

# **THE OLD ROUND HOUSE**

by  
Dave Hawkins



**When an old out-building isn't all that it seems  
maybe time travel can become a reality after all**

The Old Round House is a short science-fiction novel that was adapted for publication on A Season of Happiness. Initially serialised in six parts with a new chapter appearing monthly, it is now available as a complete eBook in PDF format which can be downloaded FREE.

Please be advised that this is not recommended for very young children as it contains some violence and mild coarse language. Readers from Nine to Ninety, however, should find it entertaining. I certainly hope so.

Dave Hawkins

Have you ever acted out a fantasy; imagined you were James Bond or Luke Skywalker? Terry has, many times. For a young schoolboy, role-playing is far more interesting than boring reality. Mind you, occasionally it does get him into strife; but he usually manages to find solutions to problems of this kind. While acting out yet another make-believe character, he stumbles across an old gazebo in an overgrown garden, and it fits in very nicely with his current scenario. Shortly, however, nice will be taking a back seat.

This fourteen year old is about to discover that even apparent reality is not all that it seems; and here will be one problem which can't be easily fixed. When he unwittingly sets in motion a series of events over which he has no control, Terry is suddenly thrust into an adventure far beyond his wildest dreams.

At times like this when a fantasy of his was starting to get a little too scary, he would just wish everything back to normal; but, for Terry, 'normal' has become a thing of the past. He can't close his eyes and make this one go away; not when so many lives are at risk; not when he is the only person in the entire Universe who has the power to save them!

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by Dave Hawkins

## CHAPTER ONE

### Imagination

It was a tense moment, but not an unusual one: danger was fast becoming a way of life. A field agent took it in his stride. A *good* agent reminded himself that he was, above all, still only human. Terry did just that as his sparkling blue eyes darted from one adversary to another. There were five of them advancing on him like jackals; shifting nervously; circling; awaiting the moment to rush in and attack when it was least expected. To the inexperienced eye they might all look alike; but Terry knew the back streets of Hong Kong, and it was not the first time he had encountered this particular gang of unsavoury Chinese thugs.

It was obvious they recalled that previous meeting and their subsequent defeat. A brief scan of their posture verified they were unsure, and they had need to be. Although their lone enemy was only small, a boy really, this meant nothing: his stance was that of a Master, his hands and feet ready to deal out justice with lightning accuracy a second time. The confidence in Terry's voice when he spoke confirmed he was clearly in control of the situation: "You are making a bad mistake, my friends," he drawled calmly. "It's not too late to back down."

The leader of the gang produced a quivering sneer and gave his signal. It was a poor move, a predictable one. The Master was ready for it. His entire body was suddenly a blur of flashing movement. He swung, darted, chopped and ducked. Bodies twisted, stopped short in their tracks and fell. There were few cries - the attack was too fast, so sure that there was no time. A swift, biting uppercut put paid to a fourth contender. Only the leader remained. Terry spun on one foot, kicking high with the other. "Keeeee-yah!"

The rattle of timber brought him back to reality and the fact that his own worst enemy was staring at him – his reflection in the wardrobe mirror! "Oh, no!" He leaned forward to examine the glass and breathed a sigh of relief on finding no apparent damage. Imagination was alright, but it wouldn't have fixed a broken mirror. A quick rub with his sleeve wiped the dusty footprint off the glass. Stepping back in the hopes of admiring a one-time hero was a total disappointment. Talk about puny! A brief re-play of the Karate stance made little difference. Pathetic! The other kids were right when they said: "There goes Terry Savage, the runt." The standard joke was that he was growing down instead of up.

Stretching the skin on his cheekbones only accentuated the mass of freckles and pink blotches. Sometimes he felt he would rather have zits. Maybe they would sprout later, when he grew up a bit; if that day ever came. Although already fourteen, to look at him no-one would know. This was supposed to be that magical transformation period called the teenage years. Adolescence was the way adults described it. They made it sound like a disease.

Well, what did they know? What did anyone? You were as old and as tall as you felt. And, anyway, being popular meant there was no shortage of friends; but sometimes it was embarrassing. Girls seemed to like him a lot, even if they did only hang around because they thought he was 'cute'.

"Terry!" The sounds of his Mother's footsteps could be heard thumping up to his bedroom door. It opened and she walked in to hover. If they gave medals for passive intimidation, his Mum would have been weighed down with them. A trained parental eye scanned the mess in the room. "Haven't you cleared up yet?" The question was one of those which required no answer. She sighed, walking across the room to draw back the curtains. Reluctantly, Terry began to collect up three days' clothes from the floor, groaning inwardly. He hated cleaning. His mother's hand ruffled her son's mane of blond, curly hair in passing. "Someone needs a haircut."

Terry made a face. "*Someone* likes it as it is."

She studied the cheeky grin. "I guess I asked for that. What are your plans?"

Under normal circumstances she need not have asked. As it was, the school was closed for a week - something about unstable asbestos on the roof. It was a shame the entire place wasn't made of the stuff if it meant a free holiday. Terry shrugged. "Homework, I guess. Education really sucks."

It was a slip of the tongue: she had never liked the expression and he was immediately sorry for using it. Turning away, he found himself glancing through the window. It looked appealing outside. Spring in Melbourne was like that – an early chill in the mornings, days starting to warm up; like a kind-of promise for the summer to come. "I think I'll go for a jog first to clear my head," he added, hoping the change of subject would avoid having to suffer the standard lecture on inappropriate language and 'being a gentleman'. It seemed to have worked.

His mother smiled knowingly. "It'll take more than a run to get rid of all the nonsense you've got in there."

"I thought you were proud of my futile imagination."

She laughed. "The word's *fertile*; and I am; but there is such a thing as reality. You should try it sometime. When will you be back?"

Terry glanced at the clock on his bedside table. "Can I buy lunch?"

Realising it was as close to a positive answer as she would get, she turned to leave. "I suppose so. There's money in the rice container." Hesitating in the doorway, she waved vaguely at the room. "But first clear this lot up. Mrs McPherson will be here at ten."

Wasn't that typical of a woman - hire a cleaning lady one day a week then race around like a hairy goat to get the place spick-and-span before she arrived? He waited until she had gone before making a token effort of gathering up clothes and stuffing them under the bed. The job was finished in record time and he was closing the bedroom door when a board creaked in the hallway downstairs.

The fertile, adolescent brain clicked into fantasy-mode. A hand dived for the hilt resting against his left hip. There was a zing of steel as the rapier slipped from its scabbard. "So, Monsieur le Duc, we meet at last!" The accent was as close to French as he could manage. "Now, we shall see 'oo is zee bettair swordsman!"

Hitching himself onto the banister rail, he slid the length of it, leaping off at the last moment to engage his waiting foe. A clash of swords rang through the palace as they fenced their way across the marble floor. The Duke fought well, but not well enough. Terry disarmed him with a twirl of his weapon, sending his adversary's sword spinning in the air. As the victor, he advanced slowly, gloating, threatening. The point of the outstretched rapier touched the invisible Duke's fancy vest. The scowl on Terry's face melted to become a sardonic smile. "Non, Monsieur, I shall not keel you," lilted the awful French accent, "I, Marcel Dupont, am feeling generous today. Until zee next time, zen."

His weapon sheathed, the 16<sup>th</sup> century swordsman turned with a flourish; and a 20<sup>th</sup> century boy went into the kitchen. The money was indeed in the rice container. Adults had no flair. While sorting through the loose change, Terry began wondering if his own make-believe world was as unhealthy as some made out. They said the death of his father two years ago had made him an introvert. He had looked the unknown word up in the dictionary and didn't understand the definition either. According to his mother, it meant he preferred his own imagination to the company of others.

In this particular instance she was right. So, what was wrong with that? How could the fantasies of his own mind do harm to anyone, least of all himself? Had Terry known what was soon to occur; what dangers and terror a wild imagination would lead to, he might have reconsidered. But it was a good day, and no adult's stuffy advice was going to ruin it.

Something else was waiting to do that.

### **The Old Round House**

Flexing bionic legs, the two-and-a-half-million-dollar man began a slow-motion sprint along the street, closing eyes to fine slits which made it seem as if the ground was being covered at phenomenal speed. A theatrical leap over the twenty-foot high electrified fence was too easy (it was actually a twelve inch hop over a plastic packing-strap). Nothing *they* could send against him was a match for his super-human powers. Dodging expertly between an army of killer androids (early morning shoppers), the bionic agent screeched around the corner of the missile factory at incredible speed (Massey's Hardware store at twelve kilometres per hour).

Open ground lay ahead. He accelerated to one-twenty kph, burning the grass with the heat from a pair of specially-made shoes - a gift from the Project Chief. Unfortunately, a sadly-normal, down-to-earth body eventually got the better of him and Terry was forced to

rest. Relaxing with head down, hands on knees, sucking in the fresh air eventually helped. The fantasy dash, however, had brought him to a part of town he didn't know. The houses were quite different to others in the neighbourhood. These were mainly large, two- and three-storey buildings surrounded by huge gardens filled with trees and bushes. Most had long, winding pathways to the front doors; and cars parked in the driveways of a few hinted that the occupants weren't short of money.

But what did the intrepid adventurer care for wealth? Stranded in the past by a malfunction in the time capsule as he had suddenly become, money was of little consequence. The priority now was finding a place to hide before someone saw him - before his futuristic clothes gave him away.

Creeping stealthily along an old, wooden fence, he came to a hole in the palings. A glimpse through enabled a lightening scan of the overgrown garden with a bionic eye. It was a jungle, almost literally. The path to the house was more weeds than gravel, and the grass had not seen a lawn-mower for months. Having to clean that up would have been a gardener's worst nightmare. The entire place gave the impression that nobody; no human being at least, had walked here for ages.

Of course! That was it! This was not the past, but some year in the distant future when the human race had been obliterated by an alien virus. This adventurer was the only man left alive on a dead planet!

A door slammed in the house next door. The last human he might be, but he was not alone, apparently! The time traveller dived through the gap in the fencing and dashed at unbelievable speed through the dense undergrowth. A mysterious tentacle shot from nowhere to wrap itself around an ankle. He pitched into a bush and lay there panting.

A back-to-the-twentieth-century Terry sat up to find his right foot was actually caught in some kind of creeper. Sharp thorns hampered initial attempts, but finally he was able to break free and inspected the damage - one torn sock and a badly scratched hand. Supposedly, it could have been worse.

The thought of leaving was next on the agenda, but a flash attracted his attention. Whatever it was glinted in the sunlight from beneath a bush at the edge of a pathway. Using a dead branch, he raked away some dead leaves and dipped in to hook it free. It was a medallion of sorts attached to a broken plastic cord. The polished stone was oval in shape, presumably a jewel which could have been anything from an opal to quartz; but it was difficult to tell because the colour kept changing. The smooth surface of the stone felt warm, yet it hadn't been sitting in the sun. The sudden appearance of stars before the eyes was another classic sign of delusion - the fall must have inflicted some degree of concussion.

Rubbing the eyes and a reasonably-vigorous shaking of the head seemed to clear his vision. Unfortunately, it didn't work as well as it should have. Looking again, not only were the stars still there, but they were concentrated in the stone of the pendant. A wide-eyed stare just made matters worse. The stars increased in number and intensity until the whole pendant shimmered with dancing lights.

He looked through the overgrown garden, along the pathway to the house, then back to the medallion. Someone who lived there had probably dropped it and it would need to be returned. That would mean admitting to trespassing. So be it. Hopefully the grateful owner would be understanding. No longer the fearless time traveller but now a rather nervous boy, Terry wove his way through the weeds sprouting from the path toward the old, rambling house. Up close it looked worse than its surroundings, the glass of dirty windows barely held in place by a few remaining strips of putty. The wooden door was in a similar state of disrepair, paint blistered and peeling, exposed timber cracked and weathered.

Terry knocked softly, waited and listened. No sound came from within. His second rap was louder. Still nothing. Convinced that the house was deserted, he banged with a clenched fist and renewed confidence. Maybe nobody lived there anymore. After a minute or two he gave up. Stuffing the medallion in a pocket, he began retracing his steps through the garden. Close to the spot he'd found the pendant, he noticed another building separate from the main house. Not surprisingly, he'd missed it before because it was almost obscured by the tangle of vegetation surrounding it.

Curiosity, they say, killed the cat. Had Terry remembered this advice he might have saved himself more than a little trouble. As it was, there seemed no harm in just investigating - a quick look before he left. The building was reminiscent of a circular mud-hut, except that the lower part of the wall was timber whereas the top half was a continuous band of windows running around the entire structure. The roof was a dome topped by a ball with a point on top lending it a mystical, oriental appearance. It was obviously an ordinary gazebo, but Terry's mind had moved past ordinary once more. Now it had become a stronghold of the Arabian Knights; and he was before it, adorned in flowing robes and a turban, scimitar at the ready, about to...

A sudden, inconsistent sound shattered the illusion. The faint, echoing cry had him pulling the medallion from his pocket and fingering it as if the jewel could ward off evil spirits. A fleeting downward glance caused the hairs to prickle on the back of his neck. Deep within the jewel, the stars were skipping frantically. A sudden flash exploded from the stone. The light was so intense it caused black spots to appear before his eyes. At that same instant the cry came again, intimating that both the sound and the lights were connected in some way. Was it possible?

Terry severed the train of thought with an annoyed 'tut'. Wasn't that just typical of him? From an adult perspective, logic would declare the flash to be merely reflected sunlight. As for the cry - it was a cat; had to be. There was no doubt in his mind of this when he heard the sound a third time; and it was coming from the old round house - probably some moggy had got itself caught inside.

Not entirely convinced, a boy feigning the wisdom of adulthood followed the wall round, fighting his way through bushes and eventually managed to locate a door. His outstretched hand reached for the knob, then hesitated. Trespassing was one thing, but breaking and entering? That was a whole new ball game. If caught it would mean the police, fingerprints,

a trial and... a criminal record - Woah! The price was too high. Then the pitiful wail rekindled his sense of chivalry. Surely, it would only take a minute...?

Turning the knob slowly, carefully, there should have been a grinding noise from a rusted lock. Surprisingly, it unlatched as if recently oiled. Wait for it, he thought - the hinges would creak like those on the door of Dracula's castle. The door swung silently outwards. Had there been a cat trapped inside, it would probably have shot out the instant the door was open. Just like one of his failed science experiments at school, nothing happened.

A tentative lean through the doorway simply confirmed it was dark inside; although some light was filtering through the dirty windows. It was sufficient to see that the single room was empty. With a quick glance over his shoulder to make sure nobody was watching, Terry stepped in and walked to the centre of the floor, accompanied by the sound of his own footsteps echoing in the emptiness.

There was something peculiar about the place; but it was unquantifiable, a word he chose to remember because it sounded coolly futuristic. In Marcel Dupont's language it would be: *je ne sais quoi*; for those who were in ignorance, Terry might have translated it as: 'I don't know what', meaning it could be this, it could be that. In other words, work it out for yourself. The trouble was, at that point in time, he was unable to do just that, and couldn't put a finger on the enigma. It was nothing sinister really - this was just an empty out-house, merely another part of the neglected property.

That was wrong, he realised. Maybe from the outside it looked uncared for, but inside it seemed bright as a new pin. He bent to wipe a hand across the floor. Apart from a few leaves which he had dragged in on his shoes, there was just a very fine layer of dust and grit. It even smelled clean. The windows, of course, were filthy. He walked over to one. It was as he thought - covered with dirt and spiders' webs. He tapped a fat black one and watched the eight-legged occupier bounce on her home-made trampoline. She did nothing else. He extended a finger to touch her abdomen. There was no frantic scuttling to some dark corner. The spider just sat quite still, quite unafraid; and quite *plastic*...?

A cursory examination of a few more spiders added to the puzzle - not one was the real thing. A rub across the glass was as strange - all of the dirt was on the outside of the panes. Why would anyone go to the trouble of keeping the inside of this building nearly spotless while leaving the rest of the property going to rack and ruin? It didn't make sense.

That familiar, wailing cry returned to fill the room, so mournful in the emptiness. Terry shivered. Goose bumps tingled on his flesh. It was definitely coming from inside; but where? He looked up. There was a large round hole in the centre of the domed ceiling. The animal must be in there, unable to climb down. He would need a ladder to investigate, and more light.

If there was a light-globe somewhere in the gazebo, there was most likely a switch for it beside the entrance. Walking over to the door, he looked for one. There was just a ten-centimetre square plate which might have been intended for a switch, except that someone had forgotten to fit it. His hand rose to pat the square as if checking another item off his list



of possibilities. As he turned to walk away, there was strange sensation on the back of his neck, the kind experienced when it was thought that someone was watching from behind. After a missed heartbeat, he spun quickly. There was no-one there, of course, but he was in time to watch the old door swing in and shut with a slam!

### **Terry Versus the Unknown**

The thought that a gust of wind might have caused the door to close never entered Terry's head. There was time only to glance at the plate he had just touched and register that it glowed with a soft light. He jumped back as a metal plate slid across in front of him, covering the door and completely blocking the entrance.

Panic took his breath away. He lunged at the steel panel, clawed at it, probing frantically for a crack, anything that would enable it to be forced open. The slippery, glass-like surface offered no such opportunity; but despite this he kept trying. Gradually, determination faded and he slumped defeated against the cold surface, panting breathlessly. Beads of perspiration formed in droplets on his brow; some trickled down his cheeks. He shivered, feeling unusually cold and clammy. An exasperated kick at the door only resulted in bruised toes and a painful reminder that such reactions were childish. Brute force was no answer. There was always a logical solution.

Sunlight dimmed by the grubby windows continued to filter through, confirming that escape and freedom were merely the thickness of a pane of glass away. All that was needed was to smash one of the windows, which required something hard. As there was no furniture in the room, he would have to use what he had brought with him, and that wasn't much. A shoe might just do the trick. He hooked a toe on a heel and was about to prise a sneaker off when the light dimmed further - probably just a passing cloud blocking the sun.

That was the guess. A glimpse at one of the windows quashed the idea – the sun was still shining vaguely through the grime. The windows themselves, however, seemed to be smaller than before. Oh, no! They really were; and getting smaller by the second! He gawped wide-eyed and horrified as sliding panels rose up from a recess in the walls, gradually covering this last line of retreat.

Terry scuttled to the nearest window and clung to the top edge of the panel, trying desperately to force it back into the cavity from which it came. But the metal shield kept on rising, rising until he was plucked effortlessly from the floor to dangle by his fingertips. Only centimetres to go before the panel locked into its top groove, imagination filled in the blanks to come. In a second or two he would be minus a few fingers if he held on.

Easing his grip, he dropped to the floor and watched the last band of daylight disappear. He stood up and froze like a statue. There was little else to do. Already alone and frightened, now he was blind as well! He waited, waited some more; and thanks to a

combination of delay, natural suspicion and imagination, became convinced someone else was in the room with him. Taking a deep breath, he held it to listen intently. The other being must have done the same because there was now just silence; empty, creepy, whispering silence. Only for a moment, though – slowly increasing in volume came the thump, thump of a heartbeat...!

"Idiot!" Terry's voice rolled around the curved wall and came back to him, mocking his stupidity. It was his *own* breathing, his *own* heartbeat he was hearing! Next he would be seeing little green men! Don't say that! It might come true. Just stay calm. Assess the situation. Think. It wasn't easy with that annoying hum drowning out even his thoughts.

Hum? There was - it was true! - a hum which was getting louder and louder. "What have I done?" he whispered to himself. "Kick-started some nuclear reactor? And they always self-destruct when someone messes with them!" Always!

So, this was it for Terry Savage. The end of a short, very unspectacular career. He slumped to his knees in a gesture of hopeless resignation. Not done with him yet, the strange happenings continued, the latest one much closer to home. There was something hot against his thigh. Jerking away didn't help, mainly because the source of the heat was in his pocket. It was the medallion, and it was going to burn a hole in his leg if he left it there. His hand plunged in panic to withdraw the stone. As well as being hot, it was shimmering in a blaze of light strong enough to illuminate part of the room. With a gasp, he tossed it away. The stone skidded across the floor dragging the broken cord like the tail of a snake; then it came to rest. The lights emanating from it intensified, becoming so frenzied that the stars within seemed desperate to burst free.

"Yarnoo....yaarnnooo....yaaarr...nnnooooo...," echoed through the room. It was that same terrible wailing cry he had heard before; but louder now, and much clearer. Definitely *no* animal, this was a voice; and with each syllable uttered, the glow in the medallion pulsed like a laser light hooked to a stereo system.

"Who are you?" pleaded Terry. "What do you want?" An association of ideas found a possible solution. "Look, I didn't mean to wreck your machine. It was an accident..."

His plea broke off when something brushed past his hand. He shuddered as if someone had walked over his grave. Whatever it was touched him again. Then there was the sound of a rushing breeze. More of the feathery things skittered, tumbled and rustled across the floor, urged on by the increasing power of the wind. They were leaves, he realised - dead ones he had dragged in on his shoes; and they were being blown away to somewhere; but where? An attempt to stand was futile. His legs were like jelly, too weak to withstand the roaring gale which drove him back onto his knees. It took his breath away. Sand and dead leaves swept past, stinging hands and face.

Crawling closer to the wall, the wind seemed even stronger. It was as if a huge vacuum cleaner was sucking all the dirt and debris out of the room. In an instinctive attempt to test the theory, he advanced a hand towards the wall, snatching it away as soon as he felt it being sucked into a slot at the base of the wall. Maybe it was this physical act of curiosity

that had triggered some shut-off feature – human safety a priority. Then again, the automatic process might have just completed its cycle. For whatever reason, the howling wind stopped suddenly to be replaced by a welcome, yet relatively deafening silence.

Fighting off the terror, the trembling boy went back to trusting logic, or tried to. Reasoning that sliding panels had sealed off the room; air currents had swept it clean, which would explain the way he had found it. So, what next - maybe disinfectant to complete the job? It was a private joke intended to raise dampened spirits. A contrived, very weak smile faded as an antiseptic odour filled the room.

The humming started up again. Terry wasn't sure where the safest place would be. Now the suction and disinfecting had stopped, close to the wall seemed a good choice. He waited there. The light from the medallion in his hand was dim. Had that occurred once the voice stopped? He was too confused to remember. It became irrelevant, replaced by another event far more spectacular. Magically, a hole suddenly materialised in the centre of the floor. He frowned when a question popped into his head: could 'materialise' be applied to a hole? His Mum would probably know. Why did he even care? Supposedly his mind did: perhaps as a way of coping with fear, especially of the unknown.

The hum was still audible, yet had drifted into the background, overshadowed by a visual distraction that was rising up through the hole. At first it was a glass-like pillar that glowed with some inner light source. They did this sort of thing at Olympic Games opening ceremonies. It would be nice to think that the athletes would be next; or... What if it was something not so nice? What if there was a gimp in the basement? "Go back to nice, idiot," he hissed to himself.

A band playing "Chariots of the Gods" would have been good. All *he* had was a background hum as the phenomenon rose higher, revealing itself bit by bit. He watched in awe as it did, right up to the point where the top of the glowing pillar slid into the hole in the ceiling. The upward movement stopped. The transformation was complete.

So, what have we got? There was a thick, oval table with a larger, circular base that now filled the hole in the floor. Part way up the glowing tube which sat on this was a rectangular panel set across at right-angles. The combination of the three resembled an illuminated cross perched on a raised dais. Except it wasn't the usual Christian-type: it was upside down! Uh-oh! Maybe he'd stumbled on the headquarters of some weird religious cult - Sons of Satan arise! Their cross had certainly arisen.

Mentally kicking himself again, he scoured his imagination for a better, more liveable explanation. Amazingly, one was waiting in the wings. The cross-piece being quite close to the table-top and about eye-height could be a monitor screen. To expand on this comparatively rational theory, if it was a monitor, it would have to be hooked into a computer of some kind – that had to be the table which was actually a control console. Surely it was? For the sake of sanity, it had to be. Closer inspection seemed to confirm this. Although there was no keyboard, a number of shapes seemed likely to be controls. Some were square, similar to the light switch by the entrance, which had actually turned out to be a door-

closer instead. So much for assumption. The passing thought, however, did trigger another, causing his heart to miss a beat. It was stupid not to think about it before, but there was always the chance that the door switch worked two ways.

A few strides and he was within arm's length; no closer though – not *that* stupid. A hand rose tentatively, warily and was trembling as it touched the square panel on the wall. He let out a gasp as it lit up. Then he was hoping, praying, watching the steel door intently, keeping fingers crossed, willing it to slide open. Nothing happened, not for a second or two. Then the square switch panel began to flash off and on, no longer plain, but displaying a single, repeated word – RESET... RESET... RESET... RESET...

What did it mean - RESET? Reset what? Maybe it referred to the switch itself. He extended a hand towards the flashing square, but fear wouldn't let him actually touch. Didn't he have enough to worry about without having to battle his own lack of confidence? With a surge of willpower, he forced the reluctant hand onto the switch. The light in the panel went out. It stayed out. He stared with disappointment at the dull, lifeless square. The door remained closed. He turned away to stand with arms folded, glowering at the desk and the illuminated pillar, hoping to give the appearance of dissatisfaction, a silent warning that dire consequences were about to transpire if his wishes were not obeyed implicitly. Either he was doing it wrong, or the computer simply didn't care. It just sat there, the column of light staring back, waiting, watching.

And all the time a mocking voice in Terry's head was saying: "Your move, Terry. What are you going to do now?"

### **Decisions, Always Decisions**

Unfolding his arms, he began to crab sideways, back to the wall, keeping the control panel - what he considered to be the heart of the machine - under a watchful eye. Still it waited, the video screen turning as if tracking the intruder. A few more steps brought him side on. The monitor stopped turning, presumably having reached its limit of mobility. Terry continued circling until he was behind it. From this particular vantage point it was reasonable to assume he couldn't be seen; although, after what had already transpired, nothing was certain. It was his own fault, of course, for messing with things that shouldn't be messed with. Now, somehow, he had to un-mess them. Unfortunately, the only way he was likely to escape was to bite the bullet and have one last mess.

There were options a-plenty on the console – panels to touch, knobs to turn, sliders to slide. Where was the harm in trying? A touch here, a turn there, plus a couple of slides and he could be free as a bird. On the other hand... If he could only come to understand what the machine was for, then the way out might be easier to find. Surely it couldn't be that

hard? Machines were, after all, predictable and logical; nothing more. They were completely at the command of the operator. Logic was the answer.

Then his mind filled with pictures of space craft and time machines, an emphatic indication that logic wasn't exactly his strongest subject. The over-imaginative thoughts were dispelled with a shake of the head and he shifted position just enough to enable a better examination of the control panel. His Dad would have known what to do. *"Have faith in yourself, Son,"* he used to say. *"If you don't have that, you've got nothing!"* And he was always proved right. Well, except for the last time when...

Terry guessed his Dad's demise was an unfortunate case of: *"You can't win them all"*. He used to say that too. Reminding himself that he only needed to win one, this father's son took a deep breath and gazed in ignorance at the console, ready to leap away if it showed the least sign of hostility. The monitor on the pillar had returned to its former position and was watching him. The machine waited placidly; but was it ready to obey a novice controller?

To recharge his faith, and for the benefit of anyone else who might happen to be listening, Terry attempted a chuckle; but an extremely dry throat produced only a hiss. So he just swallowed and looked. There were a few more controls than at first thought, all a total mystery. A bank of oblong, raised buttons looked as though they were meant to be pushed. How to activate the four domed knobs was anyone's guess. As for the five square panels, presumably they were touch-pads like the door switch. One was set quite alone on the left while the other four were grouped together in a square on the right.

A row of ten miniature video screens set into the raised back of the console were blank with not an eye between them, just like their big brother on the pillar; yet he was sure it continued to watch. Critically, Terry supposed, expecting this kid who reckons he's Albert Einstein to make his first move. What was that likely to be? Pick a button, any button? Or work it out with logic? So far he hadn't done too well in that department. It looked like this was going to be a case of hit and miss.

Applying the principle that it was always best to start from one point and work systematically through, Terry chose something reasonably familiar and placed a hand on the lone square. His heart missed a beat as it lit up. Then the hand was tingling and the sensation had started up his arm. He tried to pull away but his palm seemed to be stuck to the panel, frozen; and it had become semi-transparent, the light beneath so strong that it illuminated details of the bone structure under the skin like an x-ray.

He strained to free himself. The light went out. Suddenly, he was reeling backwards as his hand was released unexpectedly. He slipped, crashed to the floor and gasped as air was forced from his lungs. Rolling onto his side, he examined the hand. It was normal and apparently none the worse for wear, unlike his faltering courage. Once up on his feet, he walked sheepishly back to the controls; heart beating fit to burst, but determined not to be defeated.

The board was no longer lightless. With the exception of the five square panels, the rest of the controls were now illuminated, each marked with different symbols that meant nothing to him. The bank of video screens was blank except for two. The design on one reminded him of a Picasso painting; the other was definitely not abstract and something even a simple mind could comprehend. It was a digital clock with the time and date: 11:14 September 17 1997. Presumably the time was correct, although he didn't have a watch to confirm it. The addition of the year seemed peculiar. Why bother? Surely no-one needed a reminder; unless... Stop with the time-travel bit, he warned himself. It's still 1997, so you haven't gone anywhere. And as a further reminder: you won't *be* going anywhere until you can escape from this room; so forget imagination for one small, sensible moment and look for a control that will get you out!

He disregarded the bank of screens to examine the push-buttons on the table. The symbols on them resembled Egyptian hieroglyphs, offering no hint of their functions. Staring at them wasn't likely to help, so he plucked up courage and pressed one. It clicked, stayed down and the light in it changed from green to yellow. If it had done anything else, it wasn't obvious. He tried another. Same result, different colours; but it seemed to have switched on a third mini-screen which was now illuminated, the white background split by a blue vertical line. Watching the screen, he pressed the button again, expecting it to spring up to its original position and disengage whatever had been activated. It stayed down, but the line on the screen moved a fraction to the right. Pressing the button a third time shifted it another millimetre.

Something trickled into his eye – perspiration. This had nothing to do with heat: he was getting agitated; starting to panic, even. What had started out as a casual, hit-and-miss trial next developed into an increasingly rushed, stab-and-hope exercise that achieved nothing. Well, that wasn't quite true: all of the mini-screens were illuminated and displaying different images, none of which looked remotely associated with door-locks. Gritting his teeth, he slapped a hand on one of the square panels. "Useless bloody computer...!"

The panel he'd smacked had lit up along with the one beside it; and, glory be, there were words in English on both that he could actually read: TRANSMIT and RECALIBRATE.

He studied them for a long time until the words became a blur before his eyes. With a brain working nineteen to the dozen it was almost impossible to think. Recalibrate probably meant that he *had* actually calibrated something with his button-pushing; but not knowing what or how he'd done it were unknowns that he'd rather not repeat. As for the other word it seemed simpler. Maybe he was clutching at straws, but didn't Transmit mean send? Send what where? Time out, he told himself. What else could it relate to: communication maybe? If he could just talk to someone it would be a way out of his predicament. The idea was so suddenly exciting - ground control to Major Tom – yes, yes!

His hand was descending before he could stop it. As it touched the TRANSMIT square, the light began to pulsate. Jerking the hand away, he waited. A hollow, metallic voice

echoed round the room: "Operator signature interrupted. Repeat contact and maintain for five seconds." The machine fell silent. The 'Transmit' panel continued flashing.

He must have been right: he'd activated an intercom of some kind. "Hey, whoever you are!" the boy called out, turning in circles, searching every inch of his prison for a sign of life. "I'm stuck inside! Can you let me out, please..."

"Repeat operator contact and maintain for five seconds," droned the hollow voice again.

Misunderstanding, Terry said: "I'm in contact. Can't you hear me?"

The panel stopped flashing, but remained illuminated. "Operator contact required for Transmit or Recalibrate," instructed the voice.

"Look, I'm not an operator," explained Terry. He waited a few moments. There was no response. Fear and frustration were beginning to creep in and neither would help. A bit of childish sarcasm might, though. Having no idea whether he was doing what was required, he slapped a hand on the Transmit panel and snarled: "Repeating contact, okay?" Then he remembered something else the voice had said. Keeping the hand there on the panel, he tried to imitate the metallic voice: "Maintaining for five. Then, I would very much like to..."

The large monitor on the glowing pillar flickered and a white circle appeared in the centre. "Signature verified," declared the voice. "Ten seconds to transmission." Maybe a TV channel was about to start a broadcast. Presumably the count-down was in progress. The only hint of this was on the big screen as the centre circle increased in size, second by second.

Terry was shaking visibly as the light from the centre column dimmed. Pulsating flashes began rising within from bottom to top, quickening until the glass tube was a pillar of dazzling light. The large video mounted on it burst into life with a vengeance. Multi-coloured pixels began streaming from a distant point seemingly straight at Terry. All he could do was hold his breath. The light show reminded him of an old movie, the 2001 Space Odyssey. What was he seeing: a kaleidoscope of cosmic dust, maybe...? Or just another malfunction? Hopefully that and nothing too serious.

Swish...swish...swish....

The noise was coming from the walls. And he had that tingling sensation again, this time not just in his hand, but right through his body! "Stop! STOP! S T O P!" he could hear himself shouting. It must have been him, but the voice was remote, as if it had become disjointed from his body. It was like that time in hospital when they had given him the anaesthetic: things, people, sounds, all seemed to drift in a world of their own.

He clung to those thoughts, his mind comforted by memories of past care and comfort. Perhaps he was actually still in the ward and the old round house was merely a drug-induced dream; but as awareness returned, the pleasant mirage faded. Far from being in a soft hospital bed, he was sitting on the hard floor and didn't seem able to move. So, he stayed there, huddled and breathless near the control board; and he waited.

The swishing had stopped. When had that happened? Maybe he had passed out; but there was no way to tell. Yes there was – look at the clock. Struggling to his feet, eyes

swept the console for the digital readout. It was now 11:16, so whatever had just happened had taken about two minutes. The day was still September 17. So far so good. Uh-oh, there could be a problem yet – the year said 1817. If he was lucky he'd only broken the clock with his ignorant meddling, which was something else he would have to account for. *If* he ever got out.

"Program complete in primary phase," droned the computer voice in its monotone. "Survival factor normal for exit. Reverse program activated and on-standby."

Terry vaguely heard the last sentence. His mind was still repeating the welcome word, "exit". That was all he ever wanted. His heart-beats gained momentum as he raced to the door and pressed the switch-panel. The small square lit up. He glanced around impatiently, hoping and praying that this was it. Hurry, he thought, hurry up!

A thought occurred. A backward glance at the centre pillar should have seen it lowering down below the floor, its go-nowhere task finished. That's what the voice had said – "Program complete" The column and console stayed put. Something must have jammed. The window-shutters were still okay, though: the steel shutters were on their way down. Next, the door would open and he would be free.

The shutters were down and sunlight streamed through the windows. The old round house was returning to the way it had been when he had first entered. Well, almost. There was the centre column jammed in the roof still, and he noticed that the spiders' webs had disappeared. So who cared about a few plastic spiders? There were other differences too. Like the fact that the glass of the windows was now set closer to the inside walls. When the door-panel slid aside with a hiss, the anomaly was dismissed, to be instantly replaced by another. Reaching eagerly for the knob on the wooden door left him feeling rather foolish - there was no door!

A mere skipped heartbeat later, he was plunging into the fresh air and extending grateful arms upwards into the sky, marvelling at how blue, and clean, and *free* it looked. And there was the garden: that good, old, rambling, uncared-for garden with its creepers and frogs and.....

His blond eyebrows knotted in a frown. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. Spinning about, he searched for something he might recognise, something that would tell him he hadn't gone stark raving mad. The old round house was... was *gone*! In its place, a large, silver dome shone in the sunlight.

It had all been a dream, surely; or was the dream still happening now? He *had* come from the dome; must have, because there were his footprints in the sand leading straight from it, plain as day. But he didn't recall seeing any *sand* in the old garden! And the trees - they had changed! Everything had, including the old roundhouse that had turned into a silver dome!

Terry moaned to himself as he walked about in tiny, frustrated circles. Where was he? Where was this place? He didn't belong here. It was far worse than anything he could have imagined because it was so *real*! Falling to his knees, he dug trembling hands into the warm



sand and craned his neck to glare up into the sky. It was too blue, too perfect to be anything but a false sky. And it wasn't *his* sky!

He jumped to his feet and stood astride, defiant to the last, sand trickling from his small, clenched fists. Then he opened his mouth and yelled to the false sky: "Where am I?"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Lost in Paradise

Terry was unsure how long he stood motionless; surely time enough for things to change if they were going to. When they didn't, it was apparent the dream he must be having was continuing. The only other explanation was too wild to even consider. A high-pitched, agitated chattering filled the small clearing. It seemed to mock his thoughts. A glance in the direction of the sound picked up movement. A small, brown monkey shinned down the trunk of a palm tree clutching a banana. Nothing unusual here: if he was in a zoo, which he wasn't; or shouldn't have been.

So, where exactly was *here*? A brief but searching examination of the surrounding vegetation failed to resolve the mystery. There were tropical plants, exotic creepers and strange flowers he had never seen before. It was nothing like Melbourne, that much was certain. It even smelled different. Fear was on the rise and needed putting in its place. "Get real, dummy!" he said aloud to himself. "You didn't go anywhere. You're still in the old garden. You must be!" A second look around confirmed he was lying to himself.

His next step was particularly human. When things were turning out badly, the best bet was to find someone or something to blame. Try the cat: if it hadn't got trapped in the first place, he wouldn't have entered the old round house. Unfortunately, he reminded himself, there had been no cat, just a strange, wailing cry. And he wouldn't have heard that if he'd left straight away; instead of stopping to pick up some creepy medallion.

There was the culprit, his reason for being... well, wherever he was. Withdrawing the pendant from a pocket, a study of its now-dull, lifeless shape fired anger. "Devil's necklace!" he grated hoarsely. As punishment for an inanimate object that had brought nothing but trouble, he flung it across the clearing in disgust. Immediately, something tugged at him inside as if saying – bad move, bozo. Racing over to where it had landed, he snatched it up, heart pounding. Not with exertion, for sure - he'd only run a short distance. No, this was triggered by an overwhelming feeling of relief. Why, though? What was so important about this piece of jewellery that he felt he couldn't afford to lose it?

There was no real need to ask. It was, after all, a classic scenario, for Terry anyway. His imagination had lured him to the old round house; then the pendant had taken over. It was somehow connected with the voices he'd heard. Wherever it had brought him, and for whatever reason, it was the one link, mentally and physically, with normal, everyday life. If he discarded it, he would never see home again. Now, *that* was facing reality! He stared at the jewel for a while, hoping it might begin to shimmer again, willing the voices to return and tell him where he was... what to do... how to get back. Not so much as a glimmer came from the pendant.

Alright, forget the pendant; what about the silver dome? "What about it?" he repeated aloud, mainly because the sounds of his voice were reassuring; and they helped mask those

emanating from the tropical jungle. Also, talking to himself was what old Sheldon, the science master at school did; and he was smart. Smart was clearly in short supply and Terry could do with some. "Okay," he declared, decisively, "I am Sheldon and everything must conform to the laws of physics. I entered the round house." *The machine*, he corrected. "Pushed and touched some things I shouldn't have; then went from where I was to somewhere different. So, it's a vehicle, a transporter of some kind, the brainchild of a genius." And why hadn't anyone heard of this before? "Simple - it's still in the experimental stages."

That seemed pretty satisfactory – thank you, Sheldon. It didn't explain everything, but was getting there. So, let's continue: "According to Sir Isaac Newton, what goes up must come down." The theory unfortunately didn't apply to space travel. But: "It's also possible that what goes out must come back." The crew of Apollo 13 managed it. Admittedly, they knew exactly what they were doing. And, he added sourly: "They had no doubt as to where they *were* every step of the way."

He stood up and walked to the edge of the clearing, aware that he was shaking all over. Probably hunger, he lied to himself, pausing beneath a clump of banana palms to look up. The monkey and his friends had been at work, but they had since gone and had left a few hands of fruit at the lowest part of a drooping stalk. A number of futile leaps into the air missed every time. Well, if a monkey could climb, so could a boy who couldn't jump high enough. The delicate trunk of the banana palm reacted unexpectedly. Just over half way up, the plant heaved, bent like a flimsy cardboard tube, and dumped him onto the sand.

Only his pride was hurt, but the incident was a clear message to watch his step. Out of his normal environment, danger probably lurked at every turn. He looked back to the silver dome. Logically, he should return to it and try to reverse whatever process had been set in motion. But if he did manage to get back home, what would he have to recall? Nothing really. It would have been like a holiday with no happy snaps; worse even. Here was an opportunity which required no imagination; just the courage to explore, if only a little. What kind of wimpy adventurer would fly half-way round the world only to spend his limited stay in the hotel room?

Terry plucked up courage along with a hand of bananas from the broken plant and started making his way into the jungle. It wasn't that dense really, and he was pretty sure he could find his way back; but he took the precaution of breaking the occasional branch and draping strips of banana peel in conspicuous places, giving him a track to follow when he returned. Anyway, the intention wasn't to go far - just have a quick look around. He was on his third banana when the tropical vegetation thinned and he was at the back of a beach.

His chewing became extremely slow as he gazed around the bay. White sand stretched fifty metres to the water's edge where small waves lapped gently, survivors of the much larger ones breaking heavily on an exposed reef at the mouth of a horseshoe cove. Quite small, its sandy beach was skirted by a backdrop of green ferns and palm trees. Apart from the vegetation, there were no signs of recognisable life.

To his left the outlook was reasonably flat, but as the bay curved away to the right the hinterland rose gradually, finishing in a high outcrop of rock falling steeply as cliffs where it met the sea, and rounded on the landward side. A high place like that would make an excellent lookout. He started along the beach, absently peeling yet another banana, then realised that he was totally stoked and couldn't face another one. He turned to the greenery at the back of the beach and called: "Hey, monkeys - lunch!" Hurling the remainder of the fruit into the tropical jungle, he continued his trek.

By the time he had reached the start of the rise on the far side of the bay, he was tiring noticeably. The loose sand had made it hard going and there was still the climb up to the rock on the top of the cliffs. The first part wasn't too bad, except for having to push through waist-high, scrubby bushes and a forest of palm trees. Although these were quite high and blocking a view of the hill above, Terry was unconcerned: all he had to do was keep climbing and he would reach the top eventually.

The steep gradient was scattered with small rocks and protruding roots which changed a difficult climb into a mountaineering expedition. He was forced to stop frequently in order to regain his breath and reset his course. At last the trees began to thin, the rocks increased in size and he was finally leaning against a huge boulder perched on top of the cliffs. Once his breath had returned to normal, along with his heartbeat, he looked back in the direction he had come from, hoping to see some evidence of people that might have been missed at ground level – perhaps a camper van, or smoke from a barbecue – but it was not to be. There were just the trees and a few hills off in the distance. No sign of human habitation of any kind. At least the silver dome was still there – the top of it could be seen glinting in the midst of banana palms. That was a relief.

He shuffled around the huge rock so that he could see what was on the other side of the hill: just, another bay. That was the first impression; then his eyes widened. There was a boat! Not a small one, either. It was anchored offshore, a three-masted sailing vessel - probably one of those replicas like the Endeavour that everyone seemed to be building these days. Things were looking rosier all the time. Where there was a ship, there would be a crew; even if most of them were rich folk playing at being sailors in their designer clothes. And, sure enough, there they were: a small group of them was dragging a boat up onto the beach. Terry gave a little hop of delight. Excitement reached fever pitch as he plunged down the slope, slipping and sliding, stumbling and falling until he was at the bottom of the hill and racing out to the open beach.

"Hey!" He waved frantically. "Hey, I'm here... over here!"

With things seemingly returning to normal, out of habit he became the shipwrecked mariner who had not seen a human soul for years. Wonder of wonders - they had spotted him! One of them was pointing. A puff of smoke rose from what he had thought was an extended finger. Something whistled past his ear, followed a split-second after by what sounded like a small, distant explosion. Although it had never happened to him before, Terry knew that he had just been shot at! So much for normal.

He skidded to a halt and stared in bewilderment. Another individual was pointing at him. "Don't shoot!" he yelled. "It's only me - Terry. I'm just a kid! Don't shoot!" They did, so he turned and ran. He ran as he had never done before. Legs pumped, chest heaved, swinging arms fought desperately to keep up the rhythm. Another shot! This one was so close he felt it part his curly hair. Survival being paramount, there was nothing left to do but throw himself onto the sand and lie there to await his fate.

Panting, sweating and the sounds of exhaustion from a protesting body seemed to go on for a lifetime. Nothing happened to justify them; nobody came. Had it all been imagination, a further extension of the dream? Maybe he'd look up to find himself alone on a deserted beach; better still in the tangled Melbourne garden. Then the sounds of feet running in soft sand were closing and the dream, if that's what it was, continued to be a bad one.

Next, there was pain as his hair was grasped and almost wrenched from his scalp. With a hefty jerk, he was spun onto his back. "Well now, 'ere's a pretty picture." Terry's wide eyes stared up in the direction of the rasping voice. It came from a man with an evil, sneering face. Something else moved into the boy's field of vision - a vicious-looking blade which lowered to rest across his throat. Back to being plain frightened, he dared not even swallow; just closed his eyes and prayed that death would be swift and painless.

### **The Pride of Madagascar**

Dying seemed a long time coming. Terry opened his eyes to find out why. The man with the cutlass was still gloating at him. Piggy, grey eyes squinted out of deep caverns in the weathered countenance, a face so lean that the cheeks were sunken hollows. His hook nose had a large wart on the end making his appearance even more grotesque. The face split in a toothless grin. He stood up, letting out a watery cackle. "What ship yer from, lad?"

The words, the tone, the accent were all very theatrical. Logic said Terry had stumbled onto a movie set; however, the attitude of this motley crew of old-time sailors and the real live bullets they'd fired at him said otherwise. The boy sat up. "I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't got a ship."

"No, I'll bet you 'aven't, me bucko." Hooknose dragged Terry towards his mates. "Looks like we caught us a deserter, eh lads? Any o' you swabs know 'im?"

A bald-headed individual with a bare, tattooed chest lumbered forward, the pictures on his muscles rippling with every movement. He thrust an extremely ugly face at the boy. "I think I seen 'im." The voice was deeper than Hooknose's and his breath was foul, probably from his few remaining rotten teeth. "I reckon 'e's one of ours."

Hooknose pushed the man back and held up three fingers. "'Ow many fingers, Misty?"

Misty squinted. "You know I don't count so good."

"'Ow many?" Hooknose demanded again.

"Six... I think."

The crew roared with laughter as Hooknose pushed Misty away. "You got stones fer eyes, Misty. Maybe we can get yer some new 'n's." He turned back to Terry, twirling his sword like a skewer towards the boy's face. "Now, 'ere's a lad wi' eyes a-sparklin' like a blue lagoon." Terry backed away. Hooknose stretched out with his other hand and cuffed him round the ear. He cackled again. "Keep yer baby blues lad. You'll need 'em soon enough when we gets yer back on board. Kingston!" A huge dark-skinned individual pushed his way through the crowd. Hooknose stabbed the air over his shoulder as he walked away from the boy. "Stay 'ere wi' the boat. An' mind the boy don't run again."

As the crew moved off, Kingston took Terry's arm in a gigantic black fist and pulled him along the beach towards the longboat. When they reached it, he expected to be flung to the sand. Instead, the man released him and nodded to a patch of shade cast on the beach by the bow of the vessel. Kingston moved away a few feet then sat cross-legged facing his captive. He flashed a white smile.

At least one of them had good teeth, thought Terry. But, apart from his grin and his build, Kingston seemed to have little else going for him. He had one good arm, the other being a mere stump which was covered by a piece of leather held in place by a knotted thong. His entire upper body was a mass of scars and welts. The sailor's most striking feature, however, was a ragged scar which ran from the centre of his forehead, across the left eye (now permanently closed) and continuing down in an arc to the chin.

That he was big was not in doubt, but big men had a tendency to be clumsy. Adding to that the fact that Kingston had only one eye and one arm, Terry thought he would stand a better chance of making a break for it with him than any of the others; logically, anyway. He let his right hand dig into the sand then shifted his feet, ready to spring. "I knows what you thinkin' boy," drawled Kingston's lazy, West Indian accent. He stood up. "I see prob'ly better wid one eye dan you can wid two. An' I only needs one hand ta use dis." He whipped his cutlass from side to side, practising a series of lightning slashes that seemed just a blur of reflected sunlight from the polished blade. "I can cut a banana, peel it, an' slice it before it touches da groun'." He demonstrated the technique with a few more slashes.

Terry swallowed hard. "I can imagine," he said meekly, then tried give to the impression that escape had been furthest from his mind; or if it had been considered in the first place, even in the slightest, it had since been abandoned as an option.

"Now dat's better. Jus' you enjoy da sunshine, boy."

Terry was going to ask how he could possibly do that when he was sitting in the shade, but decided the sarcasm might not be appreciated. Battered Kingston might be, but he was no fool. Terry took a deep breath instead. The strong sea air stung his nostrils, causing eyes to water which blurred the surroundings, much like his contrived view of the world during his former bionic dash. It would be nice to be back there in the Melbourne street, reliving the fantasy; unfortunately, the planks of the longboat were pressing realistically hard against his back and the real-enough sensation dispelled "nice" as a definite figment of imagination.

Thumping his head lightly against the hull exemplified the here and now, so the dream theory was unacceptable. "Excuse me," he said to the sailor, "But where are we?"

Kingston eyed him with suspicion. "You makin' fun o' me, boy?"

"No, really – It's just that I don't know."

The man looked puzzled. "You not one of ours, are you boy? What ship you jump?"

Terry thought quickly. "I... I don't know. Can't remember. Must have hit my head. I... er, just woke up here."

Kingston nodded as if he understood only too well. "I don't know da name of dis 'ere island. Maybe it 'asn't got one."

"And the year?" Terry tried to hurry him on. "What year is this?"

Kingston frowned. "1817, o' course."

Terry felt like screaming again. It couldn't be! It just couldn't! One minute he was in a strange garden in Melbourne and it was 1997; the next he was 180 years in the past on some un-named desert island - impossible! You'd need a time machine to...

A tingle of excitement intermingled with fear swept through him. "Now you're making fun of me, aren't you? Come on, tell me you're really here to make a film."

Kingston scratched his head. It was obvious he had no idea what a film was. "I'm here ta make ma fortune. A litt'a bit a pay-back for deez." He tapped the side of his head and the leather stump with his sword.

Terry lapsed into dismayed silence. At that point he was confused and disbelieving; not terrified yet, but that was sure to come - *if* this nightmare proved to be real. For the moment there was little to do except go along with the fantasy, pretend for sanity's sake that he actually was a time traveller. He remembered reading somewhere about sleepwalkers, how you should never wake them - it could be dangerous. Maybe he ought to humour himself by acting out this play until his mind got back to normal.

Assuming the silver dome was a time machine that had carried him back into the past, in hindsight he should never have left it. That was stupid. Water under the bridge, now, however. The current priority was to return to the machine. Logically, it was the one hope of getting back to his own time. *If* he could figure out how to start up the travel process again, which would mean more messing with stuff he didn't understand; or maybe not... A word resounded in his head - something the machine had said: "Reverse," it had droned dispassionately, "Reverse activated and waiting...."

It sounded pretty easy, now. All he apparently had to do was start the ball rolling and the machine would do the rest. A piece of cake! Well, it would have been if he was still in the silver dome; but he in his wise wisdom had to rush off and explore. Now he was stuck on a bygone beach with a minder who was very unlikely to let him go walkabout. Hopes of escape faded with the murmur of approaching voices. The other men were returning from the hinterland laden with fruit and wooden casks. Terry felt a sharp pain in his ribs. Kingston was poking him with the point of the cutlass. "In da boat, boy."

"But..." The feeble protest was cut short by a warning growl and another jab of the sword. Terry couldn't find anything to say that wouldn't make his situation worse and scrambled over the side of the longboat. It wasn't easy - not being built with midgets in mind. Kingston assisted with a push which sent him sprawling over the gunwale and onto the planks of the hull.

He was pulling himself up by one of the seats when a full bunch of bananas hit him on the shoulder causing him to fall back again. More bananas followed along with sacks containing coconuts and some kind of potato. Once the casks were stowed - presumably they contained fresh water - the men climbed aboard, jostling for positions on the seats. The boy was treated as part of the cargo and had to be content with perching himself on the lid of a barrel.

Soon they were bobbing their way over the swell towards the moored sailing ship. The men at the oars handled them like the experts they obviously were and the distance closed fast. In the space of a few minutes, the name on the bow of the magnificent vessel became easier to read - The Pride of Madagascar. By then they were beyond the protection of the reef and into choppy water; and, unlike the ship which rolled gracefully at anchor, the longboat was pitching awkwardly. They plunged through the waves, showered by cascades of salty water spraying back over the bow. Then they were on the leeward side in the shelter of the mother ship. Terry was saturated as were the others, but he seemed to be the only one to notice.

The longboat secured, a rope ladder was dropped down from above. Some of the men grabbed at the net which followed and began to load it with the provisions they had foraged on the island. Terry was pushed roughly aside as his 'seat' was taken from him. The boat might have been perfectly becalmed for all the effect it had on the crew. Terry, however, still had his land-legs and found it easier to sit in the bottom, bilge water soaking into his pants and washing over his shoes.

Men began to shin up the rope ladder effortlessly. Terry watched the supply net being hauled up and wished he had hitched a ride. It was too late now. Someone pushed him towards the ship. He stumbled and just managed to stop himself from diving into the sea. "Get goin', lad," one of his captors growled. "It's up, or in!" With one crewman still lurching his way up, the ladder was twitching backwards and forwards erratically. Terry made three vain attempts to catch it as it swept past. "Lord, love us!" grumbled Hooknose and caught hold of a rung. "Now, nimbly, boy or I'll shake 'e off!"

Terry tried his hardest to be nimble and managed the first few rungs adequately. Overconfidence caused him to miss his next footing. He hung swaying by his fingertips. Roars of laughter boomed down from the main deck. He looked up to see a dozen gnarled, weather-beaten faces grinning and calling to him. Spurred on, not by the taunting faces but the memory of Hooknose's threat, he continued his ungainly climb. Nearly at the top, he reached for the rail and felt rough hands grip his arms and haul him on board. A rousing cheer accompanied his arrival on board The Pride of Madagascar. As for *his* pride, some



might have been preserved had he been able to walk a few steps; but his legs were trembling like jelly, and as soon as he tried, he collapsed in a heap on the wooden deck.

From what he had read about old sailing ships, their Captains usually took great care over the appearance of their vessels. This one, however, was the exception. The decks were stained and dirty; empty bottles rolled back and forth; leftover food decayed in small corners or was squashed underfoot. The one saving grace was the condition of the... ARMAMENTS...? The sight of the shining, spotless cannons somehow shocked Terry. It never dawned on him that this might be a fighting ship. The bronze guns were not merely decoration, that was for sure. Forget movie make-believe: the gun tackles and the wheels of the carriages were all clean, well-greased and ready for some *real* action!

A pair of naked, hairy legs obliterated his view. The owner of the limbs was a good match for the rest of the crew, wearing only dirty, striped trousers frayed badly where they flapped around a pair of knobby knees. His long black hair was tied in a pony-tail at the back of his neck with a stained blue kerchief. The (by now) familiar cutlass dangled from a wide, leather baldric hanging diagonally across his scarred chest from right shoulder to left hip. The sailor's face broke into a wide grin, revealing the seemingly obligatory decaying and broken teeth.

The boy's eyes widened with fear, a response that obviously pleased the man. Terry, however was not looking at, but past him, way up through the rigging, ratlines and spars to a point high on the mainmast. There, a comparatively small square of cloth flapped in the breeze. He was no sailor – a sad fact already proved - but he didn't have to be to recognise a time-worn, classic icon. There was only one black flag he knew of bearing the simple design in white of a human skull above two crossed bones. Above him flew the Jolly Roger. The *Pride of Madagascar* was a *pirate* ship!

### **Battle at Sea**

"An' wot we got 'ere, then?" the pirate snarled from a gravel throat, leering down at the boy on the deck at his feet. "A deserter, I'll be bound." Terry's attention returned from the flag at the masthead to the man standing over him; and as he listened, he couldn't help thinking, wishing this really was a scene from *Treasure Island*, the Movie. "Don't look like no-one'd miss 'm though." The sailor tested the boy's muscles as if selecting his Christmas turkey. "Still, dare say 'e'd eat 'is fair share o' vi't'als. Seein' we're all near starvin' as is, 'ow about I feeds 'im to the sharks. What say you, lads?" He turned to his mates for approval. Terry groaned as they agreed noisily.

With that, despite his captive's pleas and cries, the man lifted him off the deck and carried him to the side of the ship like a sack of wheat. The boy struggled and fought but was no match for the strong sailor. The fact that he was an exhibitionist spurred him on; that and the

cheers of his mates who gathered round to watch the fun. Terry felt himself being swung backwards. An appealing look to the bystanders for help just prompted more laughter. Then he was in the air, flying out to the open sea. With arms and legs flailing, he clutched desperately for anything that might save him. A hand caught a ratline, nearly pulling his arm from its socket and spinning him back into the rigging.

There was no time now to worry about sea-legs - he was fighting for his life! He hopped around the rigging and slithered to the deck, dodging the hands of his tormenter as he ran for the mast. The man had hold of his arm again. Terry caught one of the smooth pieces of wood on the mast. To his dismay it was not fixed but hung loosely in a rack from which it slipped as the man dragged him back towards the sea. The sudden freeing of the wooden stick caused the pirate to lose his balance. He rolled across the deck, taking Terry with him. As he scrambled for his feet, the boy glanced at the belaying pin he was holding. He had no idea what it was really for, but it looked and felt like it might make a good club.

The man renewed his attack. Terry swung his newly discovered weapon. It connected with a loud crack on the seaman's shin. The pirate yelped and bent to nurse the pain, eyes wild with fury and humiliation. Snarling like an angry tiger, he stood up slowly, pure hatred burning in his cloudy face. Terry shuffled backwards, ready with the club. The crew were jeering and cheering. It was unclear which of the contestants they supported. It just seemed an excuse to let off steam. But the noise and enthusiasm faded instantly as a voice boomed across the deck. Terry watched the faces. They registered uncertainty, fear even.

"Belay there!" A ripple shuddered through the crowd of sailors. "Bring the young pup 'ere. I'm Cap'n 'o this ship, an' I decides 'oo goes overboard." There was a panic of movement as the crew scattered, leaving a pathway between them for the Captain. He was a giant-of-a-man dressed in leather from top to toe. Only the ruffled front and balloon sleeves of his fancy shirt interrupted the mountain of black which commanded so much respect.

The man who had been denied his perverse pleasure was holding Terry's gaze, gritting his yellow teeth as if to say, "*I'll get you for this, lad!*" He spun on the Captain and grated angrily: "We got too many mouths to feed already. We bin on 'arf rations fer days. I say we toss 'im over!"

The Captain's ring-studded hand moved from where it had been resting on the butt of a pistol to the hilt of a fancy sword at his hip. "Are... YOU... challengin'... ME, Mister?" The voice built in volume until it was almost deafening. "I'm still runnin' this crew, an' if 'e want the job, back up yer claim wi' cold steel. Elsewise, 'old yer scurvy tongue!"

The face of Terry's attacker went a deep purple. A gnarled hand trembled over the hilt of his cutlass, hovered there, uncertain whether to take up the challenge. It finally decided and dropped loosely by the man's side. He slunk off along the deck, muttering curses under his breath.

The Captain flashed a glance at the other men. They needed no words. The look was enough and they scattered to their places of work, casting the odd resentful glance at the man they feared more than death itself. Terry watched as he approached. The high, black

sea boots clumped towards him. Then he was looking up, expecting to see yet another old, cruel face. Instead, the Captain's was young and relatively unblemished. Despite his apparent lack of years, he could probably tell countless tales of adventure on the high seas. The imposing man stroked a neatly-trimmed moustache and smiled. A gust of wind blew across the deck. He removed his three-cornered hat to run fingers through dark, shoulder-length hair. Replacing the hat carefully he watched Terry, his eyes twinkling. "Well, now. Where'd you come from? You ain't one o' mine - too clean an' dandy fer that." Spreading his legs, he placed hands on hips, signifying that he intended to get an answer.

Kingston bustled up and started to explain, but the Captain waved him silent. Terry fought for the right words, ones that would satisfy the pirate leader; but when he opened his mouth, no sound issued from a dry throat. "Speak up, boy. Cat got yer tongue?"

Terry needed time: time to find an explanation that wouldn't sound as if he was poking fun; time to find a way out of this situation. If only he had someone to tell him what to do. Standing up, he absently brushed sand from his wet clothing; and as he did so, his hand felt the lump in his pocket - the medallion! Perhaps if he could contact the voices...? Without thinking, his hand dived into the pocket, just to feel the pendant for reassurance, nothing more.

A sudden movement caused him to look up, and he found himself staring open-mouthed into the barrel of the Captain's pistol. "Easy there, me bucko. Stay ve-ry easy afore I gets nervous." He leant forward to remove Terry's hand from the pocket. As he did so the barrel of the weapon almost touched the boy's nose. The smell of gunpowder made nostrils tingle; the thought of what it could do caused Terry to tremble with fright. The pirate withdrew the pendant and examined it.

Terry panicked: what if the man decided to keep it? Then how would he get back to his own country, his own time? It was not a game anymore. The idea of play-acting had been abandoned. Whether this was a dream or plain insanity, there was nothing to be done about that. But without the medallion he could be lost forever in purgatory, and the thought was too horrifying to contemplate. Snatching it back, he cowered on the deck, clutching the salvation-jewel to his breast. The Captain hesitated momentarily; then he was bellowing with laughter. "Just a bauble, lad. If it means so much to you, keep it - I got chests full of 'em below. Now," He uncocked the hammer of the pistol and thrust it back into his belt alongside the matching twin. "'Ow come you be all alone on that there island?"

Providence stepped in and there was no need to think of an answer because a voice from high up the mainmast was heralding: "Sail on the starboard bow."

The question of the boy completely forgotten, the Captain spun on his heel and strutted along the deck, pushing his men roughly aside as he headed for a ladder which led up to the quarter deck. At the top he snatched a telescope from the mate and focussed it on a distant speck, at the same time calling back to the man in the crow's nest. "Can yer see 'er colours?"

"It's no ship 'o the line, Cap'n. Could be a Frenchie," echoed the reply.

"All 'ands to quarters. Clear fer action!" roared the pirate skipper. "You two!" He pointed at couple of sailors nearby. "Run for'ard an' tie an empty cask to the anchor cable, then cut us adrift. Lively, now!"

Things around Terry started to buzz as men ran everywhere. Bare-footed sailors scrambled up the rigging to inch their way along the yard arms. It seemed to take only seconds for them to untie the canvas and for it to fall, catch the wind and become a grand, billowing sail. Timbers creaked and they were underway. More sails were set and The Pride of Madagascar picked up speed until, with every stitch of canvas spread, she was flying across the blue ocean. She heeled over sharply as the helmsman spun the wheel to alter course. Unprepared for this, Terry lost his balance and went sliding across the deck. He stopped short when he became tangled in the legs of a running crewman. Expecting another reprisal, the boy put his arms up to defend himself, but the man ignored him and disappeared down an open hatch.

"Mister Aimes!" The Captain looked for the mate.

Aimes ran to the quarter deck ladder. "Cap'n?"

"The longboat's still alongside," said the pirate leader, " 'Ave it shifted astern afore it gets swamped or breaks apart."

"I could 'ave 'er on deck in two shakes, Cap'n."

The skipper cast his gaze out to sea. The other ship appeared much larger, much closer. He shook his head. "No time, Mister. Tie 'er off astern. We'll take 'er in tow – a long painter, mind."

Mister Aimes scrambled down the ladder, grabbed two men and relayed the Captain's orders; then he turned his attention to more pressing matters - the cannons. There was a flurry of activity as the gun ports were opened and bronze muzzles were rolled through. The gun crews stood waiting, tense and perspiring. Behind them stood the powder monkeys, boys no older than Terry, some even looked younger. If their faces registered fear at all, that particular expression was masked by layers of grease and dirt.

Terry took to watching their eyes which seemed to sparkle with the excitement. Then they shivered in unison as a known and dreaded word rippled through the ship like a gust of wind across a field of corn - Frenchie! Eyes turned from the approaching vessel back to their Captain. "This prize is wot we bin waitin' for, lads," he hissed with delight. A hush fell over the assembly. The Captain's sword was in his hand as if to add power to his speech. "Until I gives the word, I don't want no sound - not a whisper. If I even so much as 'ears anyone breathe I'll keel 'aul 'im. We'll take this Frenchie, or I'll 'ang ev'ry man jack o' yer!"

Nobody spoke. Nothing moved. The only sounds that could be heard were the creaking of the masts and the rush of water as the ship glided on her deadly mission. The tricolours of the French flag were easily identifiable now, and what had previously been dark shapes moving about the vessel's decks had become men. They must have had faith in their own colours, because the French galleon kept coming, showing no fear or respect for the Jolly Roger fluttering at the masthead of The Pride of Madagascar.

The pirate Captain had the helmsman swing the ship so that the starboard side faced the approaching French vessel; then he put a cupped hand to his cheek and called out: "Ahoy, there! 'Eave to or I open fire!" The bow of the French galleon dipped and rose as she kept on coming, giving no hint that she had even heard the warning. "Last chance, Frenchie." The Captain repeated the warning, his sword was poised high, ready to signal the start of battle. "'Aul down yer colours!"

The French commander ignored the request and his ship suddenly turned as she changed course to face her port side to the other vessel. Seeing this, the pirate Captain's sword sliced down. "Open fire!" Silence was shattered by a deafening roar as the big guns obeyed the command. The ship heeled over with the recoil. Gun crews pulled frantically on ropes, dragging back the cannons so that they might be swabbed, reloaded and rolled out again.

Terry began to choke as a thick fog blanketed the decks. The air was filled with noise, with shouting; then another sound, further away. A second later the great iron balls of the French cannons reached them. They tore canvas, splintered wood and swept away men like toys. A nearby cannon exploded with a fearful crash, sending showers of broken metal into the air. One piece whistled past Terry's head; another glanced off the deck and ripped open his shoe.

Before The Pride of Madagascar was able to reply to the French attack, another salvo ripped across her decks and into the sails. Terry ran, even though there was nowhere safe to run to. Someone caught him and flung him towards a ladder. Terry lashed out. His hand struck a huge, scarred black chest. It was Kingston. "Get to da longboat, boy." The pirate was spluttering, obviously in pain. "Don' wait for survivors - dare won' be any."

Terry felt himself pushed towards the stern of the vessel. Kingston limped after him using his cutlass as a walking cane. The boy halted at the rail. He looked out at the boat tied to a long rope and trailing behind in the ship's wake. He could see no way of getting to it. "Jump, boy!" Kingston hissed through clenched teeth as his pain intensified. Terry's obstinate shake of the head sparked the man's frustration. "You got no choice, boy!" The man's lips twisted in agony as he lurched closer. "A curse on you for makin' me hurt so," he hissed; then he was barging Terry over the side. His deed of mercy almost done, he leaned panting on the rail to watch the splash far below, then waited for a head to appear. "Swim, boy!" he called. "Swim!"

Terry did just that. The thought of sharks helped increase his speed to almost Olympic standards. Next, he was hauling his dripping body into the boat and looking back to the ship. It was still being pounded by the French guns. Fire and smoke was everywhere. Kingston was still at the rail and gave him a wave of farewell. "Come with me," called Terry. "You won't make your fortune if you stay here!"

The big pirate laughed. "Fortunes aren't for da likes o' me, boy." With one slash of his cutlass he parted the rope and the longboat was adrift.

"Kingston! Kingston!!" But Kingston had gone. Alone once more, Terry was faced with another problem - how could a mere boy row a boat which had been built for six big,

strapping oarsmen. After a few vain attempts, he swapped the clumsy oar for a piece of floating wood, probably originally part of the ship. It was slow work, painfully slow, and almost impossible to set a straight course for the island. Occasionally he glanced back to where the battle raged and watched for a short while before resuming his paddling.

Just after one of these examinations, a tremendous explosion, louder than even the cannon fire, echoed across the sea. When he looked for the cause, he was barely in time to see the pirate ship rise momentarily out of the water. Then she just seemed to disappear in a balloon of fire, blown apart by the gunpowder in her own magazine. The *Pride of Madagascar* was first a ball of flame and a mass of airborne debris; then she was sinking. Pieces of her continued to float down like great, black snowflakes which dived into the surrounding water, surfaced and finally bobbed on their way to some distant shore where they would be dried for use as firewood - a sad end to a once fine old sailing ship.

The hot blast from the explosion reached him; and after, a very small tidal wave which at least helped to speed him on his way. He would need all the help he could get, Terry decided, paddling nervously. He kept looking behind at the French galleon. His efforts increased measurably when he noticed a boat being lowered. As soon as the crew was aboard, it began moving about the ocean where the pirate ship had once sailed, its occupants stopping occasionally to pick up a survivor of the *Pride's* crew.

Terry was praying they wouldn't see him when he heard a shout. It couldn't be him they were calling, could it? Surely he would be lucky just this once. A musket ball whistled overhead. Luck has deserted him yet again!

### **Just a Matter of Time**

A plank of wood floated by and bumped the side of Terry's boat, a reminder of Kingston, the Captain, and even the pirate who had tried to feed him to the fish. In a way it was a relief that he hadn't suffered their same fate; but there was something else happening that confirmed his narrow escape was only temporary. The French longboat had abandoned the search for survivors and was heading straight for him. With the extra manpower they were bound to catch him. Setting to with his makeshift paddle was a token gesture; but that in itself might unknowingly have bought some precious time. The French weren't shooting at him anymore, and they certainly seemed in no hurry to overtake him, perhaps confident they could catch him soon enough without expending energy unnecessarily.

The bow of Terry's boat swung and he was suddenly heading in a different direction – straight towards the reef just out from horseshoe bay. He leapt to the starboard side and paddled furiously to correct the swing of the boat as a strong current continued to drag the vessel towards the breakers. It was hopeless – he was at the mercy of the undertow. Accompanied by the incoming tide, the stream of water swirled and bubbled; yet it seemed

concentrated as if it was pouring into a funnel. Evidence was ahead of him: flotsam from the sunken pirate ship caught in the foaming torrent was leading the way through what appeared to be a narrow gap in the reef. Arms ached from the frantic back-paddling to stay out of the current, but his feeble efforts proved useless. He gave up, deciding that being dashed to bits on the rocks was better than becoming a prisoner again.

Holding tightly as he rocked from side to side, he let the sea take the boat. Would it follow the debris into the lagoon? It was at least a chance, which was more than he had if the French caught him. Two whistles screeched past his head followed by two distant reports. They were shooting again! Terry slid to the bottom of the boat for cover. His fate was up to the sea now. The sound of the occasional lead ball whistling overhead confirmed his pursuers hadn't given up the chase. Once or twice a small thud resounded from the hull as a marksman found his target. But the boat didn't sink, or even take in water. It merely switched and pitched in the rushing stream like a bicycle with its wheel caught in a deep rut.

A terrible scraping from below made Terry's heart leap. Clearly the channel wasn't as deep as he'd hoped. The longboat hesitated for a second before sweeping on with a lurch. He breathed again, but knew he wasn't quite through yet: he could hear breakers crashing on the rocks all about him. The side of the boat was buffeted by one. The bow swung away violently to hit another. His heart in his mouth, Terry clung to a seat and waited. A deluge of water from a breaking wave cascaded down, almost swamping the boat. The boy spluttered and coughed, spitting salt water from his mouth.

Then came a different sound as timber splintered. In his imaginary world Terry would have stood and shouted defiantly at the enemy, a Viking warlord going down with his ship. But this was very much reality, at least it seemed to be; so he simply hung on for dear life and prayed as he had never done before. He was still praying with eyes squeezed tightly shut when he realised that the boat was no longer pitching erratically. He peered over the gunwale to find that he was in the lagoon, bobbing lazily. Despite the battering, the longboat had made it into horseshoe bay.

His paddle was floating on the water swilling around in the bottom of his boat. Snatching it up, the boy began to paddle once more, keeping low. The French, however, had stopped firing for some reason. He chanced a quick turn to see what they were doing. All but two of the sailors were holding their oars at the ready to push them clear of the rocks as they followed the stream through the dangerous foaming reef. Their boat stopped suddenly as it caught on the reef. Unlike Terry's vessel with only him on board, all the men added extra weight which had set their craft far deeper in the water. The tide being apparently low, they would never make it through. As if to prove the point, one of the oars snapped and the Frenchie who had been holding it fell overboard.

Terry left them to their problem and concentrated on one of his own – the damage to his boat was obviously worse than at first thought and it was taking in water fast. He renewed his paddling with a will, not daring to stop, and luckily made it to the shallows before the boat finally sank. He waded the last few metres, relieved to feel solid sand under his feet,

cheered by the warm water which seemed to melt the chill of fear in his bones. A quick glance out to sea was reassuring - the French had apparently given up the chase and were heading back to their ship. There was no hurry now; but even so, Terry's pace quickened as he began retracing his original footprints in the soft sand.

The welcome sound of chattering monkeys reached him as he followed the track through the small jungle. The broken branches showed the way, as did the banana peels, some of which had been moved or thrown to the ground, no doubt by some inquisitive but ungrateful creature. The screech of a parrot heralded his arrival in the clearing. A major and growing concern was for the silver dome and the fact that it might not be there: dreams did strange things like that. As it happened, he was worrying over nothing: the machine was waiting for him. Once inside, he made sure he wasn't taking along any stowaways, then pressed the pad by the door.

The metal panel swished across, closing the entrance. It was all quite easy, he told himself. Why bother over-thinking things? That just got you into strife. He went over to the control panel and waited for the window shutters to block out the light, and for the machine to cleanse the room. He absently brushed his clothes and kicked the sand from his shoes. The antiseptic odour was still in the air as the centre column lit up.

"Reverse program activated and waiting. Transmit or Over-ride," said the metallic servant. Sure enough, both words were illuminated on their respective panels. There was only one Terry was interested in. He placed a hand on the Transmit square and waited. It was so simple, especially when you were exhausted; when there wasn't the energy or inclination to look for a complicated solution. Even the video screens seemed to perform naturally; well, presumably: they were doing things, even if he didn't have a clue what they were.

His attention switched to the clock. The unit figure was a blur but there was no mistaking the other numbers as they clicked forward through the years... nineteen ten, twenty, thirty... It was just a matter of time, really. The swishing sound stopped as did all movement on the screens. The clock showed 11:17 September 17 1997. He had returned to the exact date he had left, and just a minute later, as he recalled. Or had he?

"Program completed in both phases," droned hollow-voice, "Survival factor normal for exit."

"Thanks for the ride," said Terry to the machine. His knees were trembling as he walked to the door to activate the switch. Disappointingly, a hand placed on the panel did nothing! Then the humming started as the console and the glowing pillar began their gradual descent through the floor. Hopefully that was the reason for the delay in opening the door – there were protocols to follow. Fine, as long as it did open eventually, once the machine had done its thing. The instant the control assembly was below floor-level, the hole disappeared. The window shutters were sliding down into their recesses revealing spiders' webs on grubby glass. Almost there. After a brief pause, the steel door panel slid aside. And there before him was the old wooden door with its brass knob! Terry was home, back in his own time, his own world.



His trudge through the streets was very different to the way it had been in the past. He was noticing the finer details of everything in passing; all the things he had taken for granted before. Like litter on the sidewalk, impatient motorists, and the smell of real, modern people. Appetising smells from a takeaway led him in that direction and he realised how hungry he was.

"Hello, young Terry. What've you been up to?"

Terry trudged up to the counter. "Hello, Mike. Nothing really. Could I have a pie with sauce, please?"

The proprietor grinned. "Sure thing. But you look like you need a laundromat. You'll get shot when your Mum sees you."

Terry was at the fridge and could see his reflection in the glass door. Mike was right - he looked like a drowned rat. He took his can of Coke back to the counter and waited for Mike to hand over the pie. An awkward fumble through damp pockets found them empty, except for the strange medallion. Withdrawing it, he fingered the jewel absently and blushed. "I... er, seem to have lost my money, Mike. Could you...?"

Mike's head shook as he tutted. "I don't know. You kids. Okay, Terry. Next time'll do." He peered at the gem in the boy's hand with interest. "What's that you've got there?"

Terry stuffed it hurriedly back into his pocket. "Just some junk I found." Grabbing the pie and his drink, he dived for the door. "Thanks Mike. I'll drop the money in later."

He ate the pie as he walked and, naturally, succeeded in spilling some of its contents down his shirt front. The stain hardly noticed, layered as it was on grime already present - a token reminder of his recent escapade. Who needed happy snaps? Terry sank down on the grass beside a small pond where ducks were swimming, eagerly awaiting titbits of food from anyone with their heart in the right place. The birds watched on as the greedy human finished all but one corner of his meal; then they were scrabbling for the tiny square of pie crust that was so generously tossed into the water.

Despite the breeze, it was still quite warm, so Terry stripped off his shirt and spread it beside him, then removed his socks and shoes. With any luck they would dry before it was time to go home. There was nothing that could be done about the gash in his shoe from the exploding cannon. For now he needed rest; so he lay back and closed his eyes, letting the warm sun bathe the aches. His mind drifted. How had he *really* wrecked his shoe? What had he *really* done to get soaking wet? It had to be all a dream. Of course it was...

When he awoke at last and discovered he was still in the park, he no longer doubted that what had happened must have been imagination. It didn't explain the state he and his clothes were in, but no theory was perfect - old Sheldon said so. The one thing that did worry him was the reception he would find at home.

His mother was nowhere to be seen as he approached his front gate. Terry felt relieved. She popped up suddenly from behind a bush, rubber gloves on and secateurs at the ready. Terry's gloom returned. "Hi, mum." It was a good attempt at casual, normal speech that failed miserably when it stuck in his throat.

Mrs Savage frowned first; then took to glaring as she inspected her son's appearance from sooty top to battered toe. "I'll give you 'Hi' young man! Where the devil have you been all day? And look at the state of you!"

"I... er, had a sort of... um, accident... kind-of."

Anger boiled in his Mother's face. Miraculously, she re-gained control. When she spoke, it was in a quiet, defeated tone. "And I thought you really understood. Oh, Terry, how could you?"

"Sorry, Mum." The apology was barely a whisper as the boy's chin dropped to his chest.

"Sorry?" Her voice began to rise. "Sorry? Sorry never paid the bills! Sorry won't buy a new pair of shoes! Wait till your Dad..."

Terry knew how the slip must have hurt her. Her eyes were glazed, ready to cry; but all he could offer was another apology which fell on deaf ears. "Get to your room!" his mother snapped; then she turned away to wipe tears from her eyes with the back of a gardening glove.

Even after his shower and wearing fresh clothes, Terry still felt dirty - not in the physical sense, but for the hurt he had caused his Mum. Nothing he could do or say could change that. Now he did feel alone. Rolling onto the bed, his head found the pillow and his hand snaked under as it usually did. The pendant was there where he had hidden it. He began turning it over between his fingers, not noticing how warm and smooth it was. He must have dropped off to sleep almost instantly.

But it was a restless sleep, full of hideous dreams, broken by explosions and flashes, faces and numbers. His arms flailed about as he fought invisible enemies. Then came a drifting calm. It rolled in sweet, moaning sounds, soft and gentle, calling him.

"Te....rrrr....eeeeee. Te....rrrr....eeeeee."

He seemed to sway with the voices. They were so peaceful, so friendly. And their touch on his forehead was so... so c o l d. So icy COLD...?

## 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... tmmmmm....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 hitchhiker's 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."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Back to the Dark Ages

The thought stone was growing warmer against his chest and it was a comforting relief to feel Annette's thoughts moving in his head: "Where are you?" she asked.

Terry checked the read-outs. "Somewhere in the English County of Kent, except it's not called that till much later. My time of arrival is 10.43 September 17 in the year 1186." It seemed to be consistent with the calibrations they had set, and now being part Rahlian he should have been rubbing his hands together, happy to have got there safely; but being also human, the thought of tempting providence was not to be ignored. "Doesn't that seem strange to you?" he mused, "I mean, why would Harold think Medieval England was a safe place for the Rahlians to start again? I gather it was a pretty hairy time."

"He must have had his reasons," Annette suggested. "Or maybe he'd planned on somewhere else and the glitch changed things. Anyway, wherever you are now, that's presumably where Harold is. Sorry about the wolf joke from before – not very considerate of me. I guess we just have to live with what we've got."

"I will, you mean," he thought sombrely.

"Yes, sorry again," she apologised. "I wish I could be with you. Just you be extra-careful, Terry - for *my* sake. I can't afford to lose my grandfather and you."

The machine's hollow, metallic voice was droning its standard observations and instructions. Terry watched through a window as the shutters started down to reveal beyond an ancient English countryside which looked green and lush. Not surprisingly, it was drizzling. From what he'd heard, that was typical of UK weather; and on reflection Melbourne had learned a lesson or two from the tradition. He glanced down at his Rahlian clothes and hoped they were both warm and waterproof.

Circling the walls, he checked the area where the silver dome sat through the other windows. There was no sign of life, thankfully no wolves that he could see. Walking to the door, his hand was reaching for the switch panel when Annette said: "Put the thought stone inside your shirt, Terry. You don't want to lose it like Yanu did."

He hadn't considered the possibility and his heart skipped a beat. "How come you can think of things like that?"

"Female intuition," she replied, "It's more reliable than imagination sometimes. Now – stone in the shirt; *then* the door."

Following her orders like the obedient slave he was, he held his breath and touched the panel. The door slid open. Standing to one side, he peered warily through the gap, hand ready to close the door if necessary. Nothing came leaping through to savage him – was that a play on words, or simply a clown-joke because he was nervous? Maybe 'nervous' should be upgraded to Terry-fied? Dear, oh dear: now he was rambling. "You'll be okay,"

Annette coaxed softly, "Believe me. And it looks really lovely there. What possible danger could there be in such a tranquil place?"

Despite her reassurance, icy fingers were crawling up his spine, warning him to stay safe inside the dome. "You're right," he said; then added a lie she would obviously see through: "This is going to be a walk in the park." With that, he stepped outside.

The air was sweet, if a little chilly; certainly no hint of factories or cars; although there was a faint whiff of wood-smoke drifting on a light breeze. The world had been almost clean once, he decided. It seemed so perfect; *too* perfect. Harold and Yanu might have had the same impression; at least until the door had opened to let the wolf in. But that hadn't happened to Terry. So far, so good; except...

"I know what you're thinking," said Annette. "You can't afford to close the door in case the machine leaves you stranded like it did Harold."

She was absolutely right. He recalled his misgivings about closing the door on Rahl; but this wasn't Rahl. It was a totally different place and time; and *after* the glitch; maybe the same one Harold had experienced. Logically, to ensure the machine didn't go anywhere, the door had to stay open. "But if I do that," his line of thought continued, "Anything might get in – another wolf... the entire pack, even!"

"Or a person," added Annette. "Remember: before Yanu lost contact, he said there was a village close by. That's where he was taking Harold."

"Even if someone got in, they couldn't do anything," Terry reminded her. "I'm the only one who can operate the machine."

"That's as maybe, but they can still trash the controls." She reconsidered the possibility: "Mind you, the people there are bound to be superstitious; and if they believe it to be some pagan Devil's temple they might leave it alone." Annette paused to think, then said: "It might be best to leave the door just ajar. If you could find something like a thick branch or log to lay in the opening, that should stop it closing fully."

"Knowing my luck, it will chop the wood in half and still nick off without me." He felt her tired groan and said: "I'm going, okay? Looking for wood here, boss. Risking life and limb, clowning all the way."

A brief scan of the surroundings proved encouraging. The silver dome sat in a small clearing, at the edge of which was the outskirts of a forest. As luck would have it, a few trees had already been felled – presumably for building materials – but not all of the timber had been taken away. Keeping a wary eye open for approaching danger, he walked to a log he had spotted and dragged it back to the machine. By the time he had dropped it onto the threshold, he was out of breath. Pausing for a few moments to recover, he said: "Before I close the door, I'm going to try contacting Yanu. Can you help?"

A hesitation in her mind pattern hinted that Annette was clearly confused. "I don't see how."

Terry hadn't figured it out fully yet, but said: "We both have thought stones, and the machine is supposed to amplify our mental transmissions. It did for me when all of this started. I'm hoping that if you join me, maybe the added boost can reach him."

"Always assuming he's close enough," Annette put in, "But I guess we have nothing to lose. I'm ready when you are."

The initial attempt was stumbling: Terry calling out in his mind pretty much the same way the voices had when he'd first heard them. Annette joined in to repeat the name: "Yaarnoo... Yaaaar-noooo!" There was no response. "We're too uncoordinated," she criticised. "Probably sound like echoes. Maybe if we called out together. Ready? On the count of three – one, two, three..."

"Yaarnoo... Yaaaar... Noooo!" they crooned in unison.

The reply was faint, but it was there: "I hear you, Terr...eee."

"Yanu?" What a stupid question! Get with the program, dummy, he sneered at himself. "Where are you, Yanu?" There was a break in contact, then the sensation of exertion as if Yanu was running.

When the Rahlian's thoughts eventually came back, they were growing louder, clearer; but were so fragmented that they were unintelligible. Just then, Terry noticed movement on the far side of the clearing. A figure had broken from the trees and was heading towards him. Hopefully it was Yanu; but in case it wasn't, the boy stepped into the doorway of the machine and was ready to push the log out of the way. The figure was closing at speed. Whoever it was could certainly run – an Olympic athlete, and some. Another few seconds and Terry began to relax on recognising the distinctive black uniform of The Group. He began rubbing his hands together and screeching pleasurably; then in Rahlian he called aloud: "Glad you could make it, Yanu. Thought you'd never get here."

The Rahlian leader stopped before Terry, took time out to draw in some well-deserved oxygen; then repeated the expression of joy. "And you are a more-than-welcome sight, Little One." He stepped closer. "May I?"

Terry knew the Rahlian leader wanted him to open his mind, and he did so willingly. It was not an unpleasant sensation, one he was becoming familiar with; and it saved on long, verbal explanations. Being part Rahlian had definite advantages.

"Thank you, Terr...eee," said Yanu once the memory-scan was over. "You have a keen mind and are learning fast."

Terry blushed. "I've got a long way to go yet. Where's Harold?" A sudden, inexplicable pain startled him, and for no apparent reason he thought he was about to die!

## The Raiders

Terry and Yanu looked at one another. It seemed they had both experienced the same discomfort at exactly the same instant. But there was nothing wrong with either of them that could account for it. Yanu was apparently going through more torment than Terry, though. He was trembling violently, eyes closed, fists clenched tightly together. Annette gasped. "What's happening?" she pleaded in desperation. "Are you being attacked?"

"I am sorry, Annette," thought Yanu as comfortingly as he was able under the circumstances. "I did not expose you to that intentionally. And in answer to your question, it is not we who are in danger. I picked up Harold's distressed mind patterns and mistakenly passed them on to you."

"He's in real trouble," stated Terry unnecessarily.

Yanu nodded in his mind. "According to a woodsman who had seen them in the distance, soldiers were heading this way. He thought they were the Sheriff's men coming to collect taxes. We have to assume now that they are brigands, because they are attacking the village."

"Does that mean Harold has been injured?" Annette demanded to know.

"Not from any attack, Annette," Yanu tried to assure her. "The pain he expressed was due to his broken leg: probably a result of him being dragged into hiding by one of the villagers."

"He's safe," confirmed Terry, "If a bit shaken. He wants to know if you remembered to put the cat out."

"Thank Heavens for that," Annette thought, breathing a sigh of relief.

"So did you?" asked Terry, "Put the cat out?"

Annette produced a Rahlian laugh. "We haven't got a cat. It was just a private joke. At least it confirms he's in good spirits; well, sort-of. I'd like to communicate with him. Could you patch me through?"

Yanu interrupted: "I am sorry, Annette, but there is no time. I must return to the village to find Harold and bring him back to the time machine."

Following a brief pause, Annette said: "Go with him Terry." Yanu started to protest, but she cut in: "That's the deal, Yanu. Terry helps you find Harold; in return for which, he will bring you all safely home. Isn't that right, Terry?"

The boy groaned. "I'll thank you not to make my decisions for me. I am quite capable of putting myself in extreme danger all on my own."

"So, you are going?" queried Annette, smiling wryly in his head.

"She who must be obeyed has spoken," declared Terry. "Don't have much choice, do I?" Crossing fingers, toes and anything else that might help, he touched the panel and waited for the door to close. It did, but only partially, stopping when it hit the log. At least something was going right.

Terry followed Yanu's lead as they broke from a copse of trees and raced down a sweeping grass slope towards the valley below. Then they were climbing again, just a small



rise this time. As he reached the crest, Terry caught fleeting glimpses of startled animals scuttling for their burrows or running for the shelter of a distant forest. A small flock of birds shot up from a clump of bracken, wings beating noisily. Once upon a time, the scene below might have appeared peaceful - a clutter of fairy-tale huts nestling lazily at the foot of gentle slopes; at that precise moment, however, the former tranquillity was shattered by raging chaos.

Peasants and animals alike rushed about the village in blind panic. Yells and screams filled the air as a group of riders thundered their horses between the buildings driving all before them. Cooking pots overturned. A frightened ox blundered into one of the huts, demolishing it in a cloud of dust. A scrawny dog flew yapping at a horse's heels. The rider toppled as his mount reared. The other invaders left him to his own devices and continued their harassment of the villagers.

Thanks to the confusion, Terry and Yanu made the first hut without being noticed. "Do you know where he is?" gasped Terry in a Rahlian whisper as he leaned panting against the mud wall.

"I left him over there." Yanu pointed to a group of four huts near a well. "I can feel his pattern. He is still there, somewhere; and alive."

A gaggle of villagers had banded together in a courageous effort to repel the attack, their only weapons being simple farm tools and makeshift clubs. Despite their lack of armaments and skill in battle, their determination compensated and they were giving a good account of themselves. The ragged peasant army provided the diversion Terry and Yanu needed to reach the huts where Harold was supposed to be.

Yanu made it to the closest hovel. The door was no more than bundles of saplings lashed together. The Rahlian flung it aside and dashed through. Terry was right on his heels. He stopped short as Yanu pitched forward, felled by a wooden stool which crashed across his back. With no thought for his own safety, Terry hurled himself bodily at the assailant. They rolled across the dusty floor, a tangled, squirming heap of arms and legs. A rough-hewn table toppled as they collided with it. A terrified chicken flapped past and ran squawking out through the open doorway.

A strong hand gripped Terry's shoulder and dragged him off. It was Yanu. The Rahlian had hold of the attacker with his other hand. He turned the individual so that they could see a face and both were surprised to find that it was a girl. Hazel eyes blazed and shivered in fear from a mask coated with grime. Her lips curled back. She hissed and snarled like a wild thing. Sinewy fingers worked frantically to free themselves; chipped and broken nails clawed vengefully.

Yanu held her tightly, pinning bare arms to the coarse wool of her tattered dress. She stiffened as the fearful stranger stared into her eyes. In a second, her face became quite calm. A tangle of matted hair curtained her vacant stare. Yanu released her. She slumped to the floor at his feet and began to cry, a pathetic pile of ragged clothes sobbing out her misery.

Terry gazed at the floor to watch absently as the toe of his boot idly drew a circle in the dried earth: girls crying always embarrassed him. He never knew quite how to handle it. Yanu, however, was in complete control of the situation. He knelt beside the girl and infiltrated her mind with soothing, gentle thoughts while stroking her hair. In response, she whispered a few seemingly unintelligible words. Finally, Yanu stood up. "The girl says that the old man is in the next hut. We should hurry."

As they were about to leave, Yanu noticed something outside. He hastily pushed Terry back and dragged the door into place. They waited. The sound of hooves thundered past. Something landed on the thatched roof. In seconds the air was filled with loud cracking noises resembling pistol shots. The cause was soon evident as smoke began to drift down and fire started to eat its way through the thatch.

It didn't take much in the way of brains to reason that they would perish if they stayed. Yanu grabbed the girl, barged the door open and hauled her outside. Terry followed, coughing hoarsely, eyes streaming from the effects of the acrid smoke. He heard Yanu telling the girl to run for the hills, but he never knew whether she actually took the advice.

By the time they had recovered their senses and had reached the next hut, flames were already licking around its entrance. The door burst open. A burning form the shape of a man tumbled out. He fell to the ground, rolling over and over in an attempt to extinguish the flames which engulfed him. Terry ran to the figure and beat frantically with his bare hands. He recalled wishing he had some water; then a miraculous deluge cascaded over the smouldering body. Yanu dropped the wooden pail and knelt beside the smoking victim.

It was Harold who looked up at them, his face streaked with soot, hair and beard flecked with soggy black ash. His broken spectacles were askew. He adjusted them and peered over the frames at Yanu. "It's my arm," he said feebly, and tried to move it. His face contorted with the pain. "Broken, I think." The old inventor added a note of sardonic humour: "At least along with the leg I've got a matching pair."

Yanu said nothing, just glanced about the devastated village. His eyes stopped roving, and he was up and running. Terry and Harold watched, amazed at the Rahlian's apparent lack of fear as he went headlong for a charging raider. The horseman yelled a battle cry and wielded his sword. The alien waited until the horse was almost upon him before jumping aside. The rider moved quickly in the saddle, swinging the sword over his head and down – too late, though. Yanu clutched at the man's flapping cloak and leapt away, pulling it with him. There was no yell or cry, just a dull thud as the raider fell in a heap on the muddy road.

Yanu returned with the horse. He nodded at the unmoving body he had left behind. "He is still alive; and it will do him good to walk for a while." He lifted Harold with apparent ease and laid the old scientist across the saddle. "I am afraid the ride will be uncomfortable." He turned his attention to Terry. "Take him straight to the time machine," he ordered; then he put out a skinny hand. "I will need the thought stone."

Remembering Maiaa's warning about keeping the stone with him at all times caused a reluctant hesitation. "My sister was quite right to advise that," said Yanu, "But I will only need the stone for a short time; then I will return it to you."

"Why do you need it at all?" Terry wanted to know.

"To amplify my mind power," said Yanu simply. "There are many raiders and I need to prevent them from following us."

"You can't do it on your own," the boy insisted. "Let me come with you – I can help."

"You can best do that by taking Harold to the time machine and being ready for when I join you." He offered his up-turned palm.

Terry nodded vague understanding and pulled on the cord to withdraw the pendant from inside his tunic. Still unsure, he paused momentarily; then placed the stone in Yanu's hand. "How is it going to help?"

The Rahlian sighed mentally. "I am hoping The Group and their additional power may be able to assist."

"If you can contact them so far from the time machine."

"As you have already said, Little One - there *are* a lot of 'if's'." Yanu passed the reins of the horse to Terry. "Let us hope this 'Force' of yours is with us. Now, go quickly!"

### Technical Problems

So much for imagination. He'd have stopped Yanu if he'd thought the alien leader was really relying on 'the Force' which was nothing more than a George Lucas fantasy; but the chuckle he felt in his head made it pretty clear that the Rahlian wasn't quite that gullible. He returned a smile, then switched his limited powers of persuasion to the horse, prior to leading it away.

Harold cried out in pain. Terry halted. "It's all right, lad," hissed the old inventor, "Go as fast as you can. I'll survive."

Terry started off again and seemed to feel every jolt that Harold did. He knew that this time it was more than just imagination. It was peculiar how much he knew about the old man and yet Harold knew nothing of him. Then again, how could he? They had never met, not in the normal sense of the word. It was time to introduce himself. "My name's Terry," he called back over his shoulder. "I had to use your machine to come and look for you. It was an accident, really."

"Accidents are what science is all about," gasped Harold. "Without them we'd still be living in the Dark Ages."

Terry grinned. "Even *with* them, I reckon."

Harold would have laughed, but he cried out instead as the horse stumbled. Terry looked back to see the inventor slipping from the saddle. Muttering apologies, he dragged at the

man's shoulders, pulling him over far enough so that Harold could grip the girth strap. Then he chanced a quick look back to the village. "I've got a feeling our alien friend's in a worse mess than we are."

Yanu was standing quite still beside the old well. A group of riders was bearing down on him, bent on destruction. The Rahlian's hands went to his forehead. He looked like a tall, skinny Canute trying to hold back the raging tide. Terry sent a plea for him to give up the madness and run, but Yanu chose to ignore him.

It seemed they were on their own. Terry could see the silver dome from the top of the rise. It was still a long way off and he didn't dare move any faster for Harold's sake. It was doubtful the horsemen would take more than a minute or so to overpower Yanu, then they would be coming his way at a gallop. Despite this, he needed to see what happened. Drawing the horse down behind the rise, he tied off the reins on a tree-stump, then climbed back up to watch.

The riders were almost on Yanu. The Rahlian had not moved an inch. In a moment there would be trampling hooves and shouts of delight as the black-clothed stranger was ground to a pulp. But it never occurred. The horses stopped suddenly, their riders sitting motionless, swords dangling from limp arms. Terry was too far away to hear if any words were being spoken. Dying to know what was going on, he searched for Yanu's mind-pattern.

A wave of dizziness swept over him. Everything started to go black. He pulled out in panic. Yanu's power of the mind was frightening and it was obvious Terry had a long way to go before he could truly consider himself one of The Group. For the moment, he would have to be content with watching like any other normal human being.

The men were dismounting and doing something to their saddles. In a minute they had the saddles and weapons in small piles on the ground. Each man then slapped his horse on the rump and seemed quite unconcerned as the steeds bolted off towards the hills.

Obviously Yanu was in complete control and Terry couldn't justify wasting any more time. He untied the horse and started down the slope. Half-way up the other side of the small valley, he heard running footsteps behind and gaining fast. He chanced a look: it was Yanu striding along, fresh as a daisy.

Terry picked up on the Rahlian's concern that the riders would catch their horses soon enough and would then be giving chase. He tried to walk faster, but his legs were too tired to cooperate fully. Yanu called a brief halt. Seemingly without effort, he lifted the boy onto the saddle behind the old man. "Hold on tightly to Harold, Little One. I have relaxed his mind so that he will feel no pain, but he will not be able to help himself."

Yanu waited for the boy to grab a handful of mane and Harold's belt, then urged the horse into a canter. Although only a short ride, by the time they were at the silver dome Terry was exhausted. Yanu helped him down and he walked on trembling legs to the silver dome where he placed a hand on the panel to open the door fully. The Rahlian slid Harold from the saddle and carried him inside. After dragging the log clear of the doorway, Terry entered.

Harold was fully conscious now and more than a little concerned as he watched the boy walking to stand before the console. Terry glanced back at him and sent the old man a tired smile. "I know what you're thinking, Harold – literally, I do - and it's okay. With Annette's help I'm going to make a few minor adjustments before I close the door. With luck, we'll go straight to Rahl and not Melbourne."

Harold was frowning. "Two things," he said, "How can Annette help if she isn't here? And where exactly is she?"

Yanu stepped closer. "Maybe I can reassure Harold." With one hand on the thought stone, he placed the other on the old man's forehead and held it there for a few seconds.

"Ah, I see," said Harold sombrely, his tired eyes clouded by reservation. "That makes it much clearer; and, unfortunately, more awkward; particularly for my granddaughter. There is a problem you may not have considered – the power core will be severely depleted by now and needs re-charging. This can only be done in my laboratory. In its present state, the machine is very unlikely to make the journey to Rahl. Even if it does, it will never be able to leave. Your only choice, Terry, is to forget recalibrating and simply close the door. Hopefully, the machine will repeat its performance when it left us stranded; always assuming the power remaining is sufficient."

The three just looked at one another, mulling over the problem. The delay was frustrating Annette. "What are you waiting for? Don't worry about me – you can pick me up on the next run. Just shut the door and get going." Plagued by uncertainty, Terry did his usual – absolutely nothing. Annette exploded in his mind: "Do it, Terry! That's an order!"

Terry snapped. "Bloody woman! Will you stop bossing me around and let me think!" He could feel the girl's abrasive thoughts boiling and added: "I have a suggestion that might work."

"I know you do," thought Annette sourly, "And you know I know."

"So does Yanu," grated Terry, trying to hold his temper at bay. "Everyone knows except Harold, and he's the only one who can verify if my idea is feasible; so could you please butt out while I talk with him."

Harold had been watching what seemed to him like a silent movie. The two actors, Terry and Yanu, said nothing; even their lips weren't moving, yet their animated expressions made it plain that they were communicating various concepts and emotions telepathically. Yanu sent a grim smile to the old man and nodded. Harold gathered all was about to be revealed; at least he hoped so and said: "Well?"

Yanu and, surprisingly, Annette remained quiet as Terry voiced his idea. It was relatively simple – in theory. The inventor pondered the boy's suggestion for a long minute before commenting. "I have experienced The Group's mental abilities, if only briefly; and I accept that, when combined as one, a powerful energy force is released that can control the minds of others; but we are not talking about people here. I have serious doubts that a concentration of thoughts, no matter how strong, will be able to influence a machine."

“But it just might work,” insisted Terry. “And even if it doesn’t, we’re no worse off. I say we give it a go. What do you reckon, Yanu?” He didn’t really need to ask – the Rahlian had already given his consent and was in the process of contacting The Group.

Annette had picked up on the thoughts and said: “I agree with Harold: we should go with the pre-set coordinates. Let’s hope the machine will return to home base as it did before; but,” and there was a heavy pause in her thoughts, “If the panel flashes ‘Reset’ when you close the door, we’ll have to think of a plan B.”

Although the possibility was unnerving, Terry tried to manufacture positive vibes. “Won’t need it – trust me.” He walked to stand beside the door, hand poised over the switch panel, looking back at the others. Harold was lying on the floor, while Yanu was close to the console, fingers rested on the thought stone; and he was obviously concentrating deeply. “Just remember,” Terry added with a smirk, “I’m just the doorman; if this all goes pear-shaped, it’s down to the nerds and the mind-squad and nothing to do with me.”

Even without the pendant and separated by a short distance, Terry could feel something significant building; not merely in his thoughts, but also within the silver dome. As if to confirm that this was not in his imagination, the power core was reacting to the phenomenon and the light in the central pillar had begun to pulsate, despite the fact that the door was still open. It seemed a good time to rectify that now; but before he closed the door it really needed some kind-of historic speech. He was trying to think of one when Annette ruined it for him.

“Now, Terry – hit the pad,” she ordered. Typically, he was caught unawares and hesitated. “Do it NOW!” Annette was almost screaming. “They can’t hold this level of concentration forever!” Terry broke from his stupor, slapped his palm on the pad and held it there.

The door slid shut; the swish... swish... started up; the power core pulsed faster and faster; then the dome lurched and the lights went out!

They all waited, Annette impatiently as usual. “Something’s gone wrong, hasn’t it?”

“Shut up!” hissed Terry. “Yanu’s concentrating.”

The Rahlian’s efforts and those of The Group must have doubled because the power core began to glow again; dimly at first, then brighter as the pulses climbing the column gradually speeded up. The swishing sound returned. It too was laboured and hesitant at first, but eventually settled into a smooth rhythm. All seemed well, until the light-pulses and speed of the swishing continued to increase far beyond expectations. In moments, the interior of the silver dome was so bright that it hurt the eyes. Terry had to close his, and he did it so tightly that his head boomed with the strain. Holding his breath made it worse. Sounds roared in his ears and he was physically shaking. Then suddenly a complete contrast enveloped the interior – no sound, no sensations of any kind, except for one; and this was in Terry’s head: “It is over, Terr...eee,” said Yanu. “The machine has stopped. Its journey is complete; but I have no idea where we are.”

## Down on Power

Annette came through: "See what the destination read-outs say, Terry."

He checked the location first and was relieved to note Melbourne, Australia was pinpointed on the chart monitor. Next was the time and date: 10.15 on September 17 1997. "So far, so good," he said, and repeated the read-outs aloud for Harold's benefit; then added: "Always assuming we *are* back home and not somewhere else. I still can't get my head around the time thing, though - it seems hard to believe how much a time-traveller can achieve in two minutes actual."

"That's something I don't fully understand myself yet," said Harold. "As for where we are, we will know once the machine has shut down; and that needs to be done as soon as possible to begin the re-charge..."

The inventor broke off at the sound of thumping. It was coming from the door. Then there was a muffled voice from outside: "I know you're in there. This is the Police. Unlock the door and come out!"

Terry extended Harold a sheepish look. "I just remembered - we have a bit of a problem."

"It would certainly seem that way," said Harold. He nodded at the centre console. "We can leave via the laboratory. No-one can enter until the machine has finished its cycle. Help me, Yanu: I have to..." The old man tutted. "I'm forgetting - I'm not the operator anymore. It's over to you, Terry. Verify your signature and I'll tell you what to do from there."

The de-activation procedure was almost completed when there was more thumping on the door. "Come out now, son," warned the voice, "If I have to call for backup, it won't go well for you."

Yanu asked Terry to delay for a minute. First he picked up Harold and placed him onto the circular base; then he turned and walked to the door. The Rahlian's bony hand went to his bald forehead. The voice outside began another warning, but cut off in mid-sentence as Yanu's projected mental power took control. He paused momentarily, then strode back to the centre console. "Finish the shut-down, Terr...eee. By the time the policeman gathers his senses we will have gone and the silver dome will be back to what you call the old round house."

Although he had seen it in Annette's memories, butterflies were rioting in Terry's stomach as he stood on the centre console and it began descending through the floor. The module came to rest in a huge subterranean chamber, the walls of which were lined with computers and machines. Harold gave instructions to set the re-charge in motion, then said: "We can leave it now. If you wouldn't mind carrying me, Yanu, I'll direct you to my study."

"No need," said Terry as he began to walk off. "Follow me."

The old inventor squirmed uncomfortably in Yanu's arms to focus on the boy. "How do you know the way? I'm sure you haven't been here before."

"No," said Terry, "But Annette has. From what I gather she spends half her life here. No wonder she's such a nerd." The last comment was made mentally.

"You are pushing your luck, buster," growled the girl.

Terry gave a mental shrug. "Just thought I'd stir you. Don't take it to heart."

They had reached the end of a corridor and began climbing a flight of steps that seemed to lead nowhere except a blank wall. Terry put out a hand to press one of the polished wood panels. Part of the wall slid aside to reveal the inventor's study beyond. The boy walked straight to the desk, picked up a phone; then began flicking through a teledex. Not having been a party to the thought-transfer between the boy and his granddaughter, Harold was still puzzled. "This is incredible. You know my house, too! Er, who are you intending to call?"

"The Doctor."

"I *am* a Doctor," grumbled Harold. He waited until Yanu had placed him on a leather-covered couch by the wall then added: "And I'm not having some freckle-faced quack straight out of medical school poking me about. The only treatment I need right now is from the decanter over there." He pointed to a piece of carved mahogany furniture.

"It's bad for your health," said Terry as he ambled over to the cabinet.

"But very good for my temper," said Harold with a hint of warning in his voice.

Terry rolled his eyes at Yanu then brought the brandy and a glass back to Harold. The old man reached for it. Terry held back. "Only if you promise you'll get your arm and leg seen to. And I don't mean tomorrow."

Harold muttered under his breath. "You sound like your Mother."

"You don't know my Mother."

"No, but if I did it would doubtless confirm from whom you learned your overbearing attitude." He sighed. "Oh, very well, I promise. But only because you bullied me."

Terry poured a small amount of brandy into the glass and handed it to Harold. The inventor looked at the dribble in disappointment. "Are you sure you can spare it?"

"Terr...eee just wants you to keep a clear head, Harold," explained Yanu in stilted, faltering English. "We have been discussing your concern for the machine losing power."

Harold frowned. "You have? When? I didn't hear you."

"You wouldn't have," said Terry, tapping the side of his head to indicate that the communication had been telepathic.

The old man sneered. "I'm not sure I can get used to this mind-speak."

"Sorry, but you're stuck with it," declared the boy, "Pretty much as I'm stuck with being a time-machine operator. So, how bad is it? - the machine, I mean."

Harold had finished his drink and held out the glass for a refill. "I'm not even confident it will make another trip. We really ought to wait until the energy banks recharge." He noticed a strange look come over both the boy and Yanu. "Something wrong?"

Yanu stared at them and spoke aloud in Rahlian, words Harold was unable to understand. Terry interpreted: "The Sens are close - they are coming to arrest the entire Group!"

"Who are the Sens?" asked the inventor.



“The Rahlian Police,” explained Terry, “And they’re nothing like ours. Gestapo would be a better comparison.” He switched to mental power and contacted Annette: “You have to get out! Find somewhere to hide. I’ll come for you as soon as I can.”

There was a break in communication. Terry assumed she was talking to The Group. Then she came back to him, her thoughts rushed: “The Old One wants me to leave with Gannah and Lohinn. They’ll take me to our original destination on Rahl. I’ll wait for you there. How long do you think you’ll be?”

Terry looked to Harold for an answer, then realised that the old man had not heard the ‘conversation’. “How long will the re-charge take, Harold?”

The inventor gazed up at the ceiling. “Two days, maybe three.”

The boy was stunned and gazed into Yanu’s eyes. Following an almost instantaneous mind-transfer, Terry asked: “If we left now, would there be sufficient power to return us to Rahl? We may be the only chance Annette and The Group have left.”

The Old One’s thoughts drifted in. They were both sad and determined. “Forget us, Little One. Save Annette, if you can.”

“But...”

“As you say in your language: no buts, Terr...eee. I know you respect me, so do this for me. Have no regrets – you have already earned your place in Rahlian history; and, if fate so wishes, there may come a time when you will be able to return to us. Remember,” he added finally, “The passing of time is something we have no control over, unlike you. Farewell, Little One. I hope we meet again.”

Terry tried to explain the desperation of the situation, but Harold remained adamant: “I will *not* allow you to risk your lives. This is *my* time machine, and *I* determine how and when it will be used.”

The boy scowled at him. “You’re forgetting: you aren’t in charge anymore – *I* am. I’m going to take your infernal machine back to Rahl to save your granddaughter; and there’s nothing you can do to stop me. Is that clear, Harold?”

Harold sighed. “Crystal. And the word’s infernal.”

“Now *you’re* starting to sound like my mother.” Terry glanced at Yanu. “Despite what the Old One said, I’d like to try bringing some of The Group back with us.”

The boy must have spoken out loud and in English because Harold intervened: “I doubt you’ll be able to achieve that, not without sufficient re-charge. The way it is at present, even taking Yanu is too big a risk, literally. His size will drain too much power on the outward journey; then no-one is likely to get back.” The old man stared across the room vacantly, sadly, but only for a while. Then his gaze swung slowly towards the boy. “You’ve had some practice, young Terry, so I imagine you know what I’m thinking.”

Terry stared back. He’d been expecting this, had already thought of the answer to their problem. “I’m the only one small enough for the job, right?” Harold nodded soberly. Terry swallowed. “If I do go, will there be enough power left to return me and Annette?”

Harold looked down into his glass. “I sincerely hope so, but I can’t be sure.”

The room went silent. Harold concentrated on his drink while Yanu made a positive effort not to invade the boy's thoughts. Despite this, Terry was aware of the tension, and something waiting in the shadows at the back of his mind - waiting for the answer only he could give. It was funny, but this was one of those scenarios he'd replayed in his imagination so many times. The trouble was, once this one began he wasn't the Game-Master any more: he was merely one of the players. And there was no guarantee that he would be around at the end.

He blinked his eyes clear and wiped sweating palms on his trousers. "Can I have a pen and paper, please. I'd like to write a small note to Mum." He swallowed hard. "Just in case..." He couldn't complete the sentence. Harold pointed to the desk. On his way to it, Terry looked at Yanu. The Rahlian leader gave no reassurances that everything was going to be all right, just a deep feeling of apology.

A small intercom on the desk before him startled Terry as it buzzed. "What's that?"

A puzzled frown made Harold's grey eyebrows seem even bushier. "It's someone at the front door. I'm not expecting anyone." Ignoring protests, he rolled off the couch and limped over to the desk with Yanu's help. Leaning close to the speaker, he pressed a switch and spoke: "Yes? Can I help you?"

"It's the Police, Sir," replied the tinny voice from the intercom. "Could I have a word with you please?" Harold replied that it was inconvenient. The policeman was insistent. "I saw a boy acting suspiciously, Sir. I thought he went into your gazebo, but when I checked just now he wasn't there. Could I see you for a moment?" It was obvious from his tone that the man was unnerved by having to talk to a machine.

"I'm sorry, officer," said Harold without hesitation, "I can't come to the door - Doctor's orders. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about."

"I think he may have been trying to break in," the officer insisted and waited. When he received no reply, he added: "Would you mind if I looked around a bit, just in case?"

Harold smiled. "By all means, officer. And thank you for your concern."

Terry breathed a sigh of relief. "That was close."

"Yes...sss?" Harold almost collapsed under the pain. Yanu carried him back to the couch and the old man sat quietly.

Terry got up from the desk and brought Harold his note. "It's finished."

Harold took the note, folded it and placed it in the accompanying envelope without even glancing at what had been written. "You would like this delivered to your Mother with some kind of explanation."

Terry nodded. "If I don't come back."

"Most unlikely, lad." The inventor's smile was obviously forced. "But it's as well to be prepared."

Yanu handed the thought stone to Terry. "You will need this, Little One. It will help to amplify your thought waves so that The Group can supplement the power core; but I warn you..."

"I know," said Terry, "I'm not used to this level of concentration and it will probably be painful." He switched to Annette: "You'll have to leave your thought stone with The Group so that I can..."

"Already done," she replied. "Maiaa was expecting I'd have to give it up, so she gave me another session in the training module to boost my mental abilities. Hopefully, that will compensate a bit."

"Believe me, it worked," said Terry. "You're almost shouting."

"Sorry." Annette broke off momentarily; then: "I have to go. Add another 30 minutes to your arrival time. I'll be waiting for you." In seconds her mind pattern faded and eventually disappeared altogether.

Terry closed his eyes briefly, hoping to gather courage from some unknown deity; but it clearly wasn't listening. Walking across the study, he was brushing his clothes absently, nervously and said aloud: "I'm scared stiff." He looked to Harold for a reply. "Is that normal?"

The old man nodded and sighed. "Very much so; but remember: we stopped dealing in normal some time ago."

Once before the bookcase, Terry moved the particular novel which would activate the switch. The entire shelf unit slid aside with a rumble revealing the staircase which led down to the underground tunnel system. He turned and gave a small wave.

No-one spoke. All the words had been said. Now it was time for actions.

This was not the first time he had travelled alone; but there was a difference. The power hadn't been an issue before, and the mental boosting of it had been dealt with by Yanu. How he would handle it was of concern, mainly because he was unsure if he had the capacity - and if not, would his inexperience detract from the efforts of The Group? The stone dangling on his chest warmed up as The Old One slipped into his thoughts: "Do not worry, Little One. We will guide you."

Although the words were comforting, the boy still had his doubts. Bundling them to the back of his mind, he concentrated on the settings, including advancing the time of arrival. That seemed logical. It would take Annette at least twenty minutes to make it out to the machine's arrival point. Thinking about her spawned an emptiness in his stomach. He shrugged this away too - they would be together again very soon; assuming nothing went wrong.

If it did, Terry was so involved that he failed to notice. The pain of the mental-boost for the power core was so intense that he eventually could bear it no longer and lapsed into unconsciousness. He awoke on the floor. Bleary eyes confirmed he was still in the silver dome. Climbing to his feet, he wobbled on jelly-legs to the console. The read-outs were as hoped for. He was back on Rahl.

Excitement built on his way to the door. All being well, Annette would be standing outside, complaining about him being late. As his hand was reaching for the door switch-panel, he

tried to contact her, but there was no reply; not at first. Then Maiaa was in his head: “Do not open the door, Terr...eee. The Sens are outside.”

His stomach knotted. “What about Annette – is she safe?”

There was a long pause, a heavy, apologetic one. “I am sorry, Terr...ee, but the Sens have her. I am so sorry...”

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Return to Rahl

“Oh, strewth!” Maiaa’s news rocked him. Terry had been so distracted by the unresolved technical problems he might have to face, that meeting up with Annette again was the one near-certainty he had to look forward to. But fate, it seemed, had stolen that particular security blanket. He wandered back to the console in a stupor. Although he had been coming to understand their significance, gazing now at the various read-outs suddenly meant nothing. As they had appeared in the very beginning, they reverted to being just pictures, patterns and colours with no association; except maybe one.

Sucking in a deep breath, he held it, closed his eyes and thought of She who must be obeyed, of Annette. It was a bad idea – in his distressed state, he couldn’t even remember what she looked like. Then, out of the blue, his memories cleared and she was there – her image and everything about her, including annoying habits. He instantly knew why and said: “Thank you, Maiaa.” Albeit by proxy, being once again reunited with Annette calmed him enough to start focussing on the matter at hand. “What happens now?” he asked, “With Annette, I mean.”

“The Sens are on their way to the Grand Dome with her,” replied Maiaa. Instead of explaining in words, she filled his mind with images and information of a place feared by most Rahlians. “The Eldaas will be keen to interrogate her.”

“And then...?” Terry already knew the dreaded answer from his Rahlian history lesson: once the Eldaas had all they needed from her, Annette would receive the same punishment as others of The Group who had been caught – banishment to Jannik’s Belt; merely a euphemism for execution. “We’ve got to get her out!” he declared unnecessarily. “How do we do that?”

“All approaches to The Grand Dome are heavily guarded,” said Maiaa, regret creeping into her thoughts, “So much so that, in the past, we were unable to rescue those of The Group who were taken there. The main problem is that the Sen barracks is part of the complex. Troopers are always coming and going; so we would never be able to get even close without being seen.”

Fit to explode, Terry interrupted: “What are you saying – that it can’t be done?”

“Not by us, Terr...eee, not at this time.” His head was spinning in confusion. It was like stumbling around in a dark dungeon trying to find a door that might not have existed. Maiaa sent him calming vibrations. “But we believe there is a way.”

There was a long pause, allowing him to absorb her thoughts. They didn’t seem to make sense. “You want *me* to do it?”

“With our help; but mainly you. We believe you will have a better chance on your own.”

He couldn't quite figure how they had come to that conclusion, but imagined there were valid reasons. "Pretty soon Annette will be inside the Grand Dome. How am I supposed to get in there – stroll up to the door and say knock, knock?"

The Old One drifted in. His attempt to smile at the boy's clowning joke felt unusually insincere, understandably so when he said: "We want you to let the Sens capture you."

"What!!!" Terry was stunned.

"Trust us." the Old One whispered through a light mist of yellow. The words, the tone and the colour calmed Terry's panic. "The Sens will transport you to the Grand Dome. We believe Annette will most likely be held pending your arrival. You will then both be taken to the Eldaas for interrogation."

"That sounds ominous. I don't fancy bright lights and Chinese water-torture."

"Have no fear in that regard, Little One," said the old Rahlian. "Even the Eldaas would not stoop so low, especially being unsure of your station because of your appearance. Hair is uncommon on this planet. I doubt that they would have seen so much on a single head before. To them it is a sign of noble birth. I can say with confidence that it will certainly impress."

He accepted that the Old One was probably right; which was a shame, seeing as he was looking for a good excuse to pull out of what was shaping up to be a suicide mission. Maybe there was something else they hadn't thought of: "What about our size? It's a dead giveaway that we're just kids."

"Wearing the clothes that you do, they will not see you as such," explained the Old One. "They will, in fact, regard you as members of The Group. Short in stature you may be, but both the Sens and the Eldaas will be wary of your potential mind powers. At an appropriate moment, you should treat them to an experience, an example or two of your ability sufficient for them to believe that yours individually is greater even than that of The Group."

"Can I do that?" Terry had no doubt that his mental talents had increased marginally, but in his opinion he was little more than a first-year apprentice.

"With the thought stone, yes, Little One," the old Rahlian assured him. "You are already aware that it is more than just a communication device. Use it wisely. And remember: it is essential you do not to let them take it from you."

"That might be easier said than done," he said dismally, "I'm not exactly Superman."

The Old One's thoughts faded as Maiaa's returned: "Not physically, Terr...eee; but mentally you will be very daunting."

He shrugged and closed his eyes briefly to re-group. "I guess it's decided then."

"Only provided you agree, Terr...eee."

"If I could ask Annette she'd probably tell me not to take the risk and to leave her there. No way am I going to give her the satisfaction of playing martyr – she'd never let me hear the last of it." He nodded in acceptance. "Whatever you've got in mind is okay by me. I'd rather not know details, though: just talk me through as we go."

Walking to the door, Terry remembered the Old One's warning and slipped the thought stone inside his tunic. Reaching out a hand towards the switch panel, he asked: "Can you do me a favour and block the Sens' minds long enough for me to shut the door after I leave? We can't afford to let them in."

Maiaa was in the middle of confirming this was their intention, when she suddenly faded. "Maiaa?" He waited in a void – no sounds, no thoughts. "Hello. Anyone?" The Group had gone; the thought stone was just a cooling lump against his chest. "Great!" he hissed.

Pulling his hand away from the switch panel, he stared at the door. The only certainty was that Sens were waiting on the other side to take him prisoner. Had The Group managed to immobilise them before they rode off into the sunset – yes or no? There was only one way to find out and he was dreading it. Then he experienced a very brief visitation, a split second of mental assurance; there and gone. Closing his eyes, he slapped a hand onto the panel.

### **Into Enemy Hands**

The scene outside was a still-shot. A short distance away there were three spheres which looked similar to the city skips used by The Group, but these police vehicles were purpose-built for combat. Interceptor pods had armoured shells and were equipped with neg-beam immobilisers for disabling the power-packs of other pods without harming the occupants. More sinister were two anti-personnel guns and a powerful assault cannon; both designed for killing, the latter a weapon capable of delivering a charge which exploded on impact. Used against civilian pods with their light shells, the effect was deadly.

Two Sens stood beside each of the interceptors. Four more troopers were close to the silver dome, hand-weapons at the ready. All, however, were unmoving and wore blank expressions on their faces. They looked like those artistic types who performed in public places: remaining stationary for a bit, moving a little, then freezing again. Even the skin-tight silver uniforms of the Rahlian Police Force added to the illusion. The Sens were, however, not just harmless entertainers; at least they wouldn't be once The Group released their mental restraints.

Terry closed the door and waited. The Sens remained statuesque and he was amused by a childish notion: a wish that he had a felt pen to draw moustaches and eyebrows on a couple. It was as well he didn't, because next second the stiffies came to life.

Following some hasty blinks to clear their heads, two of them grabbed the boy's arms none-too gently. He winced physically and hissed aloud which obviously pleased the troopers. The pain, the pleasure his captors seemed to derive from inflicting it; and the dread that far worse was yet to come caused a reaction in Terry that he was unfamiliar with. He had always imagined seeing red was just a poetic turn of phrase until that moment. The colour flooded his head, intensified by a combination of fear and anger. Both emotions were

excessive. Boosted as they were by the thought stone which had warmed suddenly, the boy's mental power exploded outwards.

The Sens holding him gasped and released their grip. The others by the interceptors must have been close enough to feel the mind barrage because they too staggered visibly. Shocked at what he had done; and at his uncharacteristic level of aggression; Terry mellowed as quickly as he was able.

The two guards beside him stared wide-eyed and fearful. He fixed their gazes, gave a wry smile and tried to speak casually past the lump that had climbed into his throat: "That was just a taste, guys. Unless you feel lucky, I wouldn't advise touching me again." A bit over-the-top, maybe? It felt good, though, playing a character other than himself again. Maybe he should have borrowed another catch-phrase, something like: 'go ahead - make my day'. Whatever. The macho Sens had taken notice, so it might be an idea to ride his luck while he was on a roll. He glanced back at the silver dome. "And if you value your lives, don't approach my machine too closely; *definitely* avoid hands on – you could get a nasty shock."

While the Sens had yet to recover, he attempted to contact The Group without success. So, he was still on his own; but they hadn't left him entirely defenceless. The Old One had suggested he exercise his mind power which he had already done and was lucky not to have made a serious mess of it. If he was going to do this, absolute control was essential. A glance at the guard next to him met a pair of eyes that shivered before darting away. Unsure how he was supposed to proceed, Terry focussed on the Rahlian's bald skull and was feeling a mite foolish as he attempted a mind probe.

With a hand resting on the thought stone, he went in softly and, surprisingly, with ease. The trooper must have been aware something strange was happening in his head. It prompted a fear of the unknown similar to that of a child who was convinced a monster was hiding in the closet. Terry attempted to reassure him; and it was working until a sudden flash of film-noir swamped his thoughts. Totally unprepared, the boy reeled from an onslaught of violence, resentment, fear and death; all exemplified by the portrait of a despicable Rahlian by the name of Aavesh!

Terry withdrew in haste. Wiping perspiration from his eyes to clear his blurred sight, he looked around to see what had caught the guard's attention and had triggered the sudden mental switch. There was movement over by one of the interceptors. A Sen was climbing out and starting towards the silver dome. He strutted rather than walked; and the black triangle on the breast of his silver uniform set him aside from the others. From the mind of the Sen he had been probing, Terry knew this to be a Metterol, an officer named Aavesh, a brutal individual more suited to criminal bestiality than law-enforcement. If his troops were pussycats, by reputation their Metterol was quite the opposite.

Aavesh was glaring at the scene before him and was not pleased. A pair of cruel, turquoise eyes narrowed as they focussed briefly on Terry; then flicked to the guards either side of him. "What are you dolts waiting for?" he spat venomously, "Put him in my pod, and be quick about it!"



“At once, Metterol,” said the individual on Terry’s left. It was clear he had learned a lesson and wasn’t about to touch the boy again, so he waggled his weapon in the direction of the spheres and said: “Please go to the transport.”

“Please?” spluttered Aavesh, storming towards the boy. “Please!! What do you think this is, a social occasion? Cretin! Take him; drag him if you have to!”

“But he is... different, Metterol,” the Sen tried to explain, “He has powers...”

“As do I, you miserable wretch!” The Metterol glared venomously and levelled his weapon at the reluctant Sen. “Obey my orders this instant!” The Sen hesitated yet again. It was once too often. A ball of light shot from the weapon and scorched a hole through the silver uniform. The victim fell to the ground.

Terry gasped audibly and stared down at the lifeless body. Another second and red was rushing into his head again. He looked up from the dead trooper and into Aavesh’s eyes, knowing that he was about to repeat his previous fit of uncontrollable anger; knowing also that he couldn’t afford to, not at this time. So he thought yellow instead. It calmed him sufficiently to downgrade the heavy emotion to a more-manageable level before giving Aavesh’s mind a painful lash of disapproval. That the Metterol had experienced a very unfamiliar and unnerving feeling was obvious from a quiver in his eyes and a small backward step. Terry withdrew. Hopefully the warning would be enough, for now.

The boy gathered his composure and tried to appear unconcerned. If it was right and they did regard him to be a noble, a reminder wouldn’t go amiss. He raised his eyebrows and stroked one as he observed dispassionately in a bored tone: “That was pretty wasteful, Aavesh.”

A corrugation of wrinkles lined the smooth forehead as the Metterol frowned. “How do you know my name?”

“I know a lot about you,” Terry sneered, “Most of it not good. Now, unless you want to waste time killing someone else, I suggest we get going. I’m keen to catch up with my sister.” He began sauntering towards the waiting spheres.

“Your *sister*?”

Was that wise? Realising it was too late to retract the spontaneous clowning comment, Terry paused to send back a scowl of reproach. “She was supposed to meet me here until you interfered. And it seems they omitted to tell you who she was. Still, I guess it was need-to-know, and someone figured you didn’t. I trust for your sake your goons are treating her with due respect.” The Metterol’s mind was numb. Never had he been so humiliated; nor could he fathom a reason for feeling fearful - actually *fearful* - of reacting violently. Terry left him to suffer his self-doubt for a moment longer; then interrupted his thoughts with a grating nudge. “Come on. You don’t want to keep the Eldaas waiting.”

Terry went straight to the interceptor Aavesh had come from. He could feel the Metterol following at a safe distance and paused to wait for him beside the sphere. As he moved closer, the Rahlian’s thoughts were very clear: he was tossing up between riding with the prisoner and going in another pod to stay out of mind’s reach. Instead of targeting Aavesh,

Terry concentrated on the Sens by the interceptor. Like the rest of the troop, their hatred of the Metterol had increased measurably after his cold-blooded murder of one of their own. What they wanted now was proof that he was no less afraid of their captive than they were.

Terry regarded the Metterol casually and looked for those piercing turquoise eyes. They skipped quickly away, but it made no difference. After a couple of forays, the door to his one-track mind was always going to be open. The boy had retained the negative desires of the rank-and-file Sens at the forefront of his memory, and now let them filter in as seeds of doubt that the officer instantly imagined had been his own. Aavesh already knew he was despised. In fact, he took the increased level as a compliment – respect came from fear, and the latter was his stock in trade. The only way now to preserve his standing was to show no sign of weakness. Noble birth or otherwise, he would prove this diminutive stranger was of little consequence to him; was certainly not to be feared.

Leering at the troopers beside the transport, he sidled around the boy; being particularly careful not to touch him as he climbed into the sphere. Pausing in the opening, he turned in Terry's direction, a display of bravado intended for any watching who had doubted his courage. What he failed to do was make eye contact with the prisoner who smirked and sent him a mind memo: "Good choice, but don't let it go to your head." With a screech of derisive Rahlian laughter, Terry pulled out none-too-gently. Aavesh jerked as if he had been bodily hit, forced a quick recovery and disappeared into the transport. One of the guards beside him put on a sheepish, pretty-please face and indicated that Terry should also board. He did so with another demonstrative flick of the eyebrows and a condescending smile.

Except for its military capabilities, the interceptor was similar to the sphere he had ridden in before; but present company on this occasion was less than amiable. Terry and a guard were in the front passenger seats, while another sat beside the Metterol in the rear. From the nervous vibes this trooper was putting out, he was clearly uncomfortable with the arrangement. Aavesh was directly behind his prisoner; presumably believing he could glare vindictively and undetected at the back of the boy's head. He hissed audibly when Terry sent him a mental reprimand: "You are really starting to annoy me, Aavesh. Stick to looking out the windows like everyone else."

Although Terry's advice had not been voiced aloud, all complied. Neither did anyone speak, not to each other; and certainly not to Terry. This served to create an extremely oppressive atmosphere. The boy's hand crept to his chest and he began fingering the bulge beneath his tunic absently. The pendant was warm, amplifying awareness of thoughts within the sphere. They were overlapping and confusing; definitely not what he needed. Unless the driver took it slowly, the domed city would be twenty minutes away; hopefully time enough to gather some information that would be handy later. So he filtered out the irrelevant, particularly Aavesh's fuming hatred of him; concentrating on anything that might help him and Annette escape and eventually return to the time machine.

After a few minutes of subtle probing, it was evident that he was getting nowhere. Annette might have a brain like a computer hard drive, but he didn't. Imagination was his forte: short

scenarios he could make up as he went along. The best bet was to concentrate on the driver's moves because Terry had a feeling the only way they were going to break out would be to steal one of the Sen pods – and *he* would have to pilot it. Hopefully the controls would be the same as the transport Lohinn had piloted, because he remembered a good portion of the moves – well, enough to get the thing off the ground, anyway. The trouble now was that it was difficult to see past the guy at the controls and what he was doing with them.

Rising from his seat, he was moving closer to look over the pilot's shoulder. The Sen must have felt his closeness and said quietly: "It would be safer for you if you remained seated, Lord."

The interior seemed to erupt in a blaze of furore. Aavesh was the source. He made no sound except for a strangled expression of intense displeasure. Judging by his thought patterns, the problem was more than just his trooper's considerate advice and the polite way he had extended it: the Metterol's greatest objection was the title. "Lord? LORD!!" he was thinking in a mental remonstrance of disbelief.

To Terry, this was getting dangerously close to a replay of the anger the Metterol had displayed outside the silver dome; and it needed defusing, pronto. It was also an opportunity to make his objections known without embarrassing the arrogant Rahlian in public. This way left him a few arrows in his quiver for later. So he mentally transferred: "Cool it, Aavesh, before you do something else I might not like and you will surely regret." The Rahlian was well aware this strange person was in his head again and it unnerved him. The rage faltered, then proceeded to diminish over the next few seconds, the time it took Terry to sink back down into his seat and for Aavesh to do the same. "Curb your temper," drawled the boy's message in the officer's head, "Or I will teach you a lesson you are never likely to forget. You have my word on that."

### **The Grey Fortress**

One transport had been left behind to guard the time machine, while the other two were heading for the city. Initially, they seemed to be following the same route as Lohinn when he had taken Terry to Maiaa's place; but instead they changed course to begin skirting the main dome. A minute later they were heading towards a complex separate from the city. Within it, the Grand Dome loomed elevated and domineering, perched high as it was atop a raised dais rounded at the perimeter. The two-tier structure reminded Terry of a glazed cottage loaf. It was rendered even more impressive by the surrounding buildings. These were ugly in comparison, a clutter of grey, angular blocks of varying sizes like factory units that had been added to as required with no regard for order or appearance. Not one had a window of any kind.

The now-familiar purple beam played on the blank wall they were approaching and a circular doorway appeared, permitting the sphere to enter the Sen transport depot. Three neat rows of interceptors sat ready for action facing the exit, while a number of others were in bays to the left, presumably being serviced or repaired. Maintenance crews stopped work, watching Terry's transport coast along to stop short of an open area at the rear of the hangar. A number of Sens were filing out through a doorway and hurriedly formed into a line facing the sphere. As they took no part in what happened next, they were apparently just a precautionary show of force.

The interceptor crabbed sideways to rest against a transparent wall similar to the pedestrian barriers of the city. The driver activated the exit door and surprisingly turned to face the prisoner, an unsure apologetic look on his face. "Please enter the chamber, Lord; and stand clear of the door." Terry could almost have imagined he was boarding a Melbourne train, were it not for Aavesh's burst of mental exasperation which totally shattered the illusion.

The chamber was entirely transparent, including the floor; a disconcerting fact for Terry who preferred standing on solid ground he couldn't see through. The instant he was inside, a clear wall appeared to close the opening, subjecting him to a sudden bout of claustrophobia. Sounds of movement behind prompted him to turn and look. Aavesh and two Sens were boarding a second compartment of the chamber. Whatever he was about to be subjected to, at least he had company. Or were they simply there to witness what might turn out to be his execution? The thought caused a rise in heart rate and he was sorely tempted to probe one of the Sens for more information; then decided if it was bad news he'd rather not know.

The chamber began to move. Light dimmed as the glass-like carriage entered a square tube and began to travel along in silence at a steady pace. The only evidence of motion was the occasional passing of a seam where the grey panels of the walls were joined. He recalled being in a car once that drove through a tunnel. Despite being over in just a minute or two, it was still an unnerving experience and he was glad to emerge on the far side. In reality, this journey probably didn't take much longer; but by the time Terry arrived at his destination, he was breathing heavily and his tunic was damp with perspiration.

The transport chamber had stopped adjacent to a short corridor heading off at right-angles. Aavesh and the two Sens disembarked, then waited for the wall of the prisoner's cube to open. Terry remained in the chamber. "What now?"

The Metterol's lips curled in a vindictive sneer. Careful to avoid eye contact, he looked along the corridor. "You go for processing."

The boy didn't move. "Sounds particularly nasty. Is that what you did with my sister?"

Still focussing on the corridor, Aavesh grated pleasantly: "All prisoners have to be processed, no matter how important they think they might be."

Terry made a point of extending the subsequent delay in silence, then said: "Okay; but if I decide I don't like it, I'm gone. Now, would someone care to lead the way?"

The Sen who had ushered him into the chamber said apologetically: “You must go first, Lord. We will follow.”

Aavesh stiffened, felt anger rising; then recalled the boy’s warning and made a concerted effort to regain self-control. Terry nodded his approval and began walking along the corridor.

Prisoners were processed individually and had to pass through a number of adjoining rooms, each with its own purpose. Fumigation and decontamination came first in yet another transparent cubicle – having been in a few while with The Group, Terry guessed they were the essential clear-goods no Rahlian household should be without. Visual images were recorded next; along with eye scans and the obligatory weight and height. Two more procedures followed which were presumably deemed necessary; but exactly what for remained a mystery. The final stage was the greatest worry – a physical examination.

Most people have an aversion to hands-on frisking, particularly when there’s an audience of four guards standing in a row, backs to the wall ogling the prisoner in the centre of the room. A fifth Sen approached, presumably the one designated to perform the inspection. Unless word had got around about it, none of the processing crew knew of Terry’s no-touching rule; and so far he had tolerated the occasional contact without resorting to mental interference. This inspection, however, might test his patience.

It began and was none-too gentle. Aavesh was off to one side, clearly enjoying the deliberately-rough turning, touching, poking and probing of the subject. Terry bit his tongue and suffered in relative silence. After a short while, the Metterol had seen all he wanted to and began walking off. It was lucky he did.

The inspector’s hand was roaming the prisoner’s upper body and inevitably paused over the conspicuous lump of the thought stone under the tunic. He began feeling it, frowning; then his head turned in the direction his Metterol had taken and his mouth opened to speak. In panic, Terry jumped into the Sen’s mind to put it on hold with a flood of yellow; too late, unfortunately, to prevent him from calling after his officer. Aavesh stopped in his tracks and looked back, anticipation glimmering in his cruel eyes. “What is it? Have you found something?”

Whatever the reply, it would have to be feasible, a good reason for interrupting an officer with a short fuse who had no time to waste on petty matters. The yellow in the Sen’s mind kept him calm as he spoke the words Terry implanted: “No, nothing, Metterol; but the prisoner wishes to know when he can see his sister.”

Aavesh produced a sneer of displeasure. “Is the inspection finished?” He waited for confirmation, then fixed the guards across the room with a glare. “Take him to the holding centre,” he snapped, “And ready both of them for interrogation.” Following a slight pause, his attitude changed to one of gratification as he addressed Terry and added: “As you said yourself... *LORD*... we do not want to keep the Eldaas waiting.” Screeching a derisive laugh, he spun on his heel and stormed out.

## Not the Best of Reunions

The holding centre was in effect a cell block. Terry was marched past a line of clear cubicles, each large enough to cater for a number of prisoners. Four cubes were jam-packed with inmates dressed in grubby coveralls and were presumably workers. Their vibes were dark, resentment of past and present injustices seethed; and fear of unknown consequences to be faced was uppermost in their tortured minds.

The last cubicle held just a few, and he was shocked to see they were dressed in the black uniform of The Group. Who had been caught? A quick pan of faces failed to recognise anyone. Mental scanning was easy and served to reassure him with an explanation: they were ordinary citizens, sympathisers who had volunteered to dress like members of The Group and act as decoys. This tagged a memory – Maiaa had told him of this before, but he'd forgotten. So, the plan was in motion – Hoorah!

The trouble was, the original idea had been to rescue Annette; but giving himself up to the Sens in order to somehow bring her out was pretty much a wasted effort if he couldn't find her. Wasn't there some quote about the best laid plans of mice and men? If whoever wrote that could see him now... Forget about it, Terry, he ordered himself. Just find Annette and put the plan back on track. He extended a scan for her mind pattern, probing the surroundings as far as he could, but even with the thought stone it proved fruitless.

He was almost past the transparent Rahlian sardine cans when Annette came through, faintly at first. His escort was marching him into a narrow, open-ended corridor, and as he entered, a wave of instant relief greeted him: "Thank God! I'd just about given up hope." It was her.

"Me too," Terry sent, his heartbeat suddenly racing. "Where are you?"

"Not sure," Annette replied, her messages growing more distinct as Terry and his escort neared the end of the passage. "In some kind of a prison. More to the point, where are you?" When there was no immediate response, she grumbled irritably: "Well?"

He sighed. "Actually, in the same prison and pretty close, I reckon."

"What!!" Friendly and welcoming went, replaced by angry exasperation: "You mean you got yourself caught? How did you manage that – not watching your back and clowning as usual, I suppose?"

"Umm... I kind-of surrendered..." Feeling she was about to explode, he rushed on: "And before you start tearing strips off me, it's all good – we have a plan."

"Who's we?"

"Me and The Group..."

Annette's concern waned. "That's good news. I thought they'd been arrested. I haven't heard from them, not a peep; but then, I didn't have a thought stone, so I figured I was out of range. Presumably you've still got yours. So, what's the plan?" She broke off as a contingent of Sens filed in, halted before her and separated to reveal a short, blond-haired boy in their midst. She began rubbing her hands and screeching in delight.

Terry, on the other hand, was less than happy to see Annette standing in a transparent tube. There was an empty one beside her which he guessed was meant for him. Both were replicas of those in his memory that had been the execution chambers of the apprehended Group members – not a cheerful thought. Hoping a clowning comment would neutralise the sinister implications, he said aloud: “Hi, Annette. Sorry you ended up in a pickle jar.”

“Very droll, but not your fault.” Although she had spoken the words, only Terry knew what she had said because nothing audible passed through the wall of the sound-proof tube.

“That’s mean,” he thought, “So much for our happy reunion. I guess we’ll have to stick with mind-transfer.”

“Might be best,” she replied. “Don’t want to let details of the plan slip. What is it, anyway?”

“Actually, it’s quite simple – I was to give myself up so that I could get into the Grand Dome and find you. That worked perfectly, I reckon.”

“And then...?”

“Ah...” He became very sheepish. “Maiaa was about to cue me on the next part when I lost contact. I haven’t been able to re-connect properly since.” He felt her enthusiasm take a sudden dive. “Thanks to the thought stone I have picked up the odd whisper, so they’re still around... somewhere. Don’t worry – they’ll bust us out somehow. In the meantime we’ll just have to improvise.”

“And you’re an expert at that,” Annette droned sarcastically. Her mind pattern darkened as she noticed Terry’s guards stiffen and stand to attention. A glance towards the corridor entrance confirmed her suspicions, promoting a flow of disgust. “Uh-oh, the pig’s just arrived.”

A quick, unnecessary look picked Aavesh swaggering in. “You’ve obviously met - poor you,” drawled Terry. “Look, before he gets here there are a couple of things you should know; so keep quiet and let me fill you in.” Expecting the obligatory interruption he held off saying more. Surprisingly, it failed to eventuate. “Okay, firstly, they think we’re nobs.”

“What do you mean by nobs?”

“I said don’t interrupt.”

“Not in those exact words...”

“Oh, for pity’s sake, Annette, just shut up! Because of the hair thing they reckon we’re of high birth; and I’ve played up to that. A couple of the Sens have actually called me Lord. That went down like a lead balloon with Aavesh, I can tell you. Anyway, to push it a bit further I decided to tell him you were my sister.”

“Your *sister*? Whatever possessed you to say a stupid thing like that?”

Terry arched his eyebrows and gave her a silly grin. “It just sort-of rolled off the tongue while I was putting him in his place with a few mind tricks.”

Annette was flabbergasted. “You’ve been in Aavesh’s *head*?”

He noticed the Metterol was almost there and said hastily: “Annette, chill out and let me handle this.”

Aavesh brushed the closest guard aside so that he could see the boy. Not his eyes though; and probably due to an association of ideas coupled with previous disturbing experiences, he avoided those of the girl too. "Why is he not in the elevator?" He was starting to fume. "I specifically ordered it! Which of you is in charge?"

Fear rippled through the guards, the leader in particular. Terry calmed him while he spoke to the Metterol in Rahlian: "Don't start blaming your men, Aavesh. I asked them if I could see my sister first, and they obliged. I thought that was pretty considerate of them; respectful – know what I mean?"

While he let the insinuation hang for Aavesh to mull over, he checked the reaction of the guards. Although he had been speaking directly to the Metterol, Terry's words were also for the benefit of the troopers; and judging by their thoughts, his defence of them was gratefully received. A couple were even thinking that a Lord who had influence over their dangerously unpredictable officer would make a better friend than an enemy. Selecting these two, he smiled and said: "Okay, you can put me the tank now. Less push and shove this time, though – the Lady is watching and you wouldn't want to upset her – believe me."

The chosen pair guided their prisoner to the waiting tube. Terry stepped in and turned to face front in time to watch the opening fizz with tiny, dust-like particles which disappeared almost instantly. His hand reached out gingerly. Fingers touched something solid, even though there was nothing to see. So, what was new? Actually, he realised something was. Since entering the tube, the thought stone had warmed considerably; and when Annette came back to him her thoughts were amplified to the extent that he had to ask her to back off. Not that he didn't want to talk; but he was also picking up waves from a different source that he needed to concentrate on. Hopefully it was The Group trying to get through.

Aavesh was at a control panel to one side of the tubes and his hand was moving towards it when he hesitated and turned to scowl in the direction of a sudden interruption. A Sen hurried over and began whispering, presumably so that the other troopers couldn't hear. He obviously had no idea that Terry was tuned into the conversation.

"What do you mean, a disturbance?" Annoyance clouded Aavesh's face.

"There is unrest in the synthetics factory, Metterol. Some workers are refusing to obey the guards."

The Metterol was fuming. "Then arrest them; shoot them if you have to!" He cast a nervous glance at the tubes, then back to the messenger. "I have more important matters to attend to. Go!" His eyes burned into the Sen who spun on his heel and scuttled away. Aavesh watched his back for a moment before returning his attention to the elevator controls.

Terry was sorely tempted, but decided that further rattling of Aavesh's cage served no purpose at that time. It was more important to bring Annette up to speed; just in case she had been unable to pick up any or all of the exchange: "Seems there's a problem in one of the factories," he sent, "A strike of sorts. The Group could have instigated it as a diversion. If so, the plan's on the move. Looks like we are too." As the elevator tubes began to rise he commented with a grin: "First floor – ladies underwear."



The higher they went, vague mind-patterns became more distinct, the thought stone warmer. The tubes reached the ceiling and there was blackness as they passed through something solid. It only took a few seconds; time enough for something strange to occur. Annette found she was still able to link with Terry, although reception wasn't all that clear; and she was expressing a wish that they could hold hands – not that she was scared; well, actually it was a lie... She broke off as yellow filled her mind momentarily, then faded almost instantly. Light began returning as the tubes rose through the floor of a circular chamber.

"Welcome to the Grand Dome," said Terry; then he asked: "Did you get all that?" She apparently had no idea what he was on about. "The message from Maiaa," he explained.

Annette was puzzled initially: "All I had was yellow;" then she realised the implication and was suddenly elated: "She got through to you at long last!"

"Briefly, while we were between floors," he said. "Must have been something to do with the concrete, or whatever it's made of..."

"Never mind that. What did she say?"

"She outlined the plan..." The tubes had come to rest and the interior of the chamber was an immediate distraction for him. He turned on the spot to gaze around. "Grand by name; grand by nature; kind-of a penthouse suite. Check out the view from the windows – pretty impressive if you like sand and rocks. No sign of the Eldaas yet, though. They'll probably rise up out of the floor to a fanfare of trumpets..."

"Forget the Eldaas too," she snapped impatiently, "And quit babbling. What's the plan? How do we get out of here? *When* do we?"

"Soon, I think. As for the plan, all I'll say is that it has to be co-ordinated. When I get the nod, just do what I tell you – exactly, no questions. Oh, by the way: the strike was nothing to do with The Group, but Maiaa thinks it might help keep some of the Sens out of our hair. On the down side, apparently even the thought stones don't work well in here."

"So how are we going to know what to do and when to do it?"

Terry shrugged and tried to seem unconcerned. "I have no idea..."

He broke off, noticing movement across the chamber in front of them. Something was appearing, rising up out of the floor, an oval table by the looks of it. Presumably having reached its required height it stopped. "Maybe they're going to serve us lunch?" Terry clowned nervously. An entrance had appeared in a side wall and a line of Sens marched in. "Guess I was wrong, unless these are the waiters." Plain nerves turned to groaning antagonism when Aavesh appeared following his troopers. "And, what a surprise - the Maitre d," he continued, "Definitely service without a smile. So, where's the cabaret?"

The squad of Sens marched briskly towards the tubes where they split into two groups and stood to attention on either side. Aavesh strode to a small control box on top of a waist-high pedestal. He seemed to be checking something on it. One of his troopers leaned towards him and whispered: "The Eldaas, Metterol. They are here." Aavesh spun on his heel and stood to attention facing the table and the entrance that had appeared in the wall beyond.

## The Council of Eldaas

The Sen guard had stopped fidgeting and was already rigid. Aavesh shot a critical glance along the ranks before facing front again. Seven Eldaas appeared through the doorway at the rear and flounced along, casually talking among themselves; white robes flowing, white skull caps covering heads that were not quite bald, retaining a few wispy strands of grey hair which floated untidily about their ears. Some of them stroked these, apparently proud that they had any at all. Instead of going straight to the table, they skirted it and continued on to stand before the tubes. Most frowned, the eyes of a couple began to pop; and the hands of those who had been hair-fiddling dropped to their sides. They huddled momentarily for a whispered discussion before returning their attention to the prisoners. Without even looking at Aavesh – probably making a point of ignoring him on purpose – one of the Eldaas screeched: “Secure them, Metterol; then open so that we may speak.”

Aavesh said nothing, just gave a curt bow before striding to the black box on the pedestal. A skinny finger extended and hovered briefly, time enough for his lips to kink in an evil smile; then the finger came down onto the box. To appreciate the full effect of this procedure, there was no need for him to look at faces to know his prisoners would be registering surprise, and hopefully fear. His eyes were glued to their feet, watching light rise from the base of the tubes to stop at ankle height.

Had he the courage to focus on them, the worried expressions of Terry and Annette as they stared down would have delighted the Metterol. “I can’t move!” exclaimed Annette. In panic, she had spoken aloud in English.

Terry replied in the same way: “Neither can I. Feels like I’ve got cement shoes. That presents a problem.”

“Of course it’s a problem,” she growled, “Being stuck to the floor is always going to be a problem.”

“What I mean,” he said, “Is this screws the plan. When the time comes, we have to be able to move, and fast...” He was half-way through the last comment when the fronts of the tubes fizzed. With the sound-proofing gone, his last words would have been heard by all and sundry. He reverted to tight-lipped mind transfer: “That explains the need for our shackles – they don’t want us going walkabout. I wonder what they’ll make of a foreign language?”

Annette said: “They obviously heard it. Look at them.”

The Eldaas were frowning again and exchanging puzzled glances. One of them pointed a bony finger at Terry. “Your speech is unfamiliar. Where are you from?”

“Melbourne,” replied Annette. She was about to add a sarcastic comment when the interrogator shot her a scowl and flapped a dismissive hand for her to remain silent.

He returned his attention to Terry. “I have not heard of it. Presumably you travelled from there to Rahl in the silver dome?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time. Now I’m not so sure.” Terry looked down at his feet. “Is this the way you treat all your visitors?”

“It is the way we treat our prisoners,” the Eldaa sneered, and added: “Wherever they are from, and however important they believe themselves to be.”

Terry noticed withered fingers twiddling a few strands of hair trailing from under the skull cap. It seemed an ideal time for a bit of one-upmanship. He raised a hand to scratch the blond mop on his own head, but the action was wasted: the Eldaas had already turned away and were walking to the table. He sent Annette a reminder: “Don’t forget – just name, rank and serial number.”

Judging by the way they were shuffling around and swapping places behind the table, it seemed the Council members each had a designated seat. Intrigued by this, Terry decided to slip into a couple of minds to find out what the big deal with seating arrangements was. This being his first scan of the Eldaas, he decided against making his presence obvious. That way he figured they would be less inhibited, believing their thoughts remained private. Later, if it might prove beneficial, he could make his mental superiority known.

The chair thing turned out to be irrelevant: it was the communication modules on the table-top that were specific to individuals. Eldaas were responsible for their own departments, from city planning and construction, to manufacturing, to law enforcement, and so on; and their modules kept them up to speed. Some were content with their appointments, while others were dissatisfied to have been palmed off with less-prestigious portfolios. This led to political rivalry, subterfuge and back-stabbing. The Eldaas might have considered themselves a cut above the rest, but they were no better than the worst that they openly despised.

Terry was in the head of an Eldaa called Ixor who was particularly critical of the Rahlian Police Force which was responsible for security in his factories. He shot an accusatory glare along the table and snapped: “I warned you this would happen, Kimmkoz. Arresting so many workers at one time was unnecessary.”

“May I remind you, Ixor, it was at your request.”

“Just the troublemakers, I said – four or five maybe; not *forty-five!*” Ixor consulted his modem and groaned. “It was bound to be a recipe for disaster. With the labour force reduced, that just put the rest under more pressure. Now it has come back to bite - the workers in the synthetics factory are rioting. This was your doing; so what are you going to do about it?”

Kimmkoz glowered at Ixor, then rasped into his com: “Seal the exits!” Following a break for a response, he demanded: “What do you mean: too late?” He was staring in dismay down at his modem. “Mobilise!! Every trooper, every transport...!” There was another interruption. “Yes, the city patrols too! Deploy *EVERYTHING!* I want this rebellion quashed before it spreads to the other factories. Seal the exits on them too; and double the guards in the holding centre in case they try to free the prisoners...” His expression clouded as he began tapping his com to switch channels without success. “I do not believe this! Now I have lost all contact with my operatives!” He scowled along the table at another Eldaa. “Thanks to

your incompetent Department of Science and Technology, Ahransu, I am landed with a communication device that has ceased communicating!”

The infuriated Eldaa thrust up from his seat and turned to leave. The senior Eldaa reprimanded him: “This is most irregular. Sit down, Kimmkoz! The Council is still in session, and we have barely begun the interrogation.”

“Then you will be conducting it without me, Perraq,” snapped Kimmkoz. “There is a rebellion to contain; and I cannot just sit here like the rest of you, stroking my hair while anarchy threatens to destroy that which I have sworn to protect.” He tried a few agitated taps on his com and grated: “Still nothing!” With a final snort, he stormed from the chamber.

“I was hoping with one of them gone they’d cancel the interrogation,” said Annette.

“Not that lucky.” Terry nodded towards the Eldaas. All were still seated, a couple were hair-twiddling. “And I should have cut off Kimmkoz before he mobilised the troops.”

“What do you mean – cut him off? Did you disable his com? How did you manage that?”

“Well, actually, I didn’t do anything to his com – there was nothing wrong with it. He just thought there was.” He tapped the side of his head. “It was all in his mind.” Following a long sigh, he added: “Kimmkoz seems a bit of a loose cannon. With him out in the field ordering death and destruction, it could be like chucking a match into a firework factory.”

## **Rebellion!**

The original plan had already been compromised. The hope of transporting as many of their Group as possible back to Earth where they could meet up with Yanu had to be discounted. The power of the time machine being so low, there was a high possibility that, even with only themselves on board, Terry and Annette might not make it home. Despite this, implementing their escape had become the priority. At that point, targeting the holding centre was deemed the best bet. Under normal circumstances, only a small number of guards would be in attendance for moving prisoners to and from the cells. Using mind power they would have been easy to control, including Aavesh who was bound to be there. The unfortunate arrest of so many factory workers at one time, however, had changed everything.

“We know Terr...eee and Annette are in the Grand Dome being interrogated,” said the Old One, “And from what we learned before losing contact, only a small contingent of troopers is guarding them. Clearly, the Eldaas believe this is sufficient and they will not be expecting a direct assault.”

Maiaa was puzzled. As well as listening to the Old One’s spoken words, she had been trying to scan his thoughts, but he had blocked her. “What are you thinking?” she asked. “Your suggestion implies militant action; and if that is so, I respectfully remind you, Old One, that violence is not our way.”

“A way that has always been peace and diplomacy, Maiaa,” replied the ancient Rahlian, “But it is too late for that. If you promise not to interrupt, I will outline my new plan.” He

gazed briefly around the members of The Group who were with him, then announced: “All of you need to know and I give you leave to join Maiaa in my thoughts. But I would advise you of two things: should you agree to accept my decision, you will have to act quickly and without question; secondly, I expect injury and possibly death – on both sides.” The Old One sat back and opened his mind.

The Group did agree, although some were uneasy. “It is as well,” said the Old One, feeling their uncertainty. “Over-confidence will be your enemy; fear will keep you sharp, and hopefully alive.” The advice was wise; although even he could not have predicted how much so. While The Group was dividing to perform their separate roles in the new plan, the knee-jerk reaction of Kimmkoz had set the cat among the pigeons. Rahl had erupted in chaos.

Workers from the synthetics factory went berserk and their numbers were too great for the guards present. Most Sens were able to flee, but some were overpowered, beaten and their weapons taken. The wild mob was out of control, and now it was armed! The bullying tactics of the Sen ground troops were useless against an enraged hoard, especially when it was shooting back. Plus, there were too many troopers whose only specific order had been to mobilise. With no strict instructions, they were reacting in frenzied panic, a colony of ants whose nest had just been raided. They scuttled to whichever bunch of rebels were closest; shooting, retreating, shooting again, then running away. Interceptors zoomed around, opening fire on the easy targets of massed insurgents; while the odd few chased individuals taking pot-shots that missed more often than not. Co-ordination had been abandoned in favour of a random free-for-all.

When Maiaa and five others arrived at the Sen Transport depot, most of the interceptors had already been deployed and were off adding to the chaos; but because of the way they were positioned in the hangar, until those at the front of the lines left, the rest behind had to wait their turn. Six interceptors remained, two more than were needed. The Group combined their mental powers and, boosted by the thought stone, a wave of paralysis flooded the hangar. As instructed, the Sen operators climbed out of their respective transports, blank expressions on their faces. They effected a slow zombie-walk to the rear wall where they stood unmoving.

The interceptors not required were disabled. Three of them left with their new operators and waited outside to guard the hangar. Maiaa was seated at the controls of her pod, and remained in the depot while Gannah changed clothes with one of the Sens. Although unhappy about carrying a weapon, he understood it was necessary for appearance sake; but he did set it to stun. Maiaa handed him the thought stone and said: “From here, it should take you no more than ten minutes. Once into the corridors, even with the stone, we will lose contact; but we will see you arrive in the Grand Dome and will be waiting for your signal. Luck be with you, Gannah.”

Gannah sent her a wavering smile. “With us all, hopefully.” He watched Maiaa take her interceptor out of the hangar, then turned to walk past the zombie guards through the doorway leading to the prison sector.

\* \* \* \*

In the Grand Dome, the interrogation had resumed without Kimmkoz; but his actions had drawn attention to a crisis that had the remaining Eldaas on edge. Ahransu was saying to Terry: “You claim your machine can travel not only between planets, but also has come from a different solar system to ours. Surely such a journey would take many years, centuries even; and you do not look that old. There is something you are not telling us.”

Annette let out a derisive screech of laughter. “If we did, you wouldn’t understand.”

Ahransu ignored her and continued to direct his questions to the male prisoner: “I wish to know how your machine works; its source of power; and what speed it can achieve.”

Terry shrugged. “Don’t ask me, I just drive the thing. My Science Officer here would be able to fill you in – provided you let her speak; and always assuming *she* wants to speak to *you*. So far, you’re pretty light on Brownie points.”

Following a deep frown as he puzzled the strange words, Ahransu glared at Annette. “Am I to understand that you, a *female*, are the Science Officer of the silver dome?”

She gave him a sneer. “Bugs you, doesn’t it? As for discussing the intricacies of a transparallax magnetron drive and the time/space continuum, I’d be wasting my breath. Taking into account your limited intelligence and woeful scientific ignorance, you would never be able to grasp even the rudiments of modern astrophysics in a million years. Might I also suggest that you add a further skill to your CV – insufferably-rude male chauvinist!”

Although he failed to comprehend the English words, there being no equivalent in Rahlian, the tone of Annette’s scathing insult flabbergasted Ahransu and he was expecting moral support from the other Eldaas; but they had apparently taken little notice, being distracted by a number of concerning incidents. One Eldaa had noticed something outside and had gone to look out of a window. He reported in a shaky screech that smoke was rising from the synthetics-factory vents. Ixor already knew via his com that a fire had broken out; but he still went to the window to see for himself; which was when he caught sight of four interceptors approaching. “I do not like the look of...” His attention was suddenly drawn to movement as a lone Sen entered through the doorway that led from the holding centre. His annoyance swung back to Aavesh: “What is the meaning of this, Metterol?”

Despite him being dressed as a Sen trooper, Annette recognised her friend instantly. “It’s Gannah!” she declared in an excited mental whisper.

With those in the chamber distracted by the disturbing occurrences, it was the ideal time. Gannah began advancing into the chamber, a hand covering the thought stone dangling on his chest. “Join with me, Terr...eee,” he sent. “We will need to combine our powers for what we must do next. You concentrate on neutralising the Sen guards and Aavesh. For the moment, I will handle the Eldaas.”

“If this is part of the updated plan,” cut in Annette, “I should remind you we are still stuck to the floor.”

Gannah reassured her: “Not for much longer. Please be patient.”

“And don’t keep interrupting,” Terry added. “I’m going to have Aavesh drop the shackles. As soon as you can move, get out of the tube.”

Terry picked up another of Gannah’s thoughts: to implant a message in Aavesh’s mind that he must return immediately to the holding centre with his troopers because it was being besieged by the rebels. “Is that a fact?” asked the boy.

“Possibly,” said Gannah, “Probably. As long as Aavesh believes it to be so, he will leave. Once he and the Eldaas have gone, I will give Maiaa the signal and very soon we will all be free.”

Remembering an old adage featuring an uncooperative Irishman, Terry sent another message to Annette: “I’ve had a word with Murphy and he’s promised to keep his law out of it; so everything’s sweet from here on in.” Unfortunately, it would seem that Murphy had his fingers crossed at the time.

The moment Aavesh switched off the restraints in the tubes, Terry and Annette took their first steps for nearly an hour only to discover their legs were so stiff that they were unable to walk properly. Terry stumbled out of his tube and held onto it for support, watching the backs of the Metterol and his Sens as they headed for the exit while concentrating to retain control of their minds. He noticed the Eldaas rushing for the exit; so Gannah was doing his bit and all seemed to be going well; until they received a hasty, faint report from Maiaa: “A squadron of Sen interceptors is approaching!”

Being much taller than the boy, Gannah could see the on-coming danger through the window and knew this changed everything. “Do it now, Maiaa!” he sent, then directed a warning to Terry and Annette: “Get down! Cover your faces!”

Both of them dived for the floor, just in time. Lohinn’s interceptor was facing the window and he sent a shot directly at it, blasting plexiglass and metal framing into the chamber. At the same instant, Terry felt a lightning bolt in his head and cried out.

“Are you hit?” rasped Annette.

“Not me,” Terry replied breathlessly as he began clambering to his feet. “The pain was Gannah’s! I’ve lost contact with him – no thought pattern, nothing! Come on!” The lanky Rahlian was stretched out on the floor, blood pooling from a shrapnel wound to his head. “Help me,” he hissed, “We have to get him into the pod!”

They were struggling to drag the Rahlian’s body towards the shattered window when a message came through from Maiaa: “It is pointless, Terr...eee – Gannah is dead. Just remove the thought stone and save yourselves.”

“No!!” Terry roared both aloud and in his mind. “Alive or dead, we do NOT leave one of our own behind! Maiaa: can you, Reeton and Habray act as decoys – draw the Sen squadron away from us? And please try not to get killed.” She was starting to argue; Terry barked: “No questions, just do it! That is an *order*, Maiaa!” He sent another to Lohinn: “Leave your pod in park and give us a hand with Gannah!”

Multi-tasking had never been his strong point; and suddenly finding himself minus Gannah’s mental support, Terry had let his control of the Sens drop. Only just passing

through the exit, the troopers stumbled to a sudden halt. They gazed around, puzzled why they were leaving when they seemed to recall that a mere blink ago they were beside the tubes guarding the prisoners. Something strange had happened. The Metterol would know what, so they turned to him for clarification.

Despite being unable to resist the mental powers of the boy, Aavesh was now getting accustomed to having his thoughts manipulated, and recovery was becoming easier; especially when prevailing circumstances demanded his immediate attention. Following the second of his release and a very brief mind-shake to re-focus, he spun on his heel and took in the situation. The prisoners were out of the tubes and were dragging what appeared to be a trooper towards a massive hole in the window. An interceptor hovered outside, its port open and the operator dressed in black was climbing out of it and into the chamber. Dressed in *black*? The Group!!!

His standing orders were clear – guard the prisoners; do not allow them to escape. “Take them!” he screeched at his Sens. Before the troopers had even rushed past, Aavesh had his weapon in hand and was levelling it at the one he considered the greatest danger – the black-uniformed Lohinn.

Realising his lapse in concentration, Terry leapt into the Metterol’s head; but a split-second too late to prevent Aavesh firing. The mental shock as his mind was invaded caused a physical jerk which sent the shot off target. Instead of boring into Lohinn’s chest, it went straight through his shoulder. Widening his range of influence, Terry resumed control of the Sen troopers as well as their officer and held them in check while he reassessed. Apart from being in obvious pain from his wound, Lohinn was about to resume dragging Gannah with his good hand. “Can you help him?” Terry asked Annette, then explained: “I need to make sure I keep the bozos in check, but I don’t think I can do that and drag Gannah at the same time.”

“Fair enough,” she said, “I’ll send you the bill for cartage later.” Something had just occurred to her. She looked up to attract his attention, but his back was turned; so she said: “I think we have a problem...” Then she had second thoughts and added: “Sorry. Forget about it - you need to keep your mind on the job. It can wait till later.”

When later came, Annette figured it could wait a bit longer. The three of them were in the pod with Gannah’s body propped up in a rear seat next to Annette. Because of Lohinn’s injury, he was unable to handle the controls, so Terry had been given the acting role. “Just remember I’m a learner driver,” he said nervously, “So when I bounce a kerb or three, don’t yell at me.”

“I would never do that, Little Terr...eee,” the Rahlian assured him and turned to smile. He was kneeling on the floor beside the boy, trying out the controls with his left hand. It was obviously awkward for him. “As long as you can manage speed and direction, I will control height and weaponry.”

Terry gasped. “I didn’t think we’d have to shoot anyone!”

“We may have no choice, Little One. Our enemies will be firing at *us*. Learn to accept this. I will set the weapons to disable for now. Like you, I would never take a life unnecessarily.”



A brief scan of Lohinn's thoughts for memories of what he might be up against was unnerving. Maybe they *were* from history's dark days when armed conflict was the only way to freedom; but the scenes were mind-blowing: like a combination of Star Wars and the Battle of Britain. It was too graphic really, causing him to doubt that he could perform well enough. Hopefully, what was to come wouldn't be that frenetic. Backing out of those early conflicts, he found something more recent that seemed a little strange. "I gather you were a Sen in your younger days," Terry commented; then queried: "How was it you decided to become a member of The Group?"

"Law enforcement sounded exciting at the time," replied Lohinn, "And it seemed to be a worthwhile calling; but when the brutal reality dawned, we wanted no part of it and looked for a better way to serve society."

"You said *we*," Terry prompted.

"Yes..." Lohinn's voice faded as he lapsed into reminiscences which Terry picked up on; but, although painful for him, it was obvious he needed to tell someone about it: "In a moment of youthful ignorance, Gannah and I joined up together." He turned to glance at the lifeless body in the rear seat. As he did so, his eyes misted and a tear trickled down his cheek. His next words were faint and soulful as he went on: "We were not merely good friends - Gannah was my natural brother."

Less than a minute had passed, yet, in that brief period Terry had come of age. Friendship and loyalty meant everything; responsibility was everything; and family was more than just blood-lines. "I understand," he said, "And I'm sorry you lost your brother."

"Lost maybe, but forgotten never." Lohinn's tone indicated that he was using sadness to re-gain composure and strength. "I do this for Gannah, Terr...eee: for his memory, and for all of those wrongs we swore to put right."

A momentary silence seemed appropriate, but it was all that could be spared. Terry asked Annette: "Did you manage to take off Gannah's stone; are you wearing it?" When she confirmed she was, he ordered: "Try contacting Maiaa. If you manage it, tell her to head for the silver dome and hold the position until we arrive."

A stray shot outside hit the window of the Grand Dome just metres from them. Terry's heart skipped and he cast a wide-eyed look to Lohinn: "Watch my back if you can. I've got one more thing to take care of."

Through the hole in the window, he could see Aavesh and the Sen guard standing motionless in the chamber. His next mental command sent them marching towards the exit, then continuing through it. Hopefully, that would be enough. Retaining mind control while he could, he instructed Lohinn to close the interceptor's door. The moment it had, he announced: "Chocks away, my good man. Red Baron taking off."

Terry spun the interceptor through one-eighty degrees to face out from the Grand Dome. He gasped at the scene before him. "Oh My God! It's World War Three!" Heart beating nineteen to the dozen, he wiped sweating palms on his tunic before returning fingers to the controls. "Hold onto your hats, everyone. This is going to be one hell-of-a hairy ride!"

## CHAPTER SIX

### Into the Plain of Death!

The desert had not seen as much action for decades. A multitude of Sens and their machines raked the barren plains around the domed city, attacking frightened civilians running to escape a frenetic onslaught. Initially it was carnage. Small bands of terrified rebels herded together by the interceptors were summarily fired upon by ground troops using hand weapons. The luckier victims fell unconscious, struck by shots from weapons that had been set to stun - apparently there *were* troopers who retained a sense of decency which precluded mass-murder. The hard-core Sens, however, continued to take pleasure in it, enraging the mob even more.

Afraid they would perish if they made no attempt to retaliate in some way, a few rebels dashed out from the packs. Those who were not stopped dead in their tracks tackled the Sens in the front ranks; and, thanks to the element of surprise, managed to overcome some. Having stripped the troopers of weapons, their next strategy should have been to continue targeting the ground troops; but in their fearful, unthinking panic, they turned their newly-acquired guns on the interceptors. It was a futile gesture. These pods were invulnerable to hand weapons, and the ineffectual shots hitting the armoured shells simply drew attention to the enemy shooters who were summarily dispatched with a spray of automatic fire or a single blast from the assault cannons. Hand guns were fine against flesh and blood; totally useless for combating the deadly interceptors. Unless there was a way to commandeer a fighting machine or two, the battle would inevitably be lost.

In one sector a leader had emerged. A long-time factory supervisor was using his organisational skills to mould an uncoordinated rabble into a small civilian army. Growing confidence from early successes had them believing in some kind of victory; and with new recruits swelling the ranks by the minute, this was not such a forlorn hope. There was, however, still the problem of the interceptors for which no-one had as yet found a solution; not until the two-man crew of a skood decided to change sides and joined the rebels.

Skoods were standard skips which had been modified for patrolling the city and immediate surroundings. Intended for dealing with civilian matters, the anti-personnel firepower of these city pods was down-graded from automatic to single-shot, and even these were only light stun-shocks. Their outer shells had no reinforcement; and they carried no assault cannons. Although their neg-beams were capable of disabling any vehicle's power-pack, adapted for use in busy confines they were only short-range. Even so, with a competent driver at the controls, immobilising an interceptor was possible, as long as the skood could move in close without getting holed or blown to bits in the process.

It seemed the one skood that had come over to their side was unlikely to make much of a difference; but the simpatico crew was determined to prove its worth in the rebels' cause. The pair was amazing, managing to disable three more patrol vehicles. The main problem

then was not the drained power-packs which could easily be replaced by factory workers whose job it had been to manufacture and fit them in the first place; it was the fact that the crews of the disabled pods were die-hards who refused to join the rebels. And imagining they remained safe within their spheres, they just sat there and waited for help to come.

It did in the shape of a lone interceptor. As the mob scattered, the rebel skood attracted attention with a series of advance and retreat manoeuvres. The interceptor took on the challenge and moved in for the kill. It should have been easy, except that the skood had taken to dancing from side to side and above the Sen craft. One second the weapon sights were on target, the next there was nothing to shoot at. The interceptor gunner might have had better success using the neg-beam, but he obviously preferred a more positive outcome. He only managed two shots from the assault cannon and both missed the unpredictable skood. Then the illusive rebel was above, behind and moving in at speed. Within just metres, the neg-beam spat. The casing of the interceptor was momentarily bathed in a fizz of electro-static sparks before it dropped, skidded along the sand a short way, and finally came to rest.

The rebels were ecstatic, an exuberance which was short-lived. "Unless the crew surrenders, we cannot use it," their former supervisor and newly-proclaimed General reminded them, "And they will have activated their emergency beacon, so more interceptors are bound to come. We will need protection. Fitters, go to the workshop - bring power-packs for skoods and interceptors: just in case we can get into them without too many casualties. And remember the tools to fit them." He had another thought: "Freight drivers return to your depot and bring every working lugger."

Since heading his interceptor out from the Grand Dome, Terry was a bundle of nerves: the last person anyone needed behind the wheel in a war zone. Each sphere had to be regarded as the enemy, and they proved that by shooting at him. Lohinn anticipated an attack was coming; and before the enemy cannon fired he sent their pod higher with a sudden lurch to clear the shot by inches. The interceptor rose to the same height and kept coming. "Veer right, then a quick turn left," he ordered Terry.

The idea was to avoid the Sen's cannon and deliver a neg-beam to the interceptor's port side. Terry was too hesitant and the beam missed. Lohinn dropped the sphere and almost instantly took it up again. "They will match us Terr...eee. This time go left, then right, then left again." Terry's responses were erratic. His first left was too short, so he overcompensated with the right and sent them zooming off into nowhere. His final jerk left turned the sphere through one-eighty degrees. It was a lucky spin. They were now behind the Sen and coming in fast. Lohinn fired a neg-beam that hit the interceptor square on the stern. "Well done, Little One," he said. "I do believe you are, as you would say, going good."

A voice came from the back seat: "He's *going* to get us killed, that's what he's going to do," screeched Annette. "You are a total maniac, Terry Savage!" she spat in English, "And you have the nerve to criticise women drivers..."

“One on your right, one straight ahead!” rasped Lohinn. His hand skipped on the controls and he said: “I am sorry for this, Terr...eee.” The interceptor in front was coming straight at them. Lohinn hit the pad on the control module, his assault cannon fired. The shot exploded to the right of centre, throwing the sphere off course. It went down trailing smoke. Had it landed on sand, any surviving crew would have had a chance. Unfortunately, it struck a large rock which penetrated the damaged shell sending shrapnel into the magazine rack. Another second and it was over - pod and crew incinerated in a ball of fire.

Terry was stunned, Lohinn more so having been the one to deliver the fatal shot; but he regained focus quicker than the boy and had seen another danger coming. “Right full-circle!” Lohinn commanded. The strategy was sound, the execution nearly fatal and they were lucky the interceptor’s shot was wide.

“This is more than hairy,” gasped Terry. “I can’t seem to get the hang of it.” His eyes widened. The attacking interceptor was still there, but a line of four was in the distance and approaching fast. “Sorry guys,” he said apologetically, “But I think we’re about to be dead.”

Annette droned pedantically from behind: “Don’t *think* - use the Force, Luke.”

Lohinn ordered: “Left full circle!” then asked: “Who is Luke?”

Terry was spinning the pod left as ordered, his mind following suit. “Not me, that’s for sure. I’m no Skywalker, Annette; and there *is* no Force!”

“But there is a *Stone*” she said, “The *thought stone*. Use it! You and Lohinn become one.”

Despite being an annoying female back-seat driver, she was right. Considering his penchant for fantasy, he should have figured it out for himself. Following a mental tut, Terry snatched a hand from the controls to touch the stone on his chest. It was warming as he joined himself and Lohinn in thought and deed. The connection made, his hand flew back to the controls. “I have the ball,” he declared in English. Lohinn understood his meaning and concentrated on the weaponry, leaving the boy to steer. A few acrobatic skips and a single neg-beam saw the closest interceptor plunge into the dirt. Terry sent his gunner thanks for switching off the assault cannon; but also confirmed it would be okay with him if Lohinn figured it necessary to engage it again. There might be no choice, not with one against four.

The rebel army had also seen the line of interceptors coming. The first of the rebel luggers was just arriving and those closest dived behind it for cover; some climbing into the empty freight container. They waited for the attack to come to them, but it went straight past. The skood driver said to his offside: “I do not understand. The interceptors are moving in on one of their own. Why would they do that?” Then it dawned on him as he recalled common gossip about the daring rescue from the Grand Dome. The driver said: “It must be The Group; but even *they* can never tackle four at once. We should help. Are you game?”

His offside shrugged and grinned. “We have made our choice. Be it right or wrong, we have nothing to lose now; and I never did like boring city patrols.”

Lohinn reported: “They will be within range in eight seconds, Terr...eee. Turn and run!”

Under normal circumstances, Terry would have argued that withdrawal was the coward’s option; but the mind-link made Lohinn’s strategy instantly clear. Spinning, then increasing

speed, he steered them straight for a convoy of approaching luggers plodding its way from the freight depot. They were slow, certainly, but being constructed from heavy metal and standing higher than three pods, they would make ideal temporary shields. Terry steered towards the leading freighter. Lohinn informed him: "The enemy has changed course to track us."

Terry said: "When we're past the first lugger, I'll drop down behind and follow the convoy back. Tell me as soon as the first interceptor is almost in range." Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined being capable of the speed and precision of his next manoeuvre. Once shielded by the side of the massive freighter container, he zipped to the third in line, stopped the pod dead, spun it to face in the opposite direction and waited.

"Two seconds," said Lohinn; then: "I see him. He is climbing over the front lugger now."

The occupants were forced back in their seats as Terry went from standing to maximum speed and sent the pod skimming just centimetres above the ground straight past the leading freighter and beyond. At the same instant that he barked: "Jump!" he spun the pod to face the side of the attacking interceptor and ordered: "Disable!" The neg-beam hit and that one went down. The other three, however, kept coming.

Terry returned his pod to the front lugger, slowed to a stop over the tray and ordered: "Down." The pod lowered to sit in the bottom of the container and the advancing interceptors were out of sight momentarily, until one rose above; and it was behind them! It tilted down a few degrees to face directly at the stationary interceptor sitting in the lugger's tray. A 'bip' from the control panel drew attention to a flashing circle – the enemy target alarm. "We're gone," said Terry. He managed a dismal: "Sorry," just as the enemy interceptor fired.

There was no sudden flash, no instantaneous oblivion, merely a buzz of electro-static energy that encompassed the outside shell of the pod. In seconds it had gone; along with their power. The incident puzzled Lohinn: "Why did he just disable us?"

The interceptor remained hovering. Perhaps the pilot was thinking that he should have used the cannon and was of a mind to rectify the oversight. Believing he was about to meet his maker, Terry released his link with Lohinn, his idea being to send a last goodbye to The Group should they be in contact. If any were, they failed to respond; but he did pick up friendly thoughts from a totally unexpected source in the form of a very polite message: "It is I, Pandhor, Lord; and it will be safer for you if you remain where you are for the time being."

Terry recognised both the mind-pattern and a similar suggestion. It was the Sen pilot who had taken him to the Grand Dome, the considerate one whose respectful acknowledgement of Terry's assumed high rank had enraged Aavesh. "Um... thanks heaps for that," returned the boy humbly. "What does your co-pilot think of your soft approach?"

A smile drifted through Pandhor's thoughts. "He is sleeping peacefully, Lord."

"Good thinking, Ninety-Nine. But you do realise you'll be in big strife if Aavesh finds out you've spared us."

"In a moment, Lord, the Metterol will have even more to complain about." The Sen withdrew from the mental exchange as he switched his concentration to practical matters.

His interceptor rose and veered, then headed out to join the other three which should have been standing off waiting for him. They were instead otherwise engaged, trying to avoid the attentions of a skood which skipped and zoomed around them like an annoying fly. Two were ducking and weaving, keeping at a safe distance as best they could. The third, unfortunately, had separated from the melee. Now it turned and was homing in on the skood. Pandhor steered straight for it. The moment he was in range, he loosed a neg-charge which sent the disabled interceptor sparking and fizzing into the sand.

Below the high side of the lugger, Terry and the others were unable to witness the confrontation; but, thanks to the power of two thought stones, all three could see it unfolding via Pandhor's mind. "He's a legend," observed Terry, feeling proud to have made a friend and ally.

"He always was," said Lohinn, "At least, he claimed that was his destiny."

Annette was surprised: "You know him?"

"From my days as a former Sen," he explained. "Gannah and I were at training school with him, and for a while in the Police Force. When we decided to leave, we asked Pandhor to join us as members of The Group."

"Considering his recent actions," observed Annette, "It's a wonder he didn't."

Lohinn screeched a Rahlian chuckle. "He maintained he was no scientist, just a soldier; and as such, he reasoned he would serve peace better from the inside. When we parted company, he said: 'Wait and see – one day I will be a legend revered forever; while you, my friends, will just be boring scientists forgotten in a moment'..." Lohinn broke off and declared: "Pandhor's going in again!"

The skood was almost there, closing in on its target from above and behind; but the pilot had either not noticed the approach of the other interceptor, or had chosen to ignore it in a moment of reckless courage. Pandhor's heart skipped a beat as he thought: "We need this brave little crew." With that, he banked, and zoomed at maximum speed straight for the attacking interceptor. It was too late for niceties. The sights aligned the target, locked on; and the assault cannon fired, blasting a hole in the side. Lohinn breathed a sigh of relief as the damaged pod hit the dirt and the crew could be seen clambering out through the rear escape hatch. Given a timely reprieve, three seconds later the skood hit its intended target with a neg-beam and the last interceptor went down.

Aware that others were still in his mind, one in particular, Pandhor sighed and thought: "I truly regret that, Lord. Please understand that I am not a normally a violent person."

"I know, Pandhor," sent Terry, "We all do, especially Lohinn. He said to say don't let this minor win go to your head: you are not a legend yet. There are more battles to fight." He waited for the ex-Sen's regrets to fade before adding: "Personally, I reckon you're already a better white knight than I could ever be, but I won't hold that against you. Welcome to the club, mate."

## The Resistance Builds

The convoy of luggers eventually arrived, along with equipment to repair the disabled pods. Fearing for their lives, the Sen crews still in their interceptors had withdrawn their weapons and waited; knowing they were safe, but only until the escape hatches were removed from the outside. "When that happens they'll panic," said Annette unnecessarily, "And more lives will be lost."

"Not if I can help it," declared Terry adamantly. He sent an urgent mental request to the rebel General to free him first; holding off on opening up the other pods for the moment. The General was unsure, expecting enemy interceptors from far afield would respond to the emergency beacons that would no doubt have been activated; and he added that it would take a while to fit new power packs. The General was convinced that more delays would be fatal. "I just need to get out of this thing," urged Terry. "You can fix it while I talk to the interceptor crews. They *will* give up without a fight. Trust me."

The easiest part was vacating his pod via the escape hatch; climbing out of the steep-sided freight container unaided, however, would have been impossible for a small boy. Fortunately, luggers carried ladders for maintenance purposes. Once on the ground, Terry hurried to the closest interceptor. It was already surrounded by rebels brandishing weapons and seemingly keen to use them. "You can put the guns down," he said, "They won't be needed." Standing close to the pod, he smiled through the clear wall and entered the minds of the crew. They were momentarily surprised, instantly calmed by a flood of yellow; then more than willing to surrender on Terry's terms which were simple – join the cause, or become prisoners of war.

He repeated the performance with the second disabled pod. "In less than an hour," he explained to Annette as they walked towards the last interceptor, "We should have three fully-operational fighters."

"I don't think we have that long," said Annette pointing to the skyline.

A single pod was in the distance heading for them. It was bound to be an interceptor; probably the front-runner of much bigger force. Terry realised this and placed a hand on the thought stone to search for Pandhor's mind pattern. The moment he was contacted, the Rahlian knew not only that he was about to be given an order; but from the Lord's own thoughts it was clear what that order would be. "I see it coming," confirmed Pandhor, "I am onto it - I have the ball," then he paused to chuckle and comment: "I do so love your turn of phrase, Lord."

Terry added: "Take the skood for backup. No risks, mind; but buy us as much time as you can. Luck to you and your little mate, Pandhor."

They could only watch as the two compatriots headed off on what might be a suicide mission. Terry turned away, wishing he hadn't made the mistake of dropping his now-disabled pod into the freight container. He was about to say as much to Annette, but was

shocked to discover he was on his own. His hand flew to the stone. “Where are you?” he sent in near-panic.

“Doing my bit for the cause,” she came back. “I’ve just convinced a skood crew to give up, and I’m working on the next one. Oh, and while I’ve got you on line, so to speak, I have a job for you.”

Since the old round house had sent him on his numerous adventures, Terry’s responsibilities had increased to the point where it was easy to forget that he wasn’t the only one capable of taking the reins. Annette had just proved that; and as he went to perform the task she had given him, it was obvious others hadn’t been standing around waiting for his orders. The General in particular had been busy. Eight of the luggers had been positioned to form a square enclosing a large courtyard. Another freighter sat inside on this sand pad, slightly off-centre to leave enough space for a number of pods to land for repairs, or just to take cover. There was sufficient room spare for a good portion of the rebel army. In effect, it was a steel fortress – a brilliant strategy. The moment he noticed Terry arriving, the General marched over and informed him: “The prisoners are in the cell, Lord.”

The ‘cell’ was one of two freight containers that had been positioned as extra defence twenty metres out from the front wall of the fortress. Rebel guards were on hand to ferry prisoners one at a time for interrogation. There was no way he was going to subject them to the indignities he and Annette had endured in the Grand Dome, so Terry dismissed the guards before talking one-on-one with the first of the Sens from the captured interceptors. Each prisoner took a while because he was being particular; and he was just over half-way through them when Annette speared into his head and snapped: “Surely you don’t have to take all day? We need *pilots*, Terry! Preferably ones who aren’t going to defect to the enemy; and we need them NOW! Pandhor’s on his way back with *five* on his tail!”

Taking a deep breath, Terry glanced at a couple of nervous Sens standing to the side. “I can only give you two. They’ll have to fly solo. I’ll ask the General for a couple of pod-mechanics to crew the third interceptor. What about mine – is it ready yet?”

“Fired up and on the runway,” she said, then rasped: “Get your crews over here quick smart, Squadron Leader – Scramble! Scramble!”

### **Outnumbered!**

The thought stone was always going to be useful, but he wasn’t sure of range or reception. The battle of the interceptors promised to be fast and furious; and his pilots being new to his kind of strategy, there would be no time for training drills. Terry decided the coming skirmish would have to be fought the old-fashioned way of the World War II dog-fight.

While they were running for their interceptors and still close enough, Terry gave them their final instructions in a mental rush: “Open pod-to-pod channels and leave the coms on. Talk



to each other – spot for incoming and tell your wingmen when they have a bandit on their tail. When I give an order, action it immediately! Neg-beams whenever possible; cannons only if you have to – we need to save as many as we can. And remember: ‘Fast’ means full throttle; ‘High’ means sky’s the limit.”

Realising this would be confusing for them, he relayed a video clip from a movie he’d seen – The Battle of Britain. Then he gave them their call-signs: Duke, Butch and Sundance for the newbies; and Ace for Pandhor who had already notched up enough to deserve the accolade. Saving the personal best for last, he assigned ‘Lillo’ to the skood in the hopes that an association with Annette would keep it out of less trouble than its namesake.

They were heading out towards the incoming enemy at a slow cruise. “On my command,” he said into the com, “Turn and go flat-stick for the fortress – draw them with you. The more we can disable there, the more we can salvage.” Finally he said: “Thanks for joining up, guys. Good to have you on board. Red Leader standing by.”

In less than two minutes it was on for young and old. The six rebel machines were homing in fast on their fortress. With the sudden burst of speed, they had put a good distance between themselves and their enemy hunters. This raised Terry’s hopes until some bad news rasped from his com: “Lillo to Red Leader: three more bandits coming in, one at four o’clock, two at nine o’clock.”

Snap glances to right and left confirmed the report. Terry groaned at the implication. Originally the odds were in their favour; but a cruel roll of the dice saw them outnumbered. First he ordered: “The lone bandit’s yours, Lillo. Ace and Duke, you’ve got the two. Butch and Sundance, with me. We’ll hit the pack.” He was about to deliver the attack command when Annette jumped into his head.

“Not the two, Terry!” she said hastily, “They’re ours.”

“Roger that, Alamo,” he sent back; then said into his com: “The two are friendlies. Show them the ropes, Ace. Duke - stick with us.”

Annette was querying: “Alamo?”

“That’s your call sign,” snapped Terry, “Can’t stop to chat. Kind-of busy;” then: “Red Leader to all birds – buckle up; then high, break and loop!”

The ensuing conflict had attracted a gallery. Except for those on maintenance duties, the rebels had been watching the approach of their fighters. When they were still in the distance it was an encouraging sight that had many of them screeching and cheering; then it seemed the line of their own pod-force was heading straight for them on ground level and at break-neck speed. Eyes flew wide. Surely they would never pull up in time? Those who could scrambled for cover behind the closest lugger; everyone else ducked as, at the very last second, the line of pods rose to barely miss the fortress and zoomed over their heads.

There was more to come. The pods continued climbing; then they were splitting up, fanning out and climbing still. Gasps and expressions of awe echoed as the rebel audience was treated to a display never before been seen on Rahl. The interceptor on the right of the fan turned to head straight for the two incoming friendlies, while the skood on the far side

veered off towards the enemy Sen approaching from the left. The four in the centre continued to climb. As they did so, they were revolving upside down in an impossible loop-the-loop that not only took them high above their intended targets, but an additional burst of speed while upside down brought them into an ideal attack position once they levelled off.

Despite having superior numbers, the Sens had not been expecting the rebel tactics and were in disarray. Their enemy previously at ground level and in front was suddenly above and behind! The Sen interceptors panicked, scattered and became fish in a barrel. "I'll take him, Sundance. Bandit on your two o'clock." Then from Butch: "Duke has taken flak, but he is still okay." Next: "Red Leader going in." Once the enemy fighters realised the battle was to be fought high in the air, they tried to adapt, but were totally outclassed. It was all over bar the shouting in ten minutes. Only one of the five survived the radical attack, and he was high-tailing it. Too late, as it happened; because, by then, Pandhor was zeroing in with his new recruits. The Sen accepted his inevitable defeat and capitulated by setting his interceptor down without a fight.

This battle, at least, had been won with just a minor flesh-wound to Duke's pod. The other disappointing casualty was a Sen interceptor that had taken friendly fire from an assault cannon. The crew was uninjured, but the vehicle was damaged beyond repair.

### **A Brief Respite**

Work began immediately on the disabled interceptors. One of the mechanics had the idea to remove the cannon from the damaged interceptor. While this was being actioned, the General sent some men back to the workshop for more power-packs, spare cannons and magazines, plus some welding gear. "We'll fix them on top of the fortress walls," he declared; then had an after-thought and asked: "Can I borrow a skood to transport some of my workers, Lord? It will be quicker than them having to walk to the factory."

While the battle of the interceptors had been raging, Annette had convinced the crews of two skoods to change sides; the Sens in the third, however, refused and were carted off to the cell. Being advised of the additions to his squadron, Terry said: "Take two of the newbies, General; but I want them back. You can't have Lillo, though – I need him."

Annette overheard. "For what?" she asked and looked to the skies which at present were clear. "Sounds like you plan on going somewhere. I hope not, because you should be here; and you need to rest."

"Apart from being totally exhausted, I'm fine," he joked, then said gravely: "I'm concerned about Maiaa and the others. We don't even know if they're still alive. I have to see. I'm taking the skood and two interceptors. That should leave you enough fighters for the time being; and there'll be more pods as they're fixed, plus crews if you can recruit them."

“So, you expect me to stay behind while you go off gallivanting, probably getting yourself killed?” she sneered. “That’s pretty macho and mean, I reckon.”

“You’re not thinking, Annette,” he declared with a sigh. “We have the two remaining thought stones. I want to return one to The Group before we leave for home; and if I don’t make it, yours is the last one.”

“You’d *better* make it, Terry Savage, or I’m stuck here for the duration. You’re the time machine operator – remember?”

“I’m well aware of that,” Terry grated irritably; then he mellowed. “Do I detect a yes somewhere in your whingeing?”

“Reluctantly.” Annette gazed nervously up into the sky. It was still clear. “Oh, go, why don’t you? I’ll stay here and knit socks for the troops or something.”

“Forget the socks,” he said, turning to walk away. “Just concentrate on getting as many fighters operational as you can, plus the crews to fly them. And they’ll need a crash course in battle tactics.”

“What do I know about that?” she asked. “I’ve only seen it from a distance.”

“I think I’ve got that covered,” he reassured her. “Carry on with your knitting – sorry, *recruiting*. I’ll be back in two shakes.”

Convincing Lohinn to stay behind was like going head-to-head with Annette all over again. He claimed Terry couldn’t operate the interceptor without him. Terry begged to differ: “You’ve taught me everything you know, and I’m pretty sure I can handle flight and weapons on my own.” Lohinn continued to argue his point. Terry played his hole card: “I really want you to look after Annette for me. I also need you to work with her. She’s totally ignorant of dog-fight tactics; so are the newbies; but between you, and using the stone, you can train them mentally in seconds – use some video clips like I did. Are you prepared to give it a go?”

A sigh was evidence the Rahlian was caving in. “Okay, Lohinn, you and Annette are now Operations Command. You can discuss strategy with your new Squadron Leader...”

Pandhor was unsure: “I would prefer to accompany you, Lord.”

“The name’s Terry,” he corrected. “Forget the ‘Lord’ bit – I’m no more of a nob than you, Pandhor. I’m giving you a field promotion to Squadron Leader. Pick any colour – puce, if you like. Do both of us a favour and take the job, Ace. I need someone who knows how to fight and can kick the rookies into shape. Butch, Sundance and Lillo are with me. Then you’ve only lost four if we don’t make it.”

“You can also have Duke, Lord... er, Terry,” suggested Squadron Leader Pandhor, already going through the colours to choose a suitable one. “I’ll assign him to an undamaged interceptor. You could use him – he is good; being hit was a one-in-a-million fluke.”

“All donations gratefully accepted,” said Terry. “Now - I want you to liaise with Lohinn and Annette. Especially keep an eye on her for me. If everything goes pear-shaped, get her to safety – priority one.”

“Roger that,” said Pandhor with a grin. “You can bank on me.”

Terry gave him a wink and a quote from an old movie: "Watch your top-knot," It was a reference to avoiding being scalped which was quite ludicrous considering Pandhor was bald; so he changed it to: "Keep your powder dry." Ace didn't understand that one either. So much for clichés.

### **The Underbelly Strategy**

Five rebel pods set out from the fortress at top speed, destination time machine. It had been hoped they would be unhindered; in true Murphy tradition, of course, roving Sen interceptors spotted them on three occasions. The resulting skirmishes were short-lived, the aerobatics of Terry's squad too complex for the enemy. His standing orders gnawed at his conscience as he issued them: "Cannons only. They're too far away for our guys to fix them, and we need them out of action permanently." Continuing on towards the silver dome, they had left behind only two Sen crews alive; the rest were unable to escape their burning pods and were incinerated. "Sorry if any of your mates were in that lot, guys," Terry said apologetically.

"Their choice, Red Leader," came back Sundance, "Not your fault they made the wrong one."

Terry was hoping to see Maiaa and the others positioned strategically around the time machine, protecting it and just waiting for the odd assault. What the rebel squadron witnessed when it came within sight was a battle royal. Sen interceptors were everywhere, swarming around the defenders; taking shots, retreating, then coming in again for another attack. Amazingly, all but one of Maiaa's pods were still airborne. "Fan and go in high," Terry ordered. "Neg-beams only, unless you're one-hundred-and-ten percent certain your shot isn't going to take out one of ours."

The rebel squadron was giving a better-than-good account of itself when disaster struck. Lillo was hit and went down. Terry veered about-face and headed for the smoking skood. Two individuals were crawling out through the escape hatch, seemingly unharmed. He landed close by, opened his port and yelled: "Jump in, guys."

They waved him off. One of Lillo's crew shouted: "We can fix it. Ten minutes and we'll be operational..." He broke off, pointed and screeched: "Incoming twelve o'clock high, Red Leader. Go, Go, GO!"

Terry was closing the door and called: "See you up top," but he was unsure they had heard. The next second he was climbing towards the approaching interceptor. Although closing fast, it was still too far. He decided on a change of tactics and stayed low. The instant he was in range, he began climbing again, homing in on the underside of the bandit. Target beam activated and locked on, he fired. The cannon charge hit and the entire pod exploded in a ball of flame. It was a lucky shot that had penetrated the interceptor's cannon

magazine. Overcoming guilt and regret for more lives lost, Terry composed himself to pass on this vital intel to his team: “Red Leader to all crews. These birds have soft underbellies. But if you hit ‘em there, don’t be too close or you’ll get taken out by the blast...”

A hasty message interrupted: “Duke, here. Bandits incoming, ten or more; but they’re high for a change. They really are asking for it.”

The rebel force was anticipating trying out the new strategy. With Lillo still down they were reduced to four, but the skood had no cannon and they weren’t planning on worrying the life out of the enemy. So, they left Lillo in the dirt and zipped off to engage in what promised to be the real deal.

Terry had them climb to the same height as the Sens, staying in tight formation and just cruising. Ninety seconds out, they climbed even higher. The line of incoming rose to match them, presumably having seen the rebels’ earlier tactics and not wanting to be attacked from above. Terry used the window to instruct his crews: “We’ll hit from the flanks towards the middle – second in, fourth in. That’s one each. Fire on my signal, then dive for the dirt. If I’m right, there’ll be one hell-of-bang.” Ten seconds out the command came: “Dive, level for two, then tilt up and shoot!”

Close to the silver dome there was a lull in the fighting, time enough for The Group to watch Terry’s interceptors going in. They could be seen diving below the Sen squadron, then came a frightful vision. Balls of fire from four exploding magazines spread outwards causing a chain reaction both ways through the line of Sen pods. In a second it seemed the sky was alight. Members of The Group gasped, then waited. The smoke began to clear. A lone interceptor had escaped the holocaust and was heading off into the distance; but there were no signs of any other survivors. Neither could the rebel force be seen. Was it possible they had been destroyed by their own dreadful actions? “Oh, my dear Little One,” Maiaa whispered to herself, “What have you done?”

### **A Plea from Annette**

The Group was stunned, particularly by Maiaa’s sentiments which all-but confirmed the death of Terry and his brave squadron. A minute passed, then two. Maiaa was becoming too distressed just gazing out over the desert at nothing and said: “I have to see for myself. Stay and guard the silver dome.”

Her last instruction was probably quite meaningless. As she set out, she was thinking that it had all been a waste of lives and effort. Without Terry, the time machine was useless; her brother Yanu was stranded on an alien planet; and Rahl was in the grip of anarchy. The only hope now was for surviving members of The Group to flee the city. There were outlying colonies, small gatherings of civilians trying to set up alternative civilisations. Perhaps one

would welcome them and they could begin again, planning for a different future, a better life for all.

She experienced a conflict of emotions from anticipation to fear as she spotted three interceptors coming out of the distance towards her, one of them trailing smoke. They could be Sens. It was hard to tell until they were closer and she was able to see vague images of the occupants through the transparent, battle-scarred shells of the pods. Two pilots wore silver uniforms which sent her pulse racing; the dress of the third operator helped relax her a little. He had on coveralls and was seemingly a factory worker which was puzzling in itself. Maybe the rebels were short on pilots? Expecting there might be more than one crew member in each, she scanned the interceptors with an eagle eye as they came closer. Spirits plunged when there was no black uniform in sight. Terry was not one of them.

The first interceptor settled onto the sand a safe distance from the other spheres, smoke rising from its damaged shell. A port opened and Duke stepped out. He waved at Maiaa before going to inspect the hole in the rear of his pod, fire extinguisher in hand. "I would not want to be in his shoes when the Skipper arrives," Sundance sniggered over his com.

Almost there, Butch took his interceptor up a few metres and turned to report: "He is coming now. I see him."

Maiaa had been close enough to pick up on the thoughts and her heart was suddenly racing. Searching the far plains, still she could see nothing from ground level. "Come on, come on," she was urging mentally, "Where are you little Terr...eee?"

"You're starting to sound like Annette," were the words that entered her head, faint at first, but growing in clarity by the second. "I guess bullying me is a female thing."

"Is that really you, Terr...eee?" she asked unnecessarily.

"Who else?" came the reply. Then she saw him, a second pod cruising alongside.

"Skipper's got Lillo," said Butch. "Just as well. Ace would be livid if we left him out here."

"Too right," agreed Sundance, "And him being a squad-boss now, we would have been on maintenance duties for a week."

Terry coasted up and set down next to the rest of the squadron. "Sorry I wasn't here sooner," he sent to Maiaa, "Had to pick up a little mate..."

By this time, night was falling. Apparently, although pods operated efficiently in darkness, the Sen pilots obviously didn't, or preferred not to. They would, however, be back in action when the first moon rose in four hours, time enough for a short, well-earned nap.

Terry was first to awake, encouraged by the increasing pale light creeping across the sandy plain. Sleeping in his pod had given him a stiff neck, and his throat was dry. A few sucks from the water tube helped quench his thirst but did nothing for the growling in his stomach. Pressing the general-alarm button on his com, he said: "Rise and shine, guys. Moon's up and we need to get going. Don't suppose anyone's got some tucker, maybe a bag of crisps or a chocolate bar? I'm famished."

Duke came back: "Got some *quillusian*, Skip."

Terry groaned. "Thanks, Duke, but I think I'll pass."

It took them a few minutes to organise. Once everyone had checked in that they were ready, Terry sent: "Red Squadron head out. I'll join you in a minute." Climbing out of the pod, he was walking over to see Maiaa when the thought stone began warming and an extremely agitated Annette was screaming in his head: "All hell's broken out here! We're trapped!"

Terry groaned. "I don't believe this – we haven't had breakfast yet. My squad's already on the way, but it'll take us fifteen or more to get back to you..."

"NO!!" Annette's desperate yell was in his head and it rocked him. "There's a cordon of interceptors surrounding us. Even if you can break through, you'll never get out..."

"But..."

"No buts, Terry. Just listen to me." Was it possible to experience panting in someone's thoughts? It seemed like that was what Annette was doing. "You must leave for home, NOW! Take the stone back to Yanu – *if* you can get back. Apologise to Harold for me..."

"You can do that yourself," he sent hastily, "I'm coming for you."

"You don't understand – something terrible is happening here!"

"Can't be as bad as what we've just been through," he tried to assure her. "One more thing – I'm giving the thought stone to Maiaa for safe keeping, so we'll be out of touch for a while. See you back at the ranch. We've got a couple of wounded birds and they might slow us down a bit." Before she could interrupt again, he took off at a run for his interceptor.

Annette had experienced the transfer of the stone to Maiaa, so she pleaded: "Please don't let him go, Maiaa!" She paused to send a current mental snapshot of what the rebel forces were facing. "That thing is devastating! Lohinn says it's a quadceptor – a killing machine! Even Terry won't be able to stop it!" Terry, however, was already speeding off to join his squadron and he was out of range.

### **The Killing Machine**

At almost the same time that Red Squadron had originally left to check on Maiaa, Kimmkoz was back in his command centre, frowning at a dusty, antiquated box on the table before him. At the flick of a switch, a red light glimmered, flashed on and off momentarily, then died. The Eldaa tutted. Picking up an old-fashioned microphone, he depressed the talk button. "Are you receiving?" He waited for a reply which was initially not forthcoming. "It does not work!" he screeched at the man beside him.

The Sen shifted nervously. "According to the curator, you have to release the button after you speak, My Lord."

Kimmkoz groaned dissatisfaction and tried again, initially forgetting about the button. When he eventually released it, a speaker crackled the last part of an incoming message:

“...little fragmented, but I can understand. I am armed and fuelled up. Do you wish me to try the engine?”

“What do *you* think, Aavesh?” the Eldaa growled impatiently. “Get on with it.”

The quadceptor was literally a museum piece, the last intact example from a fleet which was withdrawn towards the close of a war that was supposed to end all wars. Only the Generals objected; everyone else was relieved to see the back of what had proved to be nothing more than a terrible, indiscriminate killing machine. Powered by liquid fuel, neg-beams would have no effect. As for modern interceptor assault cannons, they would do little more than make small dents on the heavily armoured carapace; whereas the four guns of the quadceptor, mounted to face north, south, east and west, could fire explosive shells in almost any direction and were many times more destructive.

At that moment, it sat on display in the middle of a large chamber surrounded by military ordnance and smaller vehicles, a few of which like the quadceptor had not seen active service for over a century. This was of major concern for Aavesh. If it failed to start, and being so old this was a distinct possibility, he would be blamed. He stroked through the images on the screen of a digital instruction manual provided by the curator and found the starting procedure. It seemed simple enough – switch on ignition and press the green button. He did, releasing it instantly as a loud grating filled the interior and stopped the hearts of the occupants for a second. Nothing else happened, so he tried again. The deafening noise echoed around; that was all. Consulting the manual he found something he'd missed – hold down the start button until the engine fires.

The radio crackled and Kimmkoz was demanding: “Well, does it work?”

“Not yet, My Lord,” replied Aavesh, then remembered he should have flicked the talk-switch and said: “I am trying again.” Holding down the start button was an unnerving experience for the crew in the cabin. The grating continued and began to oscillate, sounding like the turning of a rusty metal wheel. Then came a loud bang that shook the machine.

“There is smoke, Metterol!” reported the rear gunner peering through his view port. “Black smoke,” he added unnecessarily. A few seconds later he was relieved to say: “It is clearing.”

Kimmkoz was back again and becoming very annoyed: “Hurry up, Aavesh! My interceptors are taking a beating; and not just from the pods. Those damnable rebels have set up a fort with cannons on the walls. I need this machine on the battlefield!”

Closing his eyes, the Metterol offered as close to a mental prayer as he knew how and pressed the start button. The grating whirr sounded smoother, didn't it? He kept the button depressed; was subconsciously nodding, keeping time with the turning gears. Then the entire quadceptor shuddered and began to surge with a rhythmical drumming. Clouds of black smoke belched from the exhaust and drifted up to the ceiling of the museum. In less than a minute the smoke had turned to grey. Aavesh flicked the talk switch. “The engine is now running, My Lord.”

“So get moving!” barked Kimmkoz.



“There is a problem, My Lord,” said Aavesh sheepishly. “I am surrounded by other machinery and as this is a ground-vehicle, I cannot fly over it.”

The Eldaa groaned. “Push it out of the way; roll over it if you have to! Just get my quadceptor out of there!”

Hating having to say it, Aavesh had no choice: “What about the door? This machine is too wide to go through.”

“Oh, for pity’s sake! Use your leading cannon – blast a hole in the wall! And when you have, head straight for the rebel fort. Destroy it! Then those ground rats will have nowhere to hide!”

Terry’s slightly battered magnificent five were approaching the rebel stronghold, before them an unusual formation of Sen interceptors and skoods. All were stationary and facing towards the location of the fortress. Closer still and the Sens hadn’t moved. It seemed they were completely unaware of the enemy behind them.

“Why aren’t they attacking our guys, Skipper?” sent Lillo.

Terry didn’t reply immediately. Without the stone he was unable to contact Annette and was thinking that maybe the Sens weren’t attacking because there was no-one left to attack; but there was no way he was going to tell his squadron that. Closing in and a faint message came over the com that had him breathing a huge sigh of relief: “Ace to Red Leader. If you can read me, we could really do with a bit of help.”

Terry sent back: “This must be your lucky day, mate. The cavalry’s arrived.” His next orders were for his squadron: “These bozos have got their backs to us. Seems like an invitation to me, guys. Forget flying over – blast a way through.”

“Hot diggity-dog!” replied Duke.

The quip was refreshing - but did it smack of over-confidence? Terry sent: “No more heroics, Duke: and no more holes or it comes out of your pay.”

“Are we being paid then, Red Leader?” asked Sundance.

Terry chuckled. “Only in your dreams, buddy.”

Lillo was on the com: “What about me, Skipper? All I have is a neg-beam.”

“And a hole like Duke,” said Terry. “Disable when you need to. Mainly, stay out of trouble, Lillo. I have a feeling we’re going to need your nuisance value.”

The interior of the quadceptor was oppressive. Apart from starting to heat up and eye-watering fumes from the liquid fuel filtering into the cabin, Aavesh was having to squint through a murky rectangular slot of transparent, reinforced glass in front of him, all of this making him irritable. “You are taking too long!” he rasped. “Get reloading down to ten seconds maximum.” The quadceptor was facing out at that point and it lurched as the rear gun delivering another blast at the barrier which was the rebels’ first line of defence. The charge exploded, taking out what remained of the front side of one metal container.

“A few more shots and we can start on the fortress, Metterol.” The Sen gunner seemed to be enjoying himself and was anticipating further impending mayhem.

A radio message from Kimmkoz had Aavesh bristling: “I have received a report. That infernal alien posing as a Lord has just arrived; and apparently his sister has been here all the time. They are the cause of this disaster. Finish off the fort, then find and eliminate those thorns in my side!”

### **How to Defeat the Invincible?**

Terry saw a large grey, flattened dome positioned in front of the fortress, blasting away at it. “What *is* that?” he asked. “It looks like a giant, very belligerent Quarter-Pounder.” All coms being open, the others picked up the question.

“I think it is called a quadceptor,” said Sundance. “Saw one in the military museum once.”

“Not there now,” observed Butch, “Must have done a runner.”

Terry was about to order a full-on concerted attack when one of Pandhor’s rebel interceptors came in at ground level and fired its cannon. The shot hit the armoured carapace, exploded and barely marked the surface. The quadceptor responded, blasting the attacker into smithereens, the shot carrying on to take out one of the Sen cordon in the distance with its secondary charge.”

“Woah!” said Terry. “That’s one mother-of-a tank.” Then: “What else do you know about it?”

“Got four cannons – front, back and sides,” said Duke.

“What are we – blind Freddie?” cut in Lillo.

“Smarty pants,” commented Duke with a snigger, “And what I was going to say before you decided to put your oar in, was that the cannons are on swivel-bases, so they can move side-to-side and up. Trying to zero in between the muzzles will get you a serve like that poor beggar just then.”

“I hope everyone’s got that,” said Terry. “What about manoeuvrability – can it fly?”

“I believe it is purely a ground machine, Red Leader,” replied Sundance.

“Right,” said Terry, “Get up and stay above it. How high can it shoot?”

“I have no idea,” Sundance came back. A rebel skood was zooming in just to the side of him and blew up too close for comfort. “High enough, Red Leader. Up, up people, or we are toast!”

They tried everything they could think of to hinder the gargantuan tank, including presenting it with targets to shoot at. Someone figured out that there was a ten-second delay between shots. The idea then was to drop from above, swan around in front of a cannon and zip back up a fraction-of-a-second before it fired. The gambit was discontinued after a gunner in the quadceptor shaved two seconds off the re-load time. They lost Sundance.

Also, the Sens in the background cordon which, it had been hoped, would continue to be taken out by the over-shots eventually twigged that they needed to go higher to be out of firing range. The members of Red Squadron had lost a good pilot and mate which deflated moral. In all, it seemed that defeating the invincible was impossible.

Pandhor came on line: "Ace to Blue Squadron – out of ammo, going for a refill. Keep a close watch on yours - if the fortress goes we are stuffed. While I am gone, take your orders from Red Leader. Is that okay with you, Terry?"

"Roger that, Ace... Uh-oh, hang on a tick." Terry broke off as the quadceptor swung one of its cannon muzzles in his direction. He rose a little higher and watched the shell pass well below him. Assuming the muzzle was at full elevation, that seemed to determine at least one of the quadceptor's minor limitations. After a few seconds Terry was back: "How many of yours left Pandhor?"

"Four interceptors in the air, three on the ground being re-fitted. Damn! Make that two."

Terry was surprised. "You've got maintenance crews out there?"

"They insisted," said Pandhor. "Doing our best to watch their backs. To be honest, as long as the quadceptor concentrates on the fortress I can live with that: we can take care of the Sen pods when the odd one comes in. Even the skoods are handy for that. I've got five of them left at the last count."

"Leave them with me, Ace. I'll try to make sure they all stay in one piece. By the way, is Annette okay?"

"In the fortress last I heard, waiting on a fresh power-pack."

"What?!! You mean she's *flying*?"

"Took over from you, Terry. She is Lohinn's pilot. I have seen her in action. She was pretty good, believe it or not."

"I can imagine," he moaned. "Look, do me a favour, Pandhor. I need her safe. Assign Lohinn another driver."

"I will be talking to a brick wall, Terry. You know how stubborn she can be."

"Make her listen; drag her out of the cockpit if you have to. Tell her I'm taking her to the time machine, taking her home. We're leaving as soon as we've sorted the death-burger."

"How do we do that?"

"I was hoping you could tell me." There was a pregnant silence; then: "We'll find a way, Ace. Don't want to go down in the history books as total failures."

When Pandhor lowered into the fortress it was hard to find a parking spot. The ground area allotted for pod maintenance and temporary shelter was clogged with civilian vehicles. After giving the order for re-arming, he went over to the only other interceptor in the line. The port was open and Lohinn was sitting in the operator's seat. There was no sign of Annette. His first question was: "Where is she?"

Lohinn pointed a bony finger. "Organising the evacuation. A number of city skips are ferrying as many as they can to safety."

“Whose idea was that?”

“The curator of the military museum,” replied Lohinn. “He was already feeling guilty about handing over the instructions for mobilising the quadceptor. He snapped when he had to watch it wreck some of his prize exhibits and blow a hole in his wall. With Aavesh at the controls he knew there would be a massacre, so he decided to try and make amends...”

“Aavesh?!!”

“The very same...” He broke off as Annette rushed over.

She noticed Lohinn sitting at the interceptor controls and scowled disapprovingly; then ignored him to tell Pandhor the latest news: “The curator thinks there’s a way to stop the quadceptor...”

“Hang on,” said Pandhor. He had just noticed something and rushed over to the maintenance crew working on his pod. “Forget the power-pack – do it next pit-stop. Just sort my magazine. And make it snappy, guys. I need to be back in the air pronto, like yesterday.” Leaving behind some puzzled frowns and open mouths because of his Terryisms, as he had started to think of them, he ran back to hear the rest of Annette’s news. She was alone, a space beside her where Lohinn’s interceptor had been. “He’s gone?” He caught Annette’s light-lipped, apologetic nod. “How come? He only has one good arm; there is no way he can fly the bird and shoot on his own.”

“Obviously he reckons he can,” she said; then added: “It’s my fault, sorry, Pandhor. When I told him what the curator said about how to combat the quadceptor, a peculiar look came over him. It was like all of his Christmases had come at once. Then maintenance gave him the green light and he was off like a rocket.” She gave a deep sigh and said: “I know he’s determined to go head-to-head with Aavesh; but he won’t stand a chance, not against the murder-machine. We have to stop him!”

“Not we, Annette. You are too important to lose – Terry said so. When he is ready, he will come for you.”

“And when will that be, Pandhor?” She glanced along the line of skips which were taking off with their first load of evacuees. “You saw what that monster did to our barrier wall. If it can’t be stopped the fortress will be next, then no-one survives.” She glared at him. “I don’t care what Terry said – I’m coming.”

At that point a mechanic rushed over and announced: “Your interceptor is re-loaded and ready for take-off, Squadron Leader.”

He glared into her eyes, determined not to cave in. Her lower lip was trembling slightly, and small lines of moisture were beginning to well on her lower eyelids. Pandhor melted. “Okay, She who must be obeyed; but if Terry kicks my butt, we both know who’s to blame.”

They began a brisk walk to the interceptor. Just as they were climbing in, Annette said: “I’ve listened to some of your squadron’s chat on the com. You’re risking your lives and yet you still find time for a laugh and a joke.”

“That is Terry’s influence. He told us: ‘When everything’s going to Hell in a hand-basket, a clowning joke helps’ – and we’ve found it does.”

Annette sighed. “Oh, great! I’ve just signed up for a bloody flying circus!”

### Nothing Works

Things had changed. As Pandhor’s interceptor rose out of the fortress, that became patently obvious. “The Sens are breaking the cordon and getting involved,” he informed his back-seat passenger. “What with them buzzing around plus the master-blaster, we are going to get creamed.”

“I’ve just picked up on some thoughts,” Annette said, a hand over her stone. “Our guys have been chatting about the curator’s suggested strategy - trying to shoot a charge directly down the muzzle of the quadceptor at exactly the same instant as it fires...” She sighed. “Only Luke Skywalker could do that.”

“And Yoda,” Pandhor commented, pausing to disable an oncoming Sen. “Even with his little squinty eyes shut.”

“You know about Star Wars?”

“Terry ran the movie for me.”

“Stupid question,” said Annette knowingly. “Why did you use a neg-beam instead of the cannon?”

“Delaying tactics,” he said. “It will be in the quad’s way. If Aavesh sees it as an obstruction and destroys it, that’s another shell gone. Maybe it will eventually run out of ammo... Hang on – going up!”

Terry sent: “Red Leader to all skoods. The evacuation pods are your babies. Disable as many Sens as you can. Get them on the dirt before they take out the city skips. Ace, are you there? I’ve seen Lohinn’s pod around. I hope Annette’s not with him.”

“She is with me, Terry,” replied Pandhor.

“In *your* bird?” spluttered Terry in disbelief. “I told you...”

“And *I* told *you* she wouldn’t listen,” said Pandhor. “She’s heard about the muzzle-shot tactic and reckons it won’t work; says the smart move is to head out of this blood-bath and go for the time machine, right now! Apparently, Maiaa is keeping the area clear until you get there.”

“We can’t desert our squadrons, Blue Leader!” Terry insisted desperately. “It’s not in the job description.”

“But...”

“I can be as obstinate as the woman sitting in your pod – I’m not listening. We stay and fight, bro. All for one, and all that.”

“And all dead, I reckon.” Pandhor sighed and added: “Was that a quote from another movie? I wouldn’t mind seeing it sometime. Breaking now. Ace to Blue Squadron –

whoever's left: get up top pronto; and stick to me like glue." He chuckled as he said to Annette: "A classic line from The Battle of Britain."

"Duke to Red Leader. Remembered something – the quad's fuel tank is in its belly. Going for it now."

"No, Duke, wait...!" Terry was too late. He spotted Duke's interceptor coming in high, then swooping down at speed. It was apparent that the intention was to fire a shot at the base of the quadceptor in the hopes that the explosion would ricochet off the ground and take out the fuel tank underneath; but he hadn't realised he was out of ammunition. Right at the last second Duke sent: "Bummer!" No shot fired, he knew he was in trouble and managed: "Bye guys. Been fun." As he was trying to pull out of his dive, the quad's cannon fired and Duke had gone in a final blaze of glory.

Terry sighed and whispered over the com: "Third strike, Duke. I should have told you about baseball. Sorry, mate." Then: "What the hell's the Burger doing now?"

The quadceptor was rumbling around, frequently changing direction and performing a strange, jerky dance; turning this way and that for no apparent reason. "Lohinn's sitting on top of him," said Pandhor, "And Lillo's with him."

Annette's voice echoed over the com: "He's getting into Aavesh's head and it's confusing the mongrel. I'm also picking up a plan, but I can't quite get it. Somehow he's blocking me."

Terry snapped: "What's going on, Lillo?"

"Not a lot, Skip," the skood came back, "Not yet; but this could work. Rather not say what – tempting providence."

"You take your orders from *me!*" screeched Pandhor harshly, nervously, "Rejoin the squadron, Lillo."

"Sorry, Blue Leader. Bit of moonlighting – private contract. Lillo out."

### **A Terrible Sacrifice**

The pair stayed on top of the quadceptor for a short while. Lillo sent to both squadron leaders: "Can you keep the bandits off us? We need a window."

"Wilco," Ace came back. "What's the plan?"

"Wait and see, Ace; but when we go, stay well away." With the com still open, Lillo was heard to say: "You sure you can steer and shoot with only one arm?"

Lohinn answered: "Just see to your part, Lillo, and let me worry about mine."

A few minutes ticked by. The Sen interceptors had seen the two rebel pods sitting over the quadceptor and either took it upon themselves to remedy the situation, or were under orders to do so. Both Red and Blue squadrons, at least what was left of them, flew in, over and under; and the Sens were dropping like flies. More took their places, which was good for the rebels because it gave the skoods protecting the evacuating skips some breathing space.

Lohinn and Lillo waited. At the moment known only to them, Lohinn was heard to say: “On my signal. Remember to count.”

Those who weren't engaging the enemy watched. They'd listened to the interchange between Lohinn and Lillo, but it meant nothing. Hearing Lohinn's 'Going now' was even more baffling because Lillo hadn't moved and was still hovering above the quadceptor. Lohinn must have released his mental hold on Aavesh because the killing machine had stopped careering around like a mad thing and had returned to pounding the fortress. “What does Lohinn think he's doing?” asked Terry over the com.

“Committing suicide, looks like,” said one of Ace's skood pilots.

It seemed that way. Lohinn had flown out from the quadceptor, turned; and had then dropped to hover in direct line of its forward gun. He was heard to say: “Three, two...” His interceptor suddenly jumped high a second before a charge blasted from the quad's cannon and zipped under him, missing by centimetres. The moment that happened, Lillo zoomed over to take Lohinn's place, right in the firing line!

Ace sent: “I know what you're up to Lillo, you crazy pod – you're trying the muzzle shot. It's million-to-one chance, mate. Pull out!”

“Two, one...” said Lillo, elevating just in time above the shot fired at him; then: “You're on Lohinn. Make it count.”

Lohinn's interceptor had been even higher than Lillo, hovering, waiting his turn. He dropped back down; but this time, instead of standing off at a distance to tempt Aavesh into wasting another shot, he zoomed in and sat right in front of the cannon muzzle.

Annette was in Terry's head: “I've just picked up his plan. He's going to fire point blank on the count of two, sending the charge down the muzzle just before Aavesh shoots!”

Sitting at the controls of his quadceptor, the Metterol hadn't even considered the strategy. He was almost slavering as he peered through the glass at the prospect of revenge. On the other side and directly before him was that member of The Group he should have killed in the Grand Dome. This time he would not make the same mistake. His eyes were wide with glee, especially when he watched Lohinn's mouth open and stretch wide. Whatever he was shouting, Aavesh promised they would be his last words ever. His finger was on the fire-button, ready to push.

The squadron heard Lohinn counting down: “Five, four, three...” Then a chilling battle cry echoed over the coms: “Gann-a-aa-aaah!!!”

It wasn't a nuclear reaction, but not far from it. Lohinn's perfect shot sped down the muzzle a split second before the quadceptor's cannon fired. The missiles collided inside the breech, the impact imploding, ripping through the interior; igniting remaining shells and penetrating the fuel tanks below. The explosion was a massive circle of fire that burst out, then up, sending shock waves across the battlefield. Even the fortress took more punishment from chunks of flying metal; and, sadly, another rebel skood paid a price. No more so than Lohinn. Ace asked: “Did you know he was going to do that, Lillo? Because if you did...”

There was a long silence before Lillo came back: "Someone had to do something, Ace. If Gannah had been your brother, would you not have done the same?"

The cataclysmic event left a huge crater in the ground where the quadceptor had been, and initiated a temporary ceasefire. The battlefield had frozen – Sens, rebel interceptors, skoods, and those still trapped in the fortress; all were stunned and seemed at a loss what to do next. The first sound to be heard after the deafening explosion was Pandhor over the com: "Ace to Blue and Red squadrons – go high, go fast and keep moving. The Sens will wake up soon, and we are well and truly outnumbered."

Once high in the air, it was realised how depleted the rebel forces were. Pandhor was down to himself, two interceptors and three skoods; one of which he was delighted to discover was Lillo. As for Terry, he was Red squadron – the last man standing; or at least flying. Pandhor sent: "Sorry, mate, but we should fold and cut our losses. I am taking you and Annette out of here. Please do not argue." He waited for a response. The only sound from the com was a static hiss. "Terry?"

Although loath to do it at a time like that, Annette slid gently into Terry's head. She was greeted by a swathe of pain and sadness. There were images and memories of the fallen, comrades he believed he had let down; and the clown in him was nowhere to be found. Becoming aware of Annette's presence, he thought: "I should have stuck to fantasy – reality's too cruel." A shiver rippled through, then came the tears.

Annette stayed quietly in the background, letting him grieve. After a minute or so, there was a change as he gradually overcame the deepest of sorrows. Practicalities began popping up as he switched from what had once been, to the here and now. Then his thoughts shuddered and a new Terry was back; not joking now, but reconstituting a different kind of courage which would enable him to accept what he had previously dismissed. There was no need to mention anything to Annette: she already knew what he was about to say.

Clearing his throat, he wiped moisture from his cheeks, sniffed and spoke into the com: "Red Leader standing down. Take us home, Ace." Realising it was missing something, he added: "Through the park, yeah?"

### **Will it Never End?**

Pandhor led them away from the city and the battlefield at speed. Actually, he was bringing up the rear, watching their backs. He figured he was the one for job; not merely because he was the squadron leader responsible for their safety and needed to keep an eye on them: he also had the luxury of early-warning in the form of Annette. She might not have been able to pick up bandits homing in; but she was in touch with Maiaa for updates on what was happening ahead at the silver dome. According to her confirmation, all was peaceful at present; nothing much else, until...



“Maiaa’s handed over the thought stone,” Annette informed Pandhor; then she said no more, at least not out loud. Her subsequent conversation was in her mind: “What are *you* doing here, Old One? It isn’t safe.”

“Is anywhere, Annette?” His thoughts were calm yet determined. “Please inform your fighters help is coming. Kimmkoz will be angry after what you have done; and I know him of old. Predictably, he will send as many interceptors as he can spare to prevent you leaving. We intend to disappoint him.”

Completely unaware of the mind-transfer, Terry exclaimed: “Oh, no!” He was in the lead and had just spotted pods in the distance heading out from the direction of the silver dome and coming straight towards them. Following a deep sigh, he droned wearily: “Will it never end?”

Lillo came back to him: “In the words of one of your movie heroes, Skip: it ain’t over till it’s over.”

“Yeah, and from where I’m standing, it ain’t over yet, not by a long chalk, Lillo. Fingers on buttons, guys...” He broke off to say: “Sorry, Ace: I’m forgetting it’s your show now. What are your orders, Blue Leader?”

“Hold your horses, Terry,” Pandhor came back, “They are friendlies. Your pals in The Group are definitely on the ball. Maybe give them a wave and a haughty ‘Hi-O Silver’ as they fly over.” He added: “Who is that masked man, anyway? Like to see him sometime.”

Six interceptors accompanied by five skoods flew above their heads and carried on towards the fortress. As they passed, Annette felt the thought stone warming and picked up conversation between the pilots. Through the transparent shells of the spheres, all could be seen to be wearing the black uniforms of The Group. She asked: “Where did you get the pods from, Old One?”

“Here and there, Annette,” he replied, “And I detect your concern for my safety. Do not worry – I am still at the silver dome with Maiaa and a few others. We thought it best to have a last line of defence. As soon as you arrive, I suggest you leave for your home immediately, just in case some of the Sens manage to break through our frontal attack.”

Pandhor was surprised as they coasted in and set down near the silver dome: “I never realised The Group had so many members.”

“Neither did I,” said Annette. She glanced around, looking for familiar faces in the stationary pods and saw only two. “From what I’m picking up, some are new and are struggling a bit with mind transfer – pretty much like me, I guess.” She waited for the port to open and stepped out.

Maiaa left her interceptor and hurried over: “I am so glad to see you, Annette. You fought an epic battle and it is a wonder any of you survived.”

“We lost some really good guys,” she commented sadly, “And still didn’t finish the job. What’s going to happen to the rebels? I don’t imagine they can hold out for too long.”

“For now, Annette, that is our concern, not yours.” Maiaa began walking. “The Old One wishes to see you in person before you leave. He is with Terr...eee at the moment and they are... let us say, having a difference of opinion.”

The Old One was reiterating his argument: “I believe you should try, just the two of you. The power is low and will not be able to transport more...”

“Without more, it won’t be going anywhere, Old One. You’ve seen into my head, my idea; and you know we only made the last trip by boosting power with the thought stone.”

“Which Annette has,” the ancient Rahlian reminded him.

“But neither of us has got the experience to use it to its full potential, whereas Maiaa does. With her on board there’s a better than even chance because we’ll have a direct link with you; and I mean, you *personally*.” He stared into the Old One’s eyes. They were turquoise like those of other Rahlians, but his seemed a little misty. Terry was thinking: age and cataracts. “The two of you obviously have a very strong connection. You aren’t, by any chance, related?”

The Old One smiled and chuckled. “I was wondering how long it would take you to work it out. We are, indeed, related. Maiaa is my granddaughter.”

“Ah, that puts a different light on it,” said Terry.

“So,” said the Old One hopefully, “Does this mean you will bow to my wishes and leave, just you and Annette?”

“Not that kind of light,” replied Terry, looking suddenly glum. “Maiaa should stay here with you – family ties, and all that. But I still need a few members of The Group to help boost the power core; and someone in particular who can use the stone and act as a relay to you.”

The Old One fell silent, at least as far as the spoken word went. As for his mind, even the thought stone she was still wearing didn’t help Annette to break through. They simply had to wait. Finally, he said: “Our fighters are being driven back by the Sens. It is time for you and Annette to go, Little One. I hope my decision now is the wise choice. After what you have done for us, you deserve to return home safely. Take Maiaa and however many others you believe you need.” He paused for a few moments, sent his granddaughter a nod and a warm smile, but said nothing. Spoken words were unnecessary.

His next ones, however, were best uttered for all to hear: “I have a favour to ask, Red Leader. Might I borrow Pandhor and your remaining fighters as temporary reinforcements?”

Terry looked for Pandhor - he was discussing something with his remaining crews. A wave failed to attract his attention. Annette noticed and gave him a shrill whistle. Pandhor’s head jerked up at the strange sound and he came racing over. Terry said: “I never knew you could whistle.”

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, Cuddly Terry.” She pulled the cord over her head and handed the thought stone to Maiaa. “You can give it back to your brother when you see him.”

Pandhor, skidded to a halt. “What’s up, Doc?”

Terry said: "It's your call, of course, but can you and your boys help out The Group? Or do you have something else in mind?"

Ace shrugged. "Not particularly. Surfer's Paradise looks cool; but I have no idea what or where that is; so we might as well stay here and get shot at. I do have a couple or three requests, though."

Terry shucked his head in the direction of the Old One. "If they're anything to do with operations, you'd best direct them to your new Commander."

Pandhor felt suddenly uncomfortable, a little uncertain how to address the old Rahlian. Strangely, a suggestion popped into his head, so he figured it alright to say: "We have certain rules, Boss..." He went blank as his mind flooded with yellow. Once it dissipated, he knew the Old One had scanned his memory for what he had been intending to say, but now had no need to. "Right-o; leave you to pass it on to your guys, Boss. You know, this mind thing sure saves a lot of time. Maybe you can assign them their call signs and patch them through to me."

The Old One grinned. "Wilco, Ace; and thank you."

"No probs, Boss." He turned to Terry. "Got to go, mate. You have a bonza trip." Pandhor raised a finger in the Rahlian tradition.

Terry lifted a hand to respond, then said: "Not good enough, Ace." He moved in to hug the lanky Rahlian who towered above him.

Pandhor laughed. "Learning all the time. Oh, by the by – gave Lillo's crew your old bird. Figured you wouldn't mind. Now, get the lead out, mate! Don't forget to send us a postcard." With that, he spun on his heel and started off for the waiting pods, yelling: "Get one up! Scramble! Scramble!"

In less than a minute the silver dome had seven occupants including himself and Annette. Terry was standing at the doorway looking out. Rahl was a dismal place, dry and desolate; but it was growing on him. He was also seeing beyond the visible into memories that would eventually become history. Names like Duke and Sundance; the faces of Lohinn and Gannah; these would never be forgotten; Pandhor in particular. Ace was his pupil for all things earthly and totally irrelevant. Just one omission stuck in his mind – he had never formally met the guys who crewed Lillo, didn't even know their names. If fate was kind, maybe he could rectify that; *if* they were still alive when he returned; *if* he returned at all.

### **The Final Hurdle**

Terry placed a hand on the panel, holding it there as he stood watching the door close off his last glimpse of Rahl. He remained staring, feeling hollow, empty. The wave of melancholy bugged him. He ought to have been relieved to be going home, should have been happy; but leaving others to finish what he had only started seemed disloyal and

cowardly. Someone spoke his name, softly, gently; a reminder that he still had a responsibility, one that only he could discharge. He turned and walked towards the centre console, his eyes misting over. He managed a weak smile, cleared his throat and apologised.

Maiaa had read his thoughts. "No, Terr...eee, there is nothing to be sorry for; and you are not a stupid kid, as you are thinking. Your tears simply show how much you care. And you are no child - not to us."

He was momentarily lost for words and simply blushed in silence. Composing himself, he looked around. Five of The Group were present. Maiaa was the only one he recognised; the others were complete strangers to him. Typically, he was starting to second-guess himself and was wondering if he should have asked for six. Maiaa reassured him: "All of us have strong minds, Terr...eee. Linked with the Old One and others on the ground who can be spared, our combined powers should be sufficient. There is only one way to find out; and we should do it soon – the Sens are pushing our fighters closer."

Taking a deep breath to get back on focus, he said to Annette: "I've been thinking. We need to replicate my previous journey from Earth, but in reverse – *exactly*. You said there would be a record of that in a file somewhere. The computer ought to recognise my signature, so I should be able to open it. Three questions: can we use it; how do I download it; and what do I have to do then?"

Annette took a few seconds to ponder, then said: "We can't afford mistakes, so it's probably our best option. As for the rest: when you're standing uncomfortably, I'll begin with the painting-by-numbers bit."

Terry grinned. "That sounds like clowning comments. You must be nervous. Don't be – I'm almost a Time-Lord. What could possibly go wrong?"

Annette didn't answer, merely cast him a disapproving sneer and began issuing instructions. Calling up the file and logging in the data took less than a minute; reversing the calibrations a further fifteen seconds. Finally she said: "That's it, Doctor Whoever. Transmit now, or forever hold your pizza."

"Don't think I could stomach one right now," he said; then: "I'm not sure what's going to happen, so you'd best cross your fingers everyone." Strangely enough they all complied, which didn't do a lot for his self-confidence. "Right: contact the Old One, Maiaa; and everyone here concentrate like there's no tomorrow; because if you don't, there probably won't be one, not for us." His hand came down.

Following the cleansing process which worked without interruption, the machine's energy column dimmed and the swish, swish started. As it built up speed, Terry glanced over the readings appearing on the screens before him, but none of them really registered. His thoughts were elsewhere. He was listening, feeling the subtle vibrations beneath his feet and under hands resting on the console; and he was very conscious of the illuminated power core dimming, brightening a little, then dimming more than it had previously. Then came the

lurch, and they were in darkness. When he uttered the words they were in barely a whisper, and in the silence they sounded ominous, chilling: "Jannik's Belt!"

Nothing moved; and strangely, none of the occupants felt any different. Maiaa said: "The Old One asks where we are, because he claims the silver dome is still there."

"That isn't possible!" stated Annette. Hurrying over to Maiaa, she placed her hand on the stone. "I need to see through the Old One's eyes." In a moment, she declared: "It seems we've left behind a ghost of the silver dome. We're partly here and partly there." Closing her eyes tightly, she mumbled to herself, then announced: "The Old One and the others need to step into the ghost. It's only an after-image, like a hologram; but I believe that being inside will boost the relay to our power core." She stayed with the ancient Rahlian to monitor what was happening on Rahl. Once he and The Group members were within the hologram, he sent her his version of 'okay'. Annette said aloud: "Let's try again, guys; really hard this time."

For the next few seconds the machine vibrated terribly. Annette checked the settings - they were slipping! In a panic, she babbled instructions at Terry; not in spoken words, but in his mind; then watched critically as his hands raced over the controls, making an adjustment here, resetting a co-ordinate there, fighting to hold the machine's course as it slewed erratically through the fault in the time corridor. Peculiar sensations came and went, along with snippets of thoughts, sometimes many at once. Were they her own, or were they Terry's? A combination of both, maybe?

It eventually became apparent that they were neither. They were creeping and stumbling through Jannik's Belt. Not merely a dumping ground for industrial waste, it was a void where banished, de-materialised souls drifted for all eternity. It was as if they searched for something, someone; a friend, perhaps; or a companion to share their misery. The desolate, lonely thoughts increased until they were almost strong enough to touch. Terry, Annette and The Group fought to keep their distance; desperate in the knowledge that if they failed to break free, they would never leave; not ever! "I believe they are trying desperately to return to Rahl," said Maiaa, "Using our thought waves as a conduit to pull them down to the ghost of the silver dome."

Annette had been watching the read-outs. They all seemed to indicate that their journey had stopped and was now clicking slowly into reverse. "Break contact!" she rasped. Her hand slapped on Maiaa's thought stone. "Break! Break, Old One! Get everyone out of the hologram, NOW!" She watched through his eyes as The Group scrambled clear. Her next order was for those inside the time machine: "Keep concentrating, as hard and as deep as you can; you, too, Terry!"

They directed their thoughts towards where they imagined the centre of the room to be. An almost imperceptible glow filtered through the darkness. "Harder!" rasped Annette, "It seems to be working." That small possibility had more effect than the order in terms of encouragement. The outline of the centre column became just about visible as the light inside the core grew a little brighter. Then brighter still. In another moment they heard their

first swish. A second followed, then a third; the gap between each diminishing marginally. In less than a minute, the individual sweeps had melded to become a whistle. The pulsating light in the column, however, was not as smooth and was rising up in surges; but it was flowing. “Yes, YES!” urged Annette, “One major effort!”

The time machine seemed to be straining to free itself from the clutches of Jannik’s Belt and its congregation of demented souls. There came a massive jolt followed by an increasing sensation of rushing, of silent screaming, of being swallowed by something terrifying, yet unimaginable. Then there was oblivion!

### Homecoming

How long it took, no-one knew, but eventually awareness returned. The interior of the time machine was dim except for the large monitor screen displaying the message: ‘Critical Overload... Remaining Energy Source 7%... RECHARGE. The last word continued to flash. “Woah!” exclaimed Terry, “That was one mega Whump! It never happened before. Where are we now?”

“I’m checking,” replied Annette. She was peering down at the mini-screens on the console. Power being reduced, they were barely readable. “I think we’re back. Co-ordinates seem okay, although the time’s a bit skewy. Looks as if we overshot by about five hours; but I think we’re okay.”

He turned with the intention of passing on the good news, only to discover it wasn’t good at all. “Oh My God!” he gasped as he took off and rushed over to the huddle of Rahlians staring down at the floor. One was kneeling beside Maiaa who was stretched out and seemingly unmoving. He sank down next to her and tried for a pulse, but couldn’t locate one. “Annette! Get over here! I don’t know much about this first-aid stuff, but I think she’s dead!”

“Not on *my* watch she’s not!” Annette was there in a flash and on her knees, testing for pulses, listening first with an ear on Maiaa’s chest, then over her mouth. “Not breathing!” she declared. “We’ll have to do CPR.” After checking there were no obstructions in the mouth, she slid the thought stone off Maiaa’s chest and out of the way. This was when she noticed a charred ellipse on the material of the tunic where the pendant must have been hanging. Reasons jumped into her head, the most likely being that Maiaa had taken the full brunt of an energy charge. But how and why didn’t matter now. Hurriedly pushing the thoughts aside, she re-focussed on the remedy. “You do the compressions, I’ll do the mouth-to-mouth.”

Terry’s eyes flew wide. “Er... I don’t know how...”

“Oh, you bloody useless...! Okay, I’ll do the chest, you do the mouth. You do know about that, *surely?*”

The Group were the audience, Annette the medic with Terry kneeling beside like a fifth wheel. After thirty pumps of Maiaa's chest, she said: "Hold her nose and blow – twice and deeply to inflate the lungs." While he was doing this, Annette listened. "Nothing." She repeated the compressions, Terry coming in with the mouth-to-mouth.

This went on for two or more minutes and Annette was starting to tire. She was about to ask Terry to take over when Maiaa coughed. Relieved gasps and mini-screeches echoed around the time machine. Someone said: "Thank you."

Annette waited, watched Maiaa's chest rising and falling, erratically at first, then more rhythmically. A pair of turquoise eyes opened and stared up. A weak smile spread across the thin lips. Annette's hand went to the bald head and stroked it gently. "You had us worried for a moment there. Welcome back, Maiaa."

Terry activated the final sequence and the silver dome began to move down through the floor of the old round house. In less than a minute, the gazebo would return to its former self, presumably none the worse for wear. The same could not be said for those standing around the centre console. Neither did it apply to the old inventor limping across the laboratory towards them, supported by a stooping Yanu. Harold let out an ecstatic: "Lill-O!" as he rushed to his granddaughter and embraced her in a hug.

She gasped out: "Ouch!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Didn't mean to squeeze so hard. I obviously don't know my own strength."

"It's not your fault," said Annette. "My arms are a bit sore. And please hug me again, Harold. That felt so good."

They eventually parted. Harold cast an eye over the members of The Group and frowned when he noticed one carrying another. "It's Maiaa," said Annette, "She's had a shock, literally, I think; but she seems to be recovering. I'm going to put her in my room so that she can rest." Speaking in Rahlian, she instructed Maiaa's carrier to follow. As she was leading him out, she became aware that others were tagging along and paused to address them: "She really needs peace and quiet, so no visitors for the moment, thanks. You can come, Yanu, but you can't stay long - I've got to check that burn on her chest and I'll have to undress her. I'd like a woman to help me with that." Annette saw one in the huddle and said: "I'm sorry, I don't know your name. Would you mind?"

Those remaining in the study had lapsed into concerned silence, not the least being Terry. Harold noticed him hovering in the background looking lost. "My boy!" he exclaimed, shuffling over, a hand extended. "Welcome back. Apologies for not greeting you sooner – that little incident with Maiaa totally distracted me." He put an arm round Terry's shoulder and began leading him over to the couch. "A thousand thanks for returning my granddaughter to me. I hope she didn't bend your ear overmuch. It's a gender thing, you know. An archaeologist friend of mine said that if they dig up a skull with its mouth open it's bound to be a woman."

Once settled in his favourite chair, he waved a vague hand around and said to The Group: "Make yourselves at home, everyone." They responded with frowns, and nobody moved. Terry translated the inventor's words into Rahlian and the two watched as the black-clad individuals either found seats or went on an inspection tour of the room. Harold leaned towards Terry and said quietly: "I don't think I'll ever get used to that incomprehensible babble. Now," he said in a normal voice, "There are things to talk about. You have tales to tell me, new adventures to relate; and we can't do that without some lubrication. I have been saving a special bottle of twelve-year-old single malt for just this occasion. Ah, I've just remembered – you're too young to drink. I believe there may be some Coke in the fridge under the..."

Terry hadn't heard a word – he had fallen asleep. "Perhaps later then," Harold whispered.

Shortly after, Maiaa's carrier returned accompanied by Yanu. He went straight to Harold and reported: "She seems a little better, but I suspect her recovery may take time. Will that be an inconvenience for you?"

Harold dismissed the suggestion with a wave of his hand. "Time is one thing we have aplenty." He winked and chuckled. "As for inconvenience, I am delighted to have so much company for a change." He indicated Terry asleep on the couch. "I'm thinking the excitement of rescuing us from the middle ages must have tired the boy."

"You are forgetting his return to Rahl, Harold," Yanu reminded him and went on to add: "And you should stop thinking of him as a child. What he and Annette managed to accomplish in just two days could not have been achieved by many adults in a lifetime. They will be talked about for years to come. You should be proud of them both."

Harold was puzzled. "*Two days* - as long as *that*?"

"I am sure that when they have rested sufficiently, they will be able to tell you all. It will sound incredible." Yanu touched the thought stone now hanging from the cord around his neck. "The Old One has shown me; but I warn you, as he has advised me: accept that there will be some things they may not wish to talk about just yet. Please be patient with them."

Annette came in, strode to the couch and threw herself down none-too gently. Terry awoke with a start. Blinking to wake himself up, he asked: "How's Maiaa? She *is* okay, yeah?"

"Sleeping," replied Annette. "Holeena is sitting with her. I'll look in on them later." She glanced at Terry and frowned. "You seem a bit second-hand? You aren't coming down with something, are you?"

"No, *Mum*," he drawled sarcastically; then he jerked bolt upright and was wide awake. "Um-ah! It's just dawned on me - the time! Boy, am I in trouble!"

Yanu rubbed his hands. "No need to worry about your Mother, Terr...eee. Harold and I took the liberty of contacting her. She was quite happy with the arrangement."

"Arrangement?"

"Your science project," explained Yanu, "The one Professor Harold was helping you with. Remember?"



Terry was confused. "No, not really. Is there anything else I might have forgotten?"

"Only that you returned home for a change of clothes so that you could stay at Harold's overnight."

"I did?"

"So Yanu had your Mother recall," said Harold. "You were, I understand, very convincing."

"I bet I was," mumbled Terry as he managed to grasp what had happened. "Yanu put the thoughts in her head and she really believed I was actually *there, talking* to her?" It all seemed very... Groupy; but something still puzzled him. "How did you know where I lived?"

Harold waved a hand at his desk. "The letter to your Mother, Terry - you put the address on the envelope. In the light of your safe return, maybe you might like to destroy it."

Terry walked over and picked up the envelope. He looked back at his friends, in particular at one who had become very special to him, at Annette; then he was drifting. He was back on Rahl again, flying the skies with Ace and Lillo: worrying over unfinished business; knowing that he could not live with himself if he failed to go back. The Group needed him, needed Annette; if she would agree to go. Knowing her now as he did, she would probably complain if he tried to leave her behind.

Dropping the letter onto the writing pad, he put up a hand and ruffled his mop of blond hair. "You'd better hang on to it, Harold. It'll save me writing another one..... next time."

THE END

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