

# The Investigator's Choice

by

David F Pennant

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The Investigator's Choice

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The Priorities of Jesus  
The Piano Teacher  
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# The Investigator's Choice

By David F Pennant

Sequel to The Piano Teacher and The Inventor's Folly

## The Story So Far

Bruce Winter, the gifted piano teacher whose daydreams about the spaceship Mission 12 turned out to be crucial in saving the universe, is not well. Following the demise of his close friend Jim Pond, the eccentric inventor and creator of sky-cars and flying suits, there has been a spell of relative calm. The Winter children are now teenagers, and have inherited their parents' zest for living. Sport, fitness and a trim figure are their current concerns. However, their father has started having disturbing daydreams about the future colonisation of space once again, and there are unresolved riddles from the past.

-oOo-

From: Mission 702  
To: Undisclosed Recipients

I just wish I could blow my nose!

I'm sorry to start off in such an unattractive way, but I do want you to know how enormously frustrating I find it that I cannot snort into a handkerchief. Not that I actually want to, you understand. I don't even know if the nose is blocked or not. It's the principle of the thing. I feel so powerless. I find I can't get used to it. You may not care about my problem, but I do!

Now. The matters that will interest you most.

All the hard data will be sent to you automatically, naturally, but looking from my position, the mission is in great shape. It truly does feel as if the spaceship is simply me, shooting forwards at some unimaginable speed, with my arms outstretched, able to look in every direction, feeling entirely comfortable. How they have managed to do it, I've no idea. There must be cameras pointing all round - a minimum of sixteen I would guess, passing the picture to some complex interface which outputs direct to my brain. As I move my eyes to right or left, as it were, the machinery corresponds and the view changes. It will be the same with all my other senses I imagine. If we were to pass through a wet cloud for example (please don't laugh, it's just for illustration), then I would feel the clamminess on my face. Realistically, it must be horrendously cold outside the ship, but they have kindly spared me feeling that. And of course, there's nothing to smell. Maybe that is why I find the nose problem so difficult; if there was something to smell, then I would know the nose was functioning fine. As it is, I am in permanent limbo with it.

Of course, there is no sound either, as there is no atmosphere in space for sound to travel through. Curiously, I don't miss using my ears.

I wonder if there is atmosphere on board?

Come to think of it, I have no actual proof that there is a spaceship at all. This is a weird feeling. Before my refit, I could look at my own body, but in my new state I cannot look at the ship itself. Curious. I

can observe over inter-stellar distances, but I cannot study my immediate surroundings. It is so strange.

I cannot even see the probes leaving. I take it that is how the mission is arranged. I am the parent craft (please excuse the expression) heading for the centre of the galaxy. But the spaces between stars are so vast that the chances of ever passing close to a stellar system are very remote. Indeed, it could even be that two galaxies on a collision course could pass through each other without a single star encountering another star in the process. How amazing is that?

The mission is about researching star systems. So there must be probes leaving us all the time, it seems to me, snaking off to the stars to right and left. They send back information here, and it gets transmitted on to you lot. That's fine as far as it goes, but as we get ever further away, it takes longer and longer for the information to reach you. So I become increasingly important as the years pass and decisions need to be made on the spot. At least, I think that's the explanation.

They do something clever with the time gaps. I like to think of the machines here as having a human side to them, which is why I refer to them as 'they'. The length of time for information to come back from a neighbouring star will be years rather than months, because of the huge distances. Then you have to allow time for the probe get there in the first place of course, which could be several years, even decades. So it would be no good hanging about waiting for the data to start coming. There is nothing instant about galaxy exploration. Why, there are a hundred thousand million stars to study!

But here's the clever bit. I find now I can bob from star to star in my mind. I feel I am there, present, you understand. I'm not watching it all on a screen. It is me, inspecting the planets, studying the moons, swooping round the suns and so forth. The information must have been sent back by the probes, stored on board, and fed to me as I request it. At present there are just fourteen star systems that I can hop about to, but as the years pass, there will be hundreds more on tap.

When I have worked out why they decided to put me on the mission, I will let you know. At present, I still haven't got it. I feel rather mystified.

I'd better be upfront with you. I was found guilty of destroying the human heads in the laboratory (in the business quarter of Marxon, Targetto), all one hundred and forty of them, in the explosion. I assure you it's not true. I lost my own daughter in the process. Why would I want to destroy her?

Rather than serving an endless prison sentence on a minor moon, I requested coming on the mission in her place, even if it did mean a refit. To my surprise, they agreed. Not that they discussed it with me; I simply found myself here one day. It was quite a shock, I can tell you!

All for now,  
Chris

-oOo-

"Mum," Chloe shouted, bursting into the sitting room in her track suit, hockey stick in hand, "David's coming round later, but I might not be back in time, as it's the last match of the season. About half past six. See you."

"Play well." Araminta Winter waved happily at her eighteen year old daughter as she shot out of the door. She had really grown up the last year or two. No wonder the boys were interested. Shame David was so much older than her, though, but then he was very nice with it. Let her find her own way.

She returned to her fashion magazine. Mustn't let her twin daughters outstrip her.

-oOo-

From: Mission 702  
To: Undisclosed Recipients

One thing I can do for you is to give you an overview of the mission. The trouble with machines is that they pour out data at a fantastic rate, but with no sense of what is important. So let me summarise.

Briefly, planets come in all shapes and sizes. There is no standard. Human beings cope best with natural gravity as found on earth. Although they have found ways of tweaking the gravity on larger planets, it doesn't work very well (I'm being blunt here) so ideally earth-size planets or moons are what we are looking for. Another way of expressing this is that there needs to be enough gravity to hold on to the atmosphere, which would otherwise sweep off into space, but not too much gravity so as not to crush us.

Well, we have found four planets that fit that category so far. Pretty good for only fourteen star systems studied, you might think, and I would agree with you.

However, next comes temperature. Human beings are very fussy. Although temperatures in space range from thousands, even millions of degrees Centigrade down to absolute zero, which is -273 I think, we shudder if it goes below ten and complain if it rises above thirty-five. That's a pretty tight specification when you think about it. Same with plants and trees. They are even more particular. So distance of planet or moon from the parent body, amount of heat coming from the latter and so forth are all crucial.

Then the atmosphere needs to be equipped to filter out harmful radiation. Plenty of Oxygen for us to breathe. Enough Carbon Dioxide for the plants to breathe, but not too much. The whole thing's truly complex.

I have to confess, I don't expect we will ever find the perfect place. It's like house hunting. In the end, you find something that seems reasonable, and you learn to adapt.

Needless to say, only one of the four we have found is worth considering, and it will need a great deal of terraforming to get it into shape. I hope you guys back at home are working on that. I guess you must be. The secret is not to be in a hurry. We are talking thousands of years not hundreds in most cases.

It was truly remarkable to have found Targetto to be so suitable for our needs. Speeding up the rotation of the planet was brilliant, even if raising the sea level using chopped up asteroids is going to take an age. Not that it will affect me much. This is certainly a one way trip.

Chris

-oOo-

The doorbell rang at ten to six. Araminta answered it, as there was nobody else at home, apart from her husband Bruce of course.

It was David.

"You're early. She won't be back for forty minutes."

"Not to worry." David had already breezed in. He was still wearing his suit from work; something high-powered to do with finance. "I'm happy to wait, if you don't mind."

"Not at all." It would be a pleasure. David was good company, with his winning smile and funny stories. Small wonder Chloe found him attractive. "I just need to look in on Bruce."

David settled himself on the sofa, and picked up the magazine Araminta had been looking at earlier while she made her way upstairs. She tiptoed into the bedroom. Bruce was fast asleep. She

looked at him sadly. It was so tragic! To begin with, his spells of good health following his accident had lasted for months, sometimes even a whole year. However, as time passed, they were growing shorter, and the troughs between were becoming deeper and longer. He seemed to need so much sleep; the medics could not understand it. All pretence of his going back to piano teaching one day had long since evaporated. Why, he hardly touched the instrument now. He was aware of his deterioration, and trying to play pieces that had once been a doddle was now a great effort. He could do without the unpleasant reminder.

Araminta's rage and bitterness had come to a head one evening some four years earlier. Thankfully, there was no lasting damage done to people or property but it had been a close thing. She then accepted her mother's advice to go for counselling and therapy, and after twelve agonising months of hitting pillows with cricket bats and goodness knows what else, she had finally managed to pull through.

One of the hardest parts had been when the girl who had made the accusation got in touch. Araminta had taken the phone call.

"Mrs. Winter, I wanted to let your husband know that I've become a Christian."

"Oh?"

"It was a friend at work. She persuaded me to do a course with her. I found it really interesting, despite myself, and I finally prayed the prayer on the last page of the book, and it's wonderful. I am so thrilled. I knew your husband would want to be told, because he wrote to me about believing in God all those years ago."

"That's lovely. I'm so pleased for you." Say the words, and hope the feelings catch up later.

It had been very hard. The phone call reopened old wounds. Araminta kept telling herself that the girl herself had only made the allegation to a member of staff. She admitted later that the charge of sexual assault was fabricated, but by then Bruce had been escorted out of the school in shame, and the van had knocked him over in front of the station when he was lost in his thoughts.

It was not as if the girl herself had driven the van deliberately towards Bruce with the intent to kill him. Not really. Even though she knew it was silly, Araminta found herself imagining a teenager about the current age of Ben scantily dressed in a sporty top and shorts gripping the wheel of a transit with her foot hard down on the accelerator, and a look of wild excitement on her face as she raced towards Bruce. Try as she might, she could not erase the image. She had never seen the girl or the van; perhaps it would have been better if she had.

Why couldn't the wretched van people have modernised and done their deliveries from a sky vehicle? Why persist with outdated technology, requiring fossil fuel of all things and harming the environment? Then there might have been no accident.

She ought to be pleased that someone had found God, but the truth was, she was livid. It was their own family that was Christian; who was this wretched girl to muscle in on it? She was robbing them of everything. It had only been Araminta's faith that had got her through, and that by the barest of margins. Thinking of Jesus enduring crucifixion had been the best antidote to her feelings, she found. He had not yelled and shouted when he was going through it.

It was all very well for people to say, 'You have to forgive.' Even Jesus did not manage that, if you read the account carefully; he only asked his father to forgive them. That was something she had managed to do, repeatedly. God bless the girl. She meant it. But still the anger and pain would rise up within her from time to time when she wasn't looking.

How good it was that they had money. At least that was not a worry. The complicated friendship with Jim Pond and Pikel had yielded that dividend at any rate.

Gloomy thoughts like these still tended to haunt Araminta, especially when she looked in on Bruce, lying so pathetically in the bed. Thank goodness that he didn't snore. That would have been the last straw.

At least they had made progress in one department. Bruce had apologised so often for being hopeless that Araminta had found herself counting. "That's the fourth time today!" she would exclaim. Then Bruce took to apologising for apologising. In the end, his wife had rationed him. "No more than three apologies in any one day!" she declared, in all seriousness. Bruce had got the point,

and worked at it. Some days, he even managed to cut the apologies out altogether. From time to time, he would still express his regret for being such a burden. It was understandable. He felt it deeply.

Anyway, he was fine for the time being. Better go downstairs and join David.

-oOo-

From: Mission 702  
To: Undisclosed Recipients

A very strange thing has happened. Anything to take my mind off my nose!

I was swooping about one of our star systems, admiring a huge planet, which is completely covered with ice. Quite useless for human habitation, but gorgeous to look at. For one thing, the ice is coloured in bands, or swirls should I call them, that go round the globe parallel with its equator. I reckon the whole lot was liquid water once, a massive ocean. So why did it freeze, you ask?

Well, I think I've cracked it. The problem, that is, not the ice. The parent star is variable, that is the light and heat coming from it wax and wane over time, to use an old fashioned expression. So when it's hotter, the ice melts, and when it's colder it freezes. Simple really.

What I don't know is how far down the water freezes. Does it go to the ocean floor, or is it only a surface blanket of ice a hundred metres thick?

Anyway, at that moment, I received the shock of my life. I don't think I am able to experience trauma, incidentally; all my hormone levels are constantly monitored, and if I'm inclined to feel down, then the computers boost one chemical, and if I'm too excited, they boost another to compensate. At least, I think that must be the case, as I always feel on a level, if you know what I mean. I did try once to make myself afraid, and I found I couldn't do it.

What do you think of this? As I was swooping about, an audible voice spoke to me, saying "Yes, it is beautiful, isn't it?"

I know it was a shock, because I felt a slight but definite tingling feeling all through where my body ought to be, as if it was still there. It only lasted about a second, but it definitely happened.

The sudden unexpectedness of the voice was not the whole of it. The thing that was so exciting was that it was definitely a woman speaking. An adult with personality and feelings. It was a lovely warm, soft voice.

Whatever does that mean?

Chris

-oOo-

David put down the magazine as Araminta entered the sitting room. "Keeping yourself in style, I see?" he remarked casually.

"It's a job keeping up with the girls, to be honest. You've not met Louise yet - she's our youngest. She's even worse than Chloe and Hannah."

"How old is she?"

"Thirteen going on seventeen," laughed Araminta.

"Well, it's very important they all look the part. Where would the world be without the flowers of spring?"

"Yes, men can be blooming nuisances, I agree. I think women on their own would run the world very well, frankly." It was easy to joke with David. "Can I get you something to drink?"

David thought for a moment. “You know, what I would really like would be a little drop of something from your drinks cabinet. Do you mind me asking?”

“Not at all. Come and choose.”

This was not the family’s usual habit, but why ever not? They went out to the hall. There was a fine antique cupboard that had been requisitioned for their store of bottles. She held the door open.

“It’s rather dark over here. I gave up asking Bruce to put a light in years ago. See if there is anything you fancy.”

David was rather close to her. She ought to move away really, but then she could not show him properly. He peered in. Some of the bottles had been there for years.

“Bruce likes Crème de Menthe.” Araminta pointed out one bottle. “It’s peppermint. Cointreau is rather good. There’s always the traditional sherry of course, if we have any.” Araminta parted the bottles this way and that. “Oh yes, and some dry Martini.”

“What’s that one near the back, with the monk on the front?”

Araminta had to put her head close to his to see. “Benedictine,” she said quietly. “It’s really an after dinner drink, but would you like to try some?” Oh dear, he really was very handsome.

“Yes please. Just a drop.”

He stepped back, to allow Araminta to reach the bottle. Her heart was beating fast. The truth was, she had been seized with a sudden desire to kiss him. It would never do. She stole a glance at him, and yes, there was no doubt about it. He had had the same thought as her.

They returned to the armchairs. The Benedictine was rather good. Those monks knew a thing or two. Araminta found a packet of salted peanuts which turned out to be David’s favourite.

“So tell me about your scuba diving, David.”

“Well, there’s not much to it, really. It seems rather alarming when you first put the backpack on, but as you get used to it, you relax into it as it were, and before long you feel quite at home relying on it underwater. There are simple safety procedures to follow, of course.”

“Ben would love it. He has enjoyed his snorkelling club very much.”

“Tell me about it.”

“It’s for teenagers. It was set up by some local enthusiasts a few years back. They take the young people to old gravel pits, lakes, a few rivers and so on. It’s surprising how many places there are round here where you can have a go. Every now and then they go off to the coast for the day, and end with a barbecue on the beach. It’s well run, and the young people have a whale of a time.”

“That’s a shocking pun in the best Bruce tradition!”

They were still laughing when the front door opened and shut quietly. Louise came in, dressed in whites holding a tennis racquet. Her long blonde hair looked fine as always, but her slender face was drawn. She had clearly been crying.

“Lou, what’s happened?” her mum enquired, as she settled quietly next to her on the arm of the chair.

“Thrashed. I’ll never be any good. I feel so frustrated, Mum!”

Although she was tall for her age, and had a natural flair for games, she was not tough emotionally. Even in a winning streak, one defeat tended to really get her down.

“Oh dear.” Araminta hugged her daughter tightly. She would learn how to handle disappointments in time.

Suddenly Louise looked up in excitement. “Still, the coach said my serve is improving. It’s better than it was a few weeks back.”

“Well done,” said David. “I’m David, a friend of Chloe’s, by the way. I’ll have to get out my tennis racquet, I can see. I expect you’ll wipe the floor with me!”

“He says I’m not to play people better than me,” Louise replied shyly.

“Not much danger of that,” laughed David. “Some of my serves go into the foot of the net, you know.”

“Well, perhaps then.”

“Mind you, the one serve in twenty that lands in the box does go like a bullet.”

"I don't mind losing the odd point if the rest of the time you do double faults." Louise could look demure when she chose, her mum reflected. She was flattered that David wanted to play her. It was interesting meeting him at last; he was a lot older than Chloe.

"So it's a deal. Mark can be umpire, doubling as ball boy."

"I hardly think he'll fall for that."

"Louise, surely you can handle your own brother by now!"

At this point, they were interrupted by the front door opening and slamming. Mind the glass, Araminta thought, for the umpteenth time. There were several other panes of 1930's stained glass in their five bedroom home beside the one in the front door. They might be hard to replace if they got broken.

The boys entered with a flourish.

"Hi Mum."

"Hi everyone."

Ben and Mark got on so well together; it was lovely. Mark might be short and stocky now, but he would soon grow. As it was, he already had the physique for an anchorman in a tug-of-war. His stubby brown hair looked better now that he no longer had curls.

Ben was wearing his mischievous grin, as usual. The thing you immediately noticed about him was his arm and shoulder muscles. He swore he did not use dumbbells or any exercise equipment, but none of the others believed him. "Now Ben," Hannah would say, "you must learn to be honest. Where are the chest expanders hidden?" But Ben insisted, all he ever did was press-ups. They were certainly very effective.

"Any lemonade, Mum?"

"In the fridge."

The boys made their way out.

"So what's this about snorkelling?" David asked when they returned with two huge glasses. Mark had his hand-held computer with him, as usual.

"Friday nights," Ben replied, between noisy slurps. "There's about twenty of us, and we gather at the leisure centre. Most of the time it's competitive - who can get the most things off the bottom of the pool before they have to come up to breathe, and things like that. Sometimes we play water polo. All sorts. The best ones are when we go out on Saturdays to staggies."

"What on earth are they?"

"Stagnant water. Actually, most of our venues have running water, but I call them staggies because it sounds better."

"I'm impressed. Do you want to try scuba?"

"I'd love to. Why, are you into it?"

At this point, the door opened slowly, and everyone became aware that Bruce was entering. He was in his pyjamas and dressing gown, and shuffling along in slippers too large for him. Araminta knew that they had belonged to his father once, which was why he liked to wear them, even though they were too big.

It was impossible not to feel sad for him. His face was full of lines, and although he made an effort, it was clear that he had a deep sorrow, which was always there, like permafrost in Siberia, Araminta reckoned.

She held up a finger as an apology reminder, but she could see there was no need today.

"Hi dad." His three younger children crowded round, encircling him with their arms.

"I scored twenty-one," Mark announced. "I lost," said Louise. "We won four-two," said Ben.

"However did cave-men manage before sport?" Bruce asked, as he settled heavily into his armchair with a sigh. Despite his failing powers, he was capable of enjoying his children. "I'm sorry you lost the tennis, Lou."

"She's going to wipe the floor with me to make up for it," David explained.

"I'd like to watch," said Bruce. This was unexpected. Bruce seldom ventured out of the house although he did enjoy a seat in the garden on good days. It would be easier now that summer was approaching.

"Lovely, Dad." Louise was thrilled. Araminta wondered whether he would manage it when it came to the point.

"I must see to the meal," she said. "Bruce, would you like a cup of tea?"

But he was fading. His head was already laid back. Surely he couldn't need more sleep again? Perhaps it wasn't a bad thing. He would wake up when the twins returned, and there was more chance of him making it through the meal. It was nice that he heard the voices and wanted to come down. She needed to attend to the vegetables. There was always something to be done.

-oOo-

From: Mission 702

To: Undisclosed Recipients

"I don't think you are real. You're a computer."

This was such a cheek coming from her.

"What is this, an Alan Turing test?"

Alan Turing had worked at Bletchley during the second world war, helping break the Enigma codes. He proposed a definition of Artificial Intelligence. He imagined a man seated at a computer typing in questions and receiving replies. If he could not tell whether he was conversing with another human being on another terminal, or merely with the computer, then the computer was intelligent.

"Prove you are human, then." She wasn't giving up.

"Well, it's not that easy. I was fully human, until they imprisoned me for a crime I didn't commit; well, one hundred and forty crimes, actually. I said I would prefer to volunteer for space duties than be stuck in gaol for ever, so here I am. However, I can no longer look at myself. I feel as if I am the spaceship, if that makes sense. When you first introduced yourself, I was inspecting a local planet, as I imagine you know."

"So you're not human, then."

"Yes I am. What I mean is, I suspect they removed the rest of my body, and there's just my head left, to give me a longer life, to help with the mission, because it takes such an age to get anywhere when visiting other stars. So although my brain is supported by machines, and I communicate through machines, I am still human despite that."

"And you expect me to be impressed?"

"Well, perhaps you would like to introduce yourself. It's all very well you putting me through all this self-justification, but who or what are you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"You can call me Sheila."

"Great. Is that all?"

"Do you have any objection to the name Sheila?"

"Not at all, but is there nothing else to add? Perhaps you are a machine yourself?"

"Ooh, I'm not having that from you."

"Ouch!" There was a definite feeling of pain where my body ought to be. A bit like an electric shock. It left an unpleasant tingling sensation.

"How did you do that?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Do I take it that you consider yourself human, then? Because where I come from, we don't do nasty things to each other, like giving them electric shocks."

"Well, you'd better get used to it, because if you insult me, I might just do it again."

"But look here, who are you? How did you gain access to my thoughts for a start?"

"I'm Sheila. And I'm lovely. And it's taken me all this time to discover how to talk to you."

"You don't give much away!"

"You're very observant."

I was aware of one thing. This conversation was taking place in real time. There were no gaps at all, so that meant that the voice was geographically close. Even if it was only ten thousand miles away, the time taken for the twenty thousand mile round trip would have introduced pauses into our conversation. Was there a twin ship travelling along nearby? If so, I had never seen it, but then if it was more than about five miles away, I would hardly have noticed it.

"I suppose I have got to use my skill and judgement to unravel the mystery about you," I said.

"You're not very romantic, are you?" This was accompanied by another mild shock. This time I found it vaguely pleasurable.

"Well at least I don't electrify my friends," I replied. Good to call her a friend. I had the feeling we were going to get on. "Would you like to see my favourite moon?"

"That's better. Lead the way. I'm there with you."

Yes, no doubt about that. It was somewhat concerning, to be frank.  
Chris

-oOo-

Bruce gradually came to, to the sound of animated voices. The girls had arrived. How nice.

From long habit, Bruce kept his eyes closed while he did his mental exercise. It was from Romans chapter four. 'When hope seemed hopeless.' Over the last eight years, these words had come to be more and more precious to him. God was all-powerful, no doubt about that. The *pantokrator* as he was described in the Greek of the Book of Revelation, the all-gripper, one who has the whole cosmos in his grasp. Bruce liked to imagine a farmer lifting a sheepdog by the scruff of the neck, to drop him over the far side of a fence. Apparently, it is the correct way to lift a dog. That is how God holds his creation, Bruce would think, by the scruff of the neck.

Or again, Bruce would sometimes picture God as holding up his right hand, and there being a black hole between his index finger and thumb. If a mortal tried to hold a black hole in his hand in this way, he would be instantly sucked down into it, and be crushed to almost nothing at its centre. The black hole would appear no bigger after its meal, rather like the thin cows blasted by the East wind in Pharaoh's dream.

Of course, the black hole could represent the universe, since if there is to be a big crunch one day, when the whole thing comes rushing back together, in the opposite of the so-called big bang that set the massive firecracker going, then the universe can be seen as a black hole, with all of us inside its event horizon.

Anyway, back to Romans four! 'When hope seemed hopeless... Abraham contemplated his own body, as good as dead, and never wavered in unbelief, but gave thanks to God, believing he could fulfil the promise... his faith was counted to him as righteousness...' Or something like that.

There was no hint that God was going to heal Bruce. All the prayers and longings and askings and seekings and knockings were over. It was not that God couldn't heal him. It was that he chose not to heal him. He had given Bruce a job; he was to hold on in faith, never wavering, contemplating his own body as good as dead, trusting when hope seemed hopeless.

How could you develop a long-suffering character without going through long suffering?

There. That was enough reflection for today. Time to open the eyes and take an interest in his children. It was good that they were full of life, in contrast to him. Enjoy it. Be glad for them.

Thank you God.

Ah, it was time for supper. With David, that would make eight. How nice to have a good sized dining room with its extendable table.

Mum had done well with a roast leg of lamb. Doubtless the children would enter a vegetarian phase before long. Probably pulses only. It was good to enjoy the meat while they still could. Bruce had always been rather partial to mint sauce.

“David’s going to teach me scuba diving Dad,” Ben said.

“That’s nice,” Bruce replied. “Is that diving down to look at old wrecks on the sea bed?”

“Can be,” said David. “It’s like everything; you start off simple, but as you gain experience, the sky’s the limit.”

“The sky?!” Hannah broke in.

“Well, it’s a bit like flying, and the shoals of fish above you represent the clouds.” David was not going to give any ground.

“Somebody ought to dive down and see what happened to the hotel,” remarked Bruce.

“What hotel?” asked David.

“My friends Jim and Pikel owned a hotel on one of the small islands called the Desertas off Madeira. Unfortunately, there were problems with the foundation, and the whole island sank beneath the waves.”

Chloe took up the story, her eyes fixed on David. “What Dad means is that he discovered the inventor’s workshop deep below sea level, and had a guided tour by a humanoid robot, who then opened the big pipes allowing the sea to flood in. Dad only just managed to get out alive. Then there were underwater explosions, and the whole island went down. Thankfully, there was a sky-car on hand to save him from going down too. No lives were lost.”

“Sounds intriguing,” said David. “We could go and look. Do you girls want to learn scuba as well?”

There was no interest.

“It might conflict with their parties,” Mark suggested. Hannah then threw a roast potato at him, and there was a danger of things getting out of hand.

“Alright, alright, let’s leave that!” said Araminta hastily, and the conversation turned to a different topic.

Bruce was clearly not through with the subject, however, as in a lull during the banter later on, he was heard to say, “Yes, somebody ought to go down and look. I can’t understand people’s reluctance. Too bad I can’t do it myself.”

-oOo-

From: Mission 702

To: Undisclosed Recipients

Well. It feels like a shotgun wedding. I reckon I’ve lost all my privacy. Or put it this way. Sheila seems able to read all my thoughts, and it’s only her kindly choosing not to observe me and keep commenting that gives me any space.

It’s not mutual. I can’t locate her at all. Mentally, I mean. I don’t know whether she is human or electronic, whether she is a sister ship or even on the same ship or what. It’s rather unnerving, except I can’t really be unnerved.

Or can I? I’m beginning to wonder whether I can become nervous. I wanted to test it. I think it was rather foolish of me. I said to myself, what is the most frightening thing I can think of? I decided the answer was tiny white grubs. When I was younger, it was my responsibility to knot the full bin liner and put it in the dustbin, ready for collection on Tuesdays. Some weeks, little white caterpillars would appear from nowhere, crawling all over the bin liner inside the dustbin. I suppose it was warm in there, and the conditions were just right for the things to breed and multiply.

Well, supposing a little white grub and its mate made it on board here. Could they become a growing family? What would they feed off? If it was

me, I would never know, until it was too late, and unless someone had programmed the computers to kill the little darlings off, it could be curtains for me. Then I thought, what would be the signs of them starting to nibble away? There must come a stage when I would start to feel something. Then I began to imagine what those tell-tale feelings would be like.

I felt as if I really was nervous. Of course, the hardware will have compensated for my feelings of anxiety, but that meant that if I felt a bit nervous, then that shows I must be extremely nervous, because otherwise I would feel nothing. So how much adrenalin, or whatever the stuff used to fight anxiety is, must they be pumping in, to counter it? Surely it can't be good to be filled with all those chemicals? That made me feel worse than ever.

Well. I decided to try a little test.

"Sheila?" I said. Well thought, actually.

"Yes?" she replied.

"This may sound silly, but I have a real problem about my nose. I wonder whether it needs blowing, but I can't feel it, so I don't know. It really troubles me. You seem very clever at knowing what's going on. I was wondering, is there any way you could find out for me?"

"Just a moment." Nothing happened for about twenty seconds. Then I got the shock of my life. I could feel my nose after all! Or rather, I could feel something finding its way in, turning gently this way and that. Then it left again.

"No," she said. "Your nose is clear. It doesn't need blowing."

"Thankyou."

I think it was her little finger, poking about in my nostril. Now how scary is that?

Chris

-oOo-

"Now, the crucial thing is knowing your equipment." David and Ben were on their own in the swimming pool for Ben's first Scuba lesson. "Your life depends on it. There have been fatal accidents. Occasionally it is due to faulty equipment, but ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it is human error."

"Point taken."

"So you have to decide here and now, before anything else, that you are never going to cut corners in preparing for a dive, or be in a hurry."

"Well, there might be times when I haven't got very long..."

"Then you don't dive. It's simple. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes."

"Then repeat what I said."

"It's vital to check your equipment each time because your life depends on it."

"No, I said more than that. Listen again. You need to be thoroughly familiar with your equipment, and at home with it, because your life depends on it. Never omit any of the checks before a dive, and don't be in a hurry. Try again."

Ben was grateful for David's thoroughness. "Three points. One. Know your kit inside out. Two. Check thoroughly before every dive. Three. Never be in a hurry."

"That's better. I like the way you spotted the three points. Now, let me show you how it works."

Ben learned about buckling on the pack safely, controlling the air flow, understanding the regulator, and interpreting the little computer screen with its information. Then before he dived for the first time, they went through all the checks not just once but three times; David the first time, and Ben the second and third.

"Okay, are we off?" Ben asked.

“Not yet. Hand signals. We’ll start with the sign for ‘I’m out of air’. It’s a sharp throat-cutting movement, like this.”

Ben copied the movement.

“Now, under water, there is every possibility of confusion, so make it as definite as you can. Yours was too feeble. Do it ridiculously clearly, if you know what I mean.”

Ben repeated the action in an exaggerated manner, as if he was on the stage in a vast theatre.

“Better, but not perfect. Right, we’ll do a little dive here in the deep end. We’re going to peer at the bottom, as if we were inspecting coral, and then when I do the upwards sign like this,” David’s upwards jab with his fingers was vicious in the extreme, “we surface. Alright?”

Ben nodded.

The dive only lasted two minutes. The bottom of the pool was remarkably free from defects, it seemed.

“How was that?” asked David after they had surfaced and undone their masks.

“Fine,” replied Ben. “Shall we go down again?” Ben made as if to dive once more.

“NO!” yelled David. “What are you forgetting?”

“Oh dear. The safety checks. Sorry.”

“Repeat them to me.”

So the lesson continued. David was a good teacher. At the end, he asked Ben if he was pleased with the session.

“Yes. It went very well, I thought.”

“I was afraid you’d say that. Ben, I never want you to dive like that ever again.”

Now what? Ben was curious.

“The back-up oxygen pack. Neither of us had one. We ought to be hung from the yard arm. Never go down without it again.”

Ben chuckled. Really, humans below water needed a lot of life support, and David’s comic turn about it had a serious underlying point. It had been an excellent lesson.

-oOo-

From: Mission 702

To: Undisclosed Recipients

“So Sheila, if you don’t mind me asking, what have you just done?”

“Put my finger up somebody else’s nose. It was a first for me, I hasten to add.”

“Which finger?”

“The little one of my right hand. I checked your right hand nostril first, then your left, and they are both decongested. Free-running, you might say.”

“That sounds rather disgusting.”

“Sorry. I haven’t had much practice in giving nose reports.”

I still wasn’t a hundred percent sure whether Sheila was human or machine, you understand. However, the finger did feel genuine, as far as I could tell, not that I often test things out using the touch sense of my nose, you appreciate. But if I could feel her finger there, why can’t I feel my nose normally? I decided to ask her.

“Sheila, I could feel you poking about in my nostrils, but I can’t sense my own nose the rest of the time. Have you any idea what that’s about?”

“Not the foggiest.”

“I see. Might I ask if you had ancestors living in Australia on planet earth?”

“No idea.”

“Right. I was just wondering. Never mind.”

There was a pause. My mind was working slowly. Then I spoke again.

"You can see inside the spacecraft, can't you."

"Yep."

"And I bet you can see me."

"Yep."

"Can you move?"

"Nope."

"So you and I are close together, then."

"Yep."

"So you knew I was human all along, didn't you?"

Silence.

"You don't give much away, do you?" I persevered.

"Look, I reckon I've been in hibernation or something like it for a long, long time. Then I gradually became aware that I was awake. I've had to learn to make sense of the many impressions that crowd into my head all the time, but I've finally got it sorted. The last stage was getting my eyes used to the dark. It didn't happen naturally. That was when I realised you were lying there beside me. Then it took me a long time to decide to open up communication with you at all. It was a big step for me. I couldn't know in advance whether I was going to like you, if you follow me. Was it better to maintain distance, and never know, or was it better to risk starting a friendship, which might go well or which might go wrong. I tussled with that one for ages. In the end, I decided to make an overture. Please don't push me faster than I am ready to go."

"I see. Thank you. I understand better now. Well, I am inquisitive about the state I'm in, I have to confess. Maybe it's better that you don't tell me. I expect it could make me freak out. I respect your desire to go slowly."

"Thanks. Supposing I tell you one thing about yourself every now and then; how does that sound?"

"Good idea. I'll try not to be impatient. What's the news for today than?"

"I feel a bit coy about it."

"That's alright. I won't be difficult, I promise."

"Alright than. Are you ready?... I love your hairy chest."

-oOo-

Bruce was as good as his word. The tennis match was held at the girls' club, and there was no difficulty about the car landing beside the court. Bruce sat in a chair near the net, and although he dozed a good deal, he saw nearly half the game.

David's tennis was as he described. Only the occasional serve went in, but the ones that did were too much for Louise. However, her mum had talked to her about not caving in under pressure, and she showed stamina. She also discovered that David was slow to read what shot she was playing during the rallies. More than once she did a drop shot with plenty of backspin which caught him out, and she also lobbed him successfully three times. He took the first set six four, but she fought back and took the second seven six on a tie break. That was all they had time for, as the court was taken over by some other people. It had been a fine match.

David was so natural with them all. Araminta was secretly jealous of Chloe. David was such a good find, even if he didn't share their beliefs. He wasn't hostile, just uninformed; his complete surprise when they had referred to a Bible passage had been most revealing. Surely the Bible wasn't any use today, he had enquired? Never mind - let him find his own way in his own time.

"How's the diving going?" Bruce asked David as they were getting back in the car.

"Ben's doing well. He's a quick learner. We're going deeper now, and he's learning about coming up slowly, to avoid decompression problems."

"How far down can you go?"

"Maximum of fifty metres. We'll reach it before long."

“We’ll take a trip to the Desertas when you’re ready. No reason why I shouldn’t come. I can sleep in the car as well as anywhere.”

Araminta marvelled. This was a big step forward. Why Bruce should want to return to the Desertas, she couldn’t understand, but there was no harm in it. The bird watching was good. Perhaps they could all go for the day.

So it turned out. The whole family bundled into the car. So good that you could change its shape now, to accommodate any number of passengers. Wonderful really. David and Chloe and Hannah rode in the back, the girls stifling giggles. Ben, Mark and Laura were in the middle, and Bruce and she were in the front.

Bruce slept most of the way there, which was a good thing. He came to as they descended towards the sea. They brought the car down to its lowest hover position. The car manufacturers were always thinking up fresh ideas. These days you could treat a car like a boat, that is, set it to hover just above the waves. You could set it on fixed height, so it felt stable, like the side of a swimming pool, or it could be made to bob up and down with the swell, as you preferred. Also, there was no need to worry about dropping the remote in the water; it was buoyant, waterproof of course, and would send out a loud bleep if it sensed water, accompanied by a flashing orange light. In fact, it was fine to play ball with it; you could throw it away from you and then race after it. Not that it was recommended, but never mind. Finally, if all else failed, there was lifeboat mode. If you pressed the switch on your armband, the car would come to you and even scoop you up if you couldn’t climb in.

“This is the life,” said Bruce happily. He was inside the car, studying the birds with his binoculars. They were ‘moored’ fifty metres north of what used to be the middle of the three islands known as the Desertas before Jim and Pikel’s hotel had foundered twelve years before taking its island with it.

The rest of the family were all in the water. Everyone had changed into their swim things before leaving home. The self-drying temperature-controlled costumes were a big improvement on the old ones that stayed wet for so long that you either had to shiver or change out of them. It saved all that hiding behind towels.

Ben and David had an old tennis ball, and were playing catch; the aim was to throw the ball as high in the air as possible, so that the catcher might just manage to swim vigorously to catch it in time. It was fun sometimes to play gravity games that Bruce’s granddad would have been able to enjoy, without using any of the modern technology.

Hannah was making full use of her swimsuit, which incorporated an anti-gravity feature. She was forever soaring up out of the water, arms ahead in a perfect diving position, until she was at treetop height, hovering for the barest moment, before swooping down under gravity and plunging into the sea, maintaining a perfect body posture all the while, before repeating the whole cycle once again. She had the thinnest cable running from the left hand to her swimsuit anti-gravity switch, allowing her to switch on and off repeatedly by subtle finger movements without spoiling her body shape.

The effect of her deep green costume flashing through the air was glorious, as if she was a flying fish or porpoise, or a diving Kingfisher, on a grand scale. David was trying not to look in her direction, but it wasn’t easy. The truth was that both girls were equally attractive, but he didn’t want to upset Chloe by taking too much notice of Hannah.

Bruce had been very keen that all his children should have sky suits and take proper lessons. He could never understand how few people went in for it these days - less than one in a hundred, it seemed. They all relied on the sky-cars if there was any travelling to be done. It seemed such a waste. All five of the youngsters were more than proficient in the air, to his lasting pleasure.

Araminta preferred to swim briskly about, as a means of healthy exercise, keeping not too far from Bruce in the car, until she felt tired. Then she would switch on her suit, and lie back a few feet above the surface, enjoying the view and the sunshine. At one point while she was relaxing, David swam up and offered to fetch a drink from the car for her, which was kind. She wasn’t thirsty, but it was nice to have the attention.

So it was a few minutes later that she was the one who first noticed Bruce stretch and flex his muscles, before stepping to the door of the car and flying off towards the island.

This was utterly extraordinary. He had not done any flying for years. What was he up to?

Araminta's first instinct was to swoop after him and join him, but she immediately thought better of it. Instead she waited until he was above the island, and then she quietly set off to follow him. From the shrieks of the others, she could tell that none of them had seen him go.

He was rising gently, slowly following the slope upwards, and eventually breasting the cliff. The nesting sea birds were not best pleased. As he disappeared over the crest, Araminta quickened her flight. When she saw him again, he was drifting along as slowly as possible, searching the ground. Whatever did it mean? She hurried over to him.

"Darling! What are you doing?"

Bruce straightened up. He seemed rather anxious.

"I expect it's a waste of time. However, I am rather curious. When we summoned Jim's flying car, as the hotel was flooding, the stretch limo rose up from behind this island. I was wondering if there was a hidden garage for it somewhere here."

It was no good getting angry. All that Jim and Pikel saga was well and truly behind them now. What harm would it do if Bruce wanted to look for clues of a lost garage? All the same, it was hard to feel that the one thing to stir him out of his lethargy had to do with the mad duo, as Araminta called them. What about the family, for goodness sake? Although, to be fair, he had turned out to watch Louise play tennis against David. No. Be grateful that he could fly around at all.

"It's lovely to see you on the wing, darling. Let me look too."

They studied the barren island from end to end, but there was nothing. Suddenly there was a shout behind them. They turned to see Mark speeding through the air towards them. He always liked to go as fast as possible. Meandering was for old fogies; he was in a hurry.

"There you are. Come quickly. They've found something." He was breathless, and thrilled to be bringing the message.

Bruce needed no second urging. With an energy that surprised his young wife, he led the way back to the girls and David, who had moved out further from the island. As they arrived, Ben surfaced. David and he had put on their diving gear since Bruce had left.

Ben undid his helmet. "I think we should get in the car. Straight away."

Something in his voice brooked of no argument. Within a minute, they were all inside and strapped in.

"Move away," urged Ben in a whisper. "Beyond the island."

This seemed threatening. The car swept up and away. As soon as they were hidden from view beyond the island, Ben made them hover. He stepped out, and flew all round the car, peering at it closely. When he got back in, he clearly wasn't satisfied. He pointed down to the rocks below.

Bruce guided the car slowly down to a flattish place. Ben made them all clamber out, and walk away from the car for a hundred paces at least. Then he beckoned to them to gather round.

As soon as they were in a huddle, he spoke in a whisper. "The car might be bugged; that's why I've brought you over here."

"What's up?" Bruce urged.

"Lights," David replied.

"We saw them as soon as we submerged," Ben added. "On the bottom. Going this way and that. I went down for a second look. The depth is about a hundred and fifty metres, maybe two hundred. There was a midget submarine on the bottom, with a searchlight. Then another one started up its light as well. Dad, there are people down there looking for something."

"They are bound to have seen us," announced Chloe. She clung to David, presumably for support.

"Not necessarily," David replied. "It's surprising what you don't know about the surface when you are far enough down. Especially if you are in a submarine of some kind."

"Dad, what do you think they are doing?"

Bruce found he had no idea at all. "We'd better go home," he said. "We don't want any trouble. It's a free country. People can look down there if they want to. It needn't be anything sinister."

-oOo-

From: Mission 702  
To: Undisclosed Recipients

Did you hear what she said? I still have my chest, and it is hairy like it always was. I had imagined that only my head still remained, connected to machines, but it seems not. Need I tell you that I feel totally thrilled about this?

A song has come to me. 'Fifteen men on a dead man's chest: Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum.' Alright, so in my case it is just one woman, or part of one woman at any rate. And beside rather than on. I suppose most men would be thrilled about that, but the thing is, I am married. Not that Martha and I will ever be in contact again, let alone see each other, but all the same, it doesn't feel right.

Oh, I've just had a thought. If we are speeding away at close to the speed of light, then our time will be passing much more slowly than yours, so that means she will be dead by now. Marriage is only 'til death us do part. So perhaps it's not as bad as all that to have somebody else around.

Anyway, back to the song. A bottle of rum to celebrate would go down a treat, frankly, but the fact is that I can't feel my own throat let alone swallow.

I wonder if there is any more of me, by the way. I'm not going to push her. I reckon she will let me know when she is ready.

A new solar system came on tap today. I reckon it is the most promising one yet. There's one lovely looking planet, mostly liquid water. Good atmosphere. Great place to settle in. I hope the parent star is Okay.

I took Sheila for a guided tour. We were even able to swoop right down and have a look at some tropical beaches. Wonderful.

Chris

-oOo-

David was most interested in the sea bed business. He managed not to raise the subject on the journey back to the UK, because of Ben's worry that the car might have been bugged. He did not like to say what he thought, that the idea was completely ridiculous. Why make difficulties unnecessarily?

Bruce had overdone it on the outing. He spent most of the next ten days in bed. Araminta was very concerned for him, and David's heart went out to her. It must be miserable seeing your husband in such a sorry state month after month, and feeling unable to do anything about it.

Try as he might, he found it hard to imagine her as a future mother-in-law. For one thing, she was only a few years his senior and they related as equals. Then the twins. Chloe was a bit too serious really. She had a tiresome way of correcting him if he was telling a story and got one of the details 'wrong', as she put it. Why did everything in her world have to be so precise? He felt as if he would never measure up. Then for all her attractive ways, Hannah was too flighty. She would never settle at anything. Trying to have an ongoing relationship with her could be very trying, David reckoned. They were also rather young. Shame the three of them couldn't be combined in some way; then it would have been perfect. As it was... However, he really did not want to walk away from this lovely family; he was very fond of them. Also, teaching Ben diving was great. He was a most rewarding pupil. Before long they would be able to undertake some serious diving together. The thing to do was to hang around for the time being.

Ten days later, David's patience over the hotel was rewarded. They were all having tea in the garden, when Ben raised the subject.

"Dad, what happened when the hotel went down in the sea?"

"Well. It's a long story, but briefly, Pikel and I had discovered her husband's workshop, deep below the sea bed."

"Sorry," David interrupted, "Who's Pickle?"

"Pikel Vanderpokel," Chloe broke in. "She's of Dutch extraction. Where the bulbs come from."

"And I'm Charlie's Aunt," Bruce continued without batting an eyelid. Fortunately, David knew the play and understood the bungled reference. This was clearly a family joke.

"Jim was already dead by this time. One of his humanoid robots showed me the workshop, and then opened the floodgates, having showed me the lift at the far end first. I couldn't leave just like that; I needed to rescue Pikel, who was resting back at the other end of the workshop. The room was massive, by the way, practically a mile long. Anyway, the water poured in at a fantastic rate, and soon filled up the levels below ours. It was all we could do to force the door open to get out, indeed we needed the weight of water against it to finish the job off, and then we managed to escape up the rubbish shaft where the bin liners came down. The rubbish used to be emptied automatically by a railway truck which ran through a tunnel for about four miles before reaching a pit which went down ever such a long way. The water flowed along the tunnel and flooded the pit, and caused it to explode, taking the island with it. I've never understood why or how that happened.

"Personally, I reckon the door which we forced was never meant to be opened again. The humanoid had locked it. It would have made a water tight seal. Once the workshop tour was over, and the person had gone out at the far end, the workshops were returned to the ocean. In my opinion, Jim never meant for the hotel to founder. That was our doing. As it was, we reinforced his desire that his secrets should die with him. The replicator must be completely inaccessible now."

"Dad, what do you mean, replicator?" Ben asked.

"It was the crown of his inventions. It could reshape raw material such as sand to copy whatever you wanted. Or rather, that was the ultimate goal. As far as I can gather, Jim was only partially successful. His best work was copying human bodies, including mine, to a level of accuracy which fooled the authorities. He also developed body tissue masks for people, incidentally. Oh yes, he was successful in turning sand into water. That was what made Sahara golf possible.

"The replicator comprised a number of buildings each the size of a block of flats. There were complicated inter-connections between them; the material was passed to and from one another in some manner. Also, there were grills in the floor, and I could see that there was a lot more structure down below the level we were on. It would have been nice to discover the principles it was based on, but that never became clear, and maybe never will. Certainly, if somebody had understood the way it worked, they would have built one by now and we would all know about it."

David found all this rather hard to follow. The others had clearly heard it before.

"Dad, do you think somebody is trying to discover something down there?" Hannah asked.

"Seems likely. And why not? Personally, I'm pleased. It should be possible to do some exploring there alright. Rather fun, I should think."

"Well, why don't we have a go," David said cheerfully, looking at Ben. "Buried treasure. Sounds good to me."

"You're on," said Ben. "How about this Saturday?"

-oOo-

From: Mission 702

To: Undisclosed Recipients

I'm really sorry. I was very unkind about Martha in my last email. What must you be thinking?

I'm afraid it will have come over that I just want her out of the way so that I can pursue something with this Sheila, who, let's face it, I

hardly know. Indeed, I only have her word for it that she's not a machine. How do I know that there really is somebody there, feeling my torso as the mood takes her?

The only firm evidence I have is that she or it is local, because of the lack of time delay in communication.

When it comes down to it, I have a choice to make. I can either believe her, or say that she's lying. I have no way of finding out which of these two is the case. At least, I can't think of one. Can you?

So as a matter of will, I have decided that she is truthful, and that we really are side by side in this spaceship.

I worked myself up to tell her.

"Sheila, are you there?"

"As always."

"Look, I have no way of telling whether you are human or machine - please let me finish, or whether you are truthful or not, because I lack the chance to make a judgment. I am restricted to what the machines allow me to see and hear and sense, etc. So I just wanted to let you know that I have decided to trust you completely. I believe you are real, and that you are here, and you have my permission to enjoy my hairy chest if you wish."

"Thanks a lot, Chris. I do understand that I cannot prove myself to you. I'm grateful that you trust me, and I promise that I will not deceive you. How's that?"

"Great. I really appreciate it. And Sheila?"

"Yes?"

"I'm really glad you turned up. As Piglet once put it, things are so much more friendly with two."

"Who's Piglet?"

"A character in a children's book I enjoy."

"Sounds good to me."

"May I have my information for today?"

"Of course. I've found I can move my head a bit, and I can see past your rib cage. You'll be pleased to hear that your navel is looking fine."

"Jolly good. That means you can go in for some navel gazing if you feel the need."

"I will. Thank you."

"Not at all."

Chris

(Whopeeeeeeee!)

-oOo-

"Come to bed with me?" Bruce asked.

The timing was awkward, as usual, but Araminta did not waver. "Of course, dear."

It was so rare, these days, for Bruce to want her, that she had learned to agree no matter what was in the diary. She had even worked out a system with Gnilla, from whom no secrets were hidden, that the one word message 'undertake' was a request for Gnilla to drop everything and man the fort in whatever way was required for the next hour. This generally meant collecting children from somewhere, although as they were growing up, this facility had been needed less and less.

At least Bruce generally chose a helpful time of day. However, to be on the safe side, she had explained to the twins that sometimes Dad needed her for an hour without interruption, and the sign would be a sweater hanging on the doorknob outside their room. The girls had tutored the younger three not to barge in at such times; how, Araminta had not enquired.

All the same, it was heart-rending. Sometimes Bruce finished the course, but more often than not, he would fade part way. Every time, Araminta's wounds would be reopened. It was so hard to

accept the crumbling of their life together. More often than not she would need to cry silently for ten or fifteen minutes afterwards before returning to the land of the living, while he slept. Even if they did make it to the final whistle, it was a source of despair to her, rather than the happiness and contentment they had once enjoyed together. It was heart breaking.

This time, there was a new dimension.

"I've been burgled," Bruce said, when she had climbed into bed.

"What do you mean?"

"Somebody's been through my filing cabinet."

"Are you sure, dear?"

"My papers have been disturbed, although nothing has gone missing."

"That's very odd." Could he be right about this? Was he even aware of the contents of the filing cabinet any more? Araminta had gradually taken over the running of their affairs, without anything being said about it. She was not conscious of anything out of the ordinary.

"I feel upset about it. If they wanted to know something, why couldn't they have asked?"

"Quite." Araminta agreed. "I'll keep an eye open."

She could tell he was troubled. Whatever could it mean? Had there been an intruder?

Don't let him get off the matter in hand. "Thanks for telling me, darling," she murmured, snuggling up.

"Thanks for being there to listen. I love you so much."

How nice. Bruce could still be kind and considerate. It meant a lot.

-oOo-

From: Mission 702

To: Undisclosed Recipients

I feel cheated. Sheila has explained all. Below our navels we are both encased in a black plastic housing, from which a long tube leads off to another part of the ship. In other words, she and I together make up a mating machine, controlled by computer. Charming, isn't it?

Normally, a man gets to choose his woman, but not in my case. Think about it. I will never be able to see her, I will never know if the sounds of the words I imagine in my mind bear any relationship to her voice, but as the mission requires, we will produce offspring whom we will probably never see or know. How dismal is that?

I told her that I will call her Eve from now on, as she is to be the mother of all living. That makes me Adam, which means dust or earth. Our children will be the dust of the cosmos. I suppose it's something to be grateful for. Fathering the human race seems better than solitary confinement. However, it would have been nice to have been asked.

There is one bonus, however. You remember that she was able to give me an electric shock, which made me feel as if my body was there, when we first met? Well, I encouraged her to experiment with it a bit, and it turns out that she can send electrical impulses of varying kinds and intensities; I can't think how. Some of them are unpleasant, but only mildly so, whereas others are okay. I'm wondering if we can invent a substitute for emotions in some way. It's hard to explain, but I reckon she might be able to communicate what she was feeling by use of the electrical impulses. It would be a big improvement on only being able to communicate with words. If you think about it, communication between humans contains a lot more than mere words.

It's fun to try, at any rate, and I doubt it can do me much harm. I'm hoping she can get so used to it that it becomes automatic in time. Then I will be like her musical instrument, that she can strum and resonate at will. It feels closer to relating, if you see what I mean.

I hope she really is human. I still have my doubts from time to time.  
What if it's all a machine all along?  
Chris

-oOo-

There was just room for two inside the small submarine. David had been delighted to find it was a yellow one, and had tried to teach Ben a song he knew about life on board, with only partial success. Now they were nosing around on the sea bed, much as they had seen the other submarines doing a few weeks before. The beam of the headlights was rather narrow, requiring them to turn this way and that a good deal. It was not the most comfortable ride.

“The chances of those other investigators being down here the same time as us must be very remote,” David had said. “I don’t think we will be disturbed. Now, it’s not easy to make things out when you are submerged.”

There had been much planning at home over the previous days. Bruce had quite come alive over it. The detailed marine map of the three Deserta islands which had finally arrived through the post might be out of date in one sense, but in another, it gave them the best chance of working out where the underground chambers would have been with reference to the second and third islands, which were as they had always been.

Bruce had pored over the map. “Now, the hotel was here,” he indicated, “facing this way.” Chloe pencilled it in lightly with her careful hand. “The underground viewing lounge would have been here, I reckon.” This was less certain, although Bruce could picture the lift position in the hotel, and reckoned he knew which way the lounge lay in relation to the exit from the lift under the sea. That also implied where the workshop had been, and the long railway track for rubbish disposal that Bruce had investigated so thoroughly. However, when they had been leaving the island, amidst the huge waves and general confusion, Bruce could have sworn that the underwater explosion that occurred in the long tunnel, or so he had believed, had been to the West of the island, but his calculations suggested that the tunnel should have lain to the North. In other words, there was a possible error of up to ninety degrees, which was pretty hopeless.

Then Bruce remembered that there had been a slight curve in the tunnel as seen from the workshop, just before you reached the station. Maybe that would account for some of it.

The decision had been taken to look for the tunnel West of the submerged island, and if it couldn’t be found, to extend the search more towards the North.

“My theory is that there may be a way into the tunnel somewhere, and hopefully it won’t be completely blocked. Anyway, we can but try.” David was feeling quite positive about it. Ben did not mind whether they were successful or not; it was fun just being below the surface, looking about.

There had been no difficulty getting started. They had collected the submarine in Madeira, and hitched it to the underside of the car. They parked off the shore of the second island facing away from Madeira, against prying eyes. David put the car’s visibility as low as he could. Total invisibility had been outlawed, even for vehicles at rest, but the latest cars now had Vis-reduce, whereby you could turn down the opacity, or rather, turn up the transparency to a set maximum, in which the vehicle was reduced to a delicate shimmering effect reminiscent of Moiré curves seen in superimposed sheets of gauze. It made the car hard to detect from a distance.

The submarine was easy to handle. It had a gentle humming noise, which was strangely reassuring. All the same, it felt somewhat frightening going down and down into the murky depths. The light from above soon faded to virtually nothing.

The sea bed was sandy and largely featureless in every direction, but as they approached their destination all that changed markedly. There was seaweed everywhere, obscuring it all. There were a number of jagged chunks that looked like former parts of the hotel, but it was hard to make anything out from the great turbulence of the sea bed. Clearly, the underwater explosions had been very powerful to have produced all these ups and downs. The dozen years that had passed had

allowed sand to congregate in the lowest parts; suggesting the presence of currents. It was all very confusing.

David guided the vehicle about in an expert manner. He had obviously done this kind of thing before. The headlights were essential; they would not have seen anything without them.

The underwater fish were delightful, Ben thought. Although they moved out of the way on their approach, they did not seem alarmed by the submarine. Occasionally, a large shape would loom up ahead of them, and some monster fish would swirl past them.

On one occasion, they received a bump from large fish, and the whole submarine shook uncomfortably, but David was reassuring. "Don't worry," he said. "These things are built to withstand enormous pressures, and even Jonah would have been fine in one of them."

Ben, who was young enough to remember the film *Pinocchio* with *Monstro* the huge sea monster that swallowed ships whole, was not so sure. He said nothing.

They peered about this way and that.

"I'm going to try a bit further away from the island," David announced after a few minutes. "It's all too confusing here."

It was a good move, because they soon came across the trench. "Look," said Ben, "I can even see bits of rails." They nosed along steadily. The roof of the tunnel had clearly been blown off, leaving a long indentation in the ground, which was largely blocked by sand and debris covered in seaweed. But fairly soon, they were certain.

"It's no use," sighed David. "The remains of the island have blocked it. No-one will ever get in there."

"Don't give up," Ben replied. "Let's go to the other side of the island and see if the trench continues there."

It was worth a try, although David was not hopeful. They cruised quietly round to the other side of the remains of the island. They were beginning to make more sense of the submerged shapes by this time. To their surprise, the trench did continue on away from the island.

"Go down into it," urged Ben. "Perhaps there is a way in underneath." But although it was possible to get down low into the trench, the remains of the island had blocked it completely.

"It's no use," said David again.

"Try the other way." Ben was determined to leave no stone unturned.

This immediately produced a surprise. After a hundred metres, the trench suddenly became a lot deeper. David guided the submarine down. They soon found themselves facing the entrance to a low cave.

"Go on then," urged Ben.

David guided the little craft skilfully into the cave.

"Look, there are the rails!" exclaimed Ben.

There was no doubt about it. They were partly covered, but the line could be seen running on ahead into the darkness.

"We're a lot deeper here than we were before," David remarked. "I reckon the tunnel the other side must have filled in more than we realised. I wonder how far we'll get."

"I've lost my sense of direction, but we are certainly moving away from the sunk island. We may be moving away from the workshop too of course. Still, let's persevere. I don't much like it in here; there's only just room to turn round. I wouldn't want to get stuck."

The same thought had occurred to David. He did not fancy having to reverse a long way. It could be awkward.

He was just wondering when to call a halt, when Ben pointed ahead and said "What's that?"

They crawled forwards, and soon there was no doubt about it.

"It's the little station!" exclaimed David. It seemed to be in quite the wrong place, but never mind.

They soon came to the small platform. Hardly any sand had penetrated in here. The area was somewhat wider.

"I'm going to practise turning round here," said David. He slowed to a halt, and then turned on a sixpence. It was expertly done. They just had enough room, and were soon facing back down the way they had come.

"Wonderful!" breathed Ben.

"Come on then!" said David, continuing the turn, until they were facing forwards again. He looked at the dial. Forty-eight minutes gone. They had two hours left before they needed to resurface. That should be plenty long enough.

-oOo-

From: Mission 702  
To: Undisclosed Recipients

It's working. It is also great fun. I say something to Sheila, and she sends an electrical impulse that matches what she feels. Let me see if I can convey the right impression.

If I say, "how are you today?" and then I get a stab of pain, I respond "Okay, so you are in a bad mood," but if instead a warm feeling comes over me, I reply "happy and contented". You get the idea.

The main challenge has been for me to sense subtle alterations in the electrical impulse. Sheila can vary it in several ways; by its intensity, by duration, and by amplitude variation, that is there can be a surge factor in it or a sense of dying away. We have developed a code to stand for the most common feelings, and I am beginning to recognise them. Sometimes Sheila will send an impulse out of the blue and I then tell her what I'm experiencing.

Locating physical feelings is proving just about impossible. I am able to understand that she is touching my chest now, but which side or whereabouts is beyond me. Still, even that may improve in time.

I suppose from her point of view, it must be like trying to have a relationship with a stroke victim, one of those serious cases where speech has become impossible. No worse than that; I am like a dead person to look at. All she has is the thoughts of my mind. I must try to be stimulating and bright for her. I find it rather threatening, as I don't always feel very bright. Let's face it, I have hardly anything to offer her. However, we don't have much choice, being chained together like this.

Oh dear, I've just thought of something. Suppose she is a criminal too? Perhaps a murderess? Or maybe she's a con artist.

I don't know. What does it matter anyway? Let's get on and enjoy what we've got.

Chris

-oOo-

The little submarine nosed its way carefully past the railway platform.

"I thought there was meant to be a passage leading to a room with two doors," Ben remarked.

It was nothing like that now. They had quickly come out into a wide open space. David slowed the vehicle to a crawl, and swivelled right and left. Large gaunt structures towered above them. David slewed the machine so that they could look upwards.

"There's the roof!" cried Ben. "We're in the workshop."

So it seemed. The roof was in tact, and stretched away ahead of them. Everywhere the headlights revealed startled fish, who only knew a world of darkness. These ones reacted nervously, scuttling away into the shadows.

The various pylons and buildings were disfigured by seaweed, but the general outline of the enormous hall was clear enough. David edged the craft forward down the middle, following the

route that Bruce and the robot had taken all those years before, although he did not know it. Again they had to make the craft swivel to right and left to get an idea of what they were seeing.

Ben was already at work with his camera. Whether the results would be any good or not time would tell, but it was worth a shot. He also pencilled some diagrams of the lay-out of the workshop on to a reporter's notepad he had brought for the purpose.

They nosed past the banks of computers and the giant radiator where unknown to them Bruce and Pikel had perched amidst the rising flood waters all those years before. The submarine made its silent way along. The structures were many and varied. David was keen to look out for the grills in the floor that Bruce had specifically mentioned, but there was no sign of them.

Eventually they came to the far end. It was remarkable that the whole of the hall was still intact.

"Well, that's it then." David began to turn the sub round.

"Turn the lights off!" hissed Ben suddenly.

"Why, what's the panic?" asked David, doing nothing of the kind. He did not appreciate being bossed around by his junior assistant.

Ben was already fumbling for the switches, and in a moment they were in darkness.

"This is ridiculous. I can't see a thing..."

Ben's hand closed over David's mouth. "Look back there," he said quietly.

To David's horror, there was a faint light at the far end of the hall not far from the entrance. It was moving slowly in their direction.

"It must be the sub we saw the other day," he said in dismay. "Now what?"

Ben was master of the situation. "We will have to feel our way along without lights. Hopefully they will put out enough for us to see by."

"But we may be seen!" David objected. Neither of them liked to mention the fear they both had that the other vehicle might be hostile. It was not a nice place to come across a possible enemy.

"Let's make our way to the side wall and then we will have the huge machines between us and them."

This seemed sound. David nudged the sub forward at a snail's pace. Within a few seconds, the light from the other craft was shielded from them by some obstruction.

"I reckon I can switch on our light in short bursts, when we are out of view," David whispered. Ben said nothing.

Without warning they came to a sudden halt, with an unpleasant bump. David threw the motor into neutral.

"This is hopeless!" he said. "We've reached the side wall already. I can't direct this thing without some light; it's pitch dark in here."

Ben felt for the switches. Thankfully he had noted their position as he turned them off. He tried them one at a time. The left hand one lit up the interior of the submarine. This was worse than useless, as it destroyed any night vision they might have had, without showing them anything of their surroundings. The second switch gave a gentle light pointing ahead, and the third one gave a powerful beam.

"Turn that off!" hissed David as Ben tried the third switch. "Okay," he lowered his voice, "sorry to get worked up, but I'm feeling quite scared, to be truthful. I don't know what would happen if they fired a harpoon at us or something worse. These things aren't designed to cope with being attacked."

"I won't put that one on again," Ben agreed.

David had managed to take in the direction they should go while Ben had the light on. He steered the craft gently along the wall. It seemed a good idea to cling to the wall, even to bump softly along it, to maintain direction, although they would probably have to pay for paint damage to the hire company. If only the wretched thing had been a less strident colour than classroom yellow!

One of the disadvantages of working in the dark was that David could no longer see how much more air they had. He had not checked it for some time. There should still be over an hour left, although it was not easy to be certain. Perhaps more time had passed than he had been aware of.

They might even have to risk discovery by the other sub and make a dash for it in order to surface in time. He broke out into a sweat.

They had not touched the wall for a while now. "I think you had better give me a bit more light," David said. This was risky.

"I'm going to count down. Three... two... one..." Ben stabbed the light on at zero for half a second before switching it off again. It was just enough for them to see that they had moved away from the wall, and were alarmingly close to an enormous structure that towered up above them. David did a course correction, and they went on without incident.

"I wonder what the other lot are doing," Ben muttered. David had been thinking about that too. With any luck, they would proceed slowly down the central aisle as they had done, and the two craft might pass without being aware of each other. Submerged ships in the night.

After another minute, David said, "it's no good. I need another stab of light. At the moment I feel like a blind man in an unfamiliar room. We could kill ourselves if we bumped into something and sprang a leak."

"Three... two... one..." Ben stabbed the light again. Their course was good. They crawled on for another minute or two.

David realised he still had not managed to look at the dial showing time left for his eagerness to get a sense of their route. "Ben, this time, I will concentrate on the route, but would you see how much air we have left. It's on a dial here." David guided Ben's hand to the dial in the pitch darkness. As he did so, they came up against something solid with a terrific bump.

"Lights on," shouted David. Anything was better than this. At least the craft seemed to be intact.

From this point on, things happened very quickly. David put the lights on, and they found they were staring into the side of a huge black tank stretching up above them into the gloom. Frightened fish were still darting away from them. Ben then gave a cry. There were just twenty minutes of air left. David was still correcting the vehicle when a powerful beam of light came shooting through the darkness, lighting up their craft, and making them feel horribly exposed.

"Leave the lights on," shouted David, "we've been spotted." As he was speaking, a terrific thud echoed through the tiny vessel, and they reeled.

"They're firing at us." David put the motor up to full. As they began to accelerate away, they sensed rather than felt another rush of something flashing past their back end. Ben dimly saw a harpoon on the end of a rope snake away from them into the darkness.

David was wasting no time. He kept the motor on full throttle. In a few seconds they passed the edge of the next huge structure, and to his infinite relief, the glare of the searchlight playing on them was cut off.

"We're ahead of them at any rate!" David urged. Thank goodness he had experience of driving these things.

Ben was very worried. "We are a small submarine; perhaps theirs is bigger and more powerful. Also, maybe they are going back down the central aisle and will cut us off when we turn towards the way out. Ought we to hide and try to slip out quietly, do you think?"

"No. There's not enough air anyway. We have to get away as fast as we can. All the same, it's going to be hairy when we get back into the tunnel because we can't dodge right and left in there - it's too narrow." This was turning into a nightmare.

They sped on, all lights blazing. There was no point in attempting secrecy now. The progress seemed painfully slow.

Just then, a metallic voice spoke. "Fifteen minutes of air remaining. Proceed to the surface immediately."

"That was never five minutes!" gasped David. "The dial must be misleading. I've had this kind of trouble with diving before. You always need to allow a margin for inaccurate data regarding air."

There ahead was the end of the huge chamber. When they reached it, they would need to turn right, and then turn left again to get out towards the tunnel. They would then be exposed to the central aisle. Suppose the other sub had manoeuvred its way towards them and was poised, ready to fire again? Could the opposition have read their intentions correctly? It seemed highly likely.

“I’m really sorry to have got you into this, Ben. I hope we are going to get out of this alive. It will need all our concentration, and I want you to obey me whatever I ask.”

Ben swallowed. He found he was unable to speak.

They reached the end wall and turned to the right. Ben gave a cry. The searchlight of the other sub was shining on their exit.

David didn’t hesitate. He forced the sub upwards as they reached the beam, and then turned left. They were lengthways on to the other machine, which presented least target. David swerved left and right as much as he dared to confuse their aim as they slid forward. Both boys held their breath. The seconds ticked past, but no missile came.

“Perhaps they only had two harpoons!” Ben gulped.

David was concentrating. They had reached the slight bend. How glad he was of it now. The light from behind was already weaker.

“I don’t think they are pursuing us,” Ben said. This seemed to be the case. David maintained a steady course. “Ten minutes,” said the metallic voice. A lady’s voice had been simulated for the purpose, presumably to give comfort. It was not a success, David reflected. They would probably be just in time.

The tunnel proved longer than they had remembered, but eventually they saw the roof opening overhead, and David was able to ascend.

“Can we go up at speed?” Ben asked.

Oh dear. David had forgotten this aspect of things. “I don’t know,” he replied. “In a diving suit, you have to take it in stages. I’m not sure about this contraption.”

“Better safe than sorry,” Ben urged.

They turned the lights off again, and went up in stages. “It’s not far,” said David, “and we still have five minutes left.” As he spoke the voice chimed in again with the five minute warning. “Also, there must be a safety margin on it.”

Ben was wondering what it would feel like when the Oxygen began to give out. Was it his imagination or was the air quality already getting worse?

David took them up in twenty metre bursts. Ben tried not to panic.

At last, just when he felt he could bear it no longer, Ben saw the surface above them.

“Not far now,” said David, infinitely relieved.

In a couple of minutes, they surfaced, and David punched the replenish air button. At once the air quality improved markedly.

“That was close!” said Ben.

“Now, I don’t want to hang about. Let’s summon the car.”

This was quicker than going to the car. Within a minute the car was a few feet above their heads.

“Okay, grappling routine.” The intelligent car cables found their points of contact, and the submarine was soon winched clear of the water.

“Right, let’s climb in.” David led the way out of the sub and into the car. How did the world ever manage before flying suits? He and Ben were soon strapped in.

“I know it’s illegal, but I’m going to keep the visibility down for the first mile. Too bad we can’t hide the sub. They’ll be able to see us if they surface.”

“Relax,” said Ben. “They’re not coming.”

“You sound very certain.”

“They got us to scarper, which was what they wanted. That searchlight on the exit was to make certain that we left. All they wanted was the place to themselves. I didn’t actually see what they were doing, but I’m ninety percent certain that they were at the banks of computers. I bet they were removing the storage devices. Think about it. If they can gain access to the information, that will be of far more value than snooping around taking photographs.”

David did not argue. He sensed Ben was right. Oh dear. Perhaps they had shot off too quickly. They had not even got a photo of the other machine.

Ben was continuing. "I have a mental image of a man in an old fashioned heavyweight diving suit, slicing off the computers at the base, and loading them into a trailer type thing behind their sub. They could never have chased us."

"Well, we were running out of air anyway. Perhaps it was craven to escape so quickly, but quite honestly, my priorities were getting us out alive. Too bad. We may never see them again."

Everything seemed much calmer now that they were airborne on their way back to Madeira.

"I don't think we need worry about that. They fired at us, remember. We had just as much right to be down there as they did. No, I reckon they are very highly motivated, if not desperate. They are going to make enquiries and find out who hired the yellow sub that came back scratched and dented. I reckon we can expect a call pretty soon, and not a very pleasant one."

David looked at Ben. For the second time in a few minutes, he had a horrible feeling that Ben was right. Their problems might only just be beginning

-oOo-

From: Mission 702

To: Undisclosed Recipients

I'm sorry, I'm afraid I've completely lost it.

I've been trying to pretend to you and Sheila that things are going well, but it's no use. What's the good of trying to have a relationship with someone when you are as good as dead? Okay, she can read my thoughts, but I can't speak, I can't look at her, I can't tell when she's touching me unless she gives me an electric shock, and frankly there is nothing erotic or sensual about her twitching my nipple because I can't tell which one she's attacking (we have practised long and hard at this I assure you) and anyway, decisions about our children are taken by computers and we don't even know when and if the mating happens. I mean, how cruel is that?

I suppose the only way to guess about the mating is that if a promising looking planetary system comes on line, then the machines will probably think it's worth seeding, so let's call on Adam and Eve, but we ourselves don't know about it or anything. Just think of it; Sheila will never get to hold the baby. I think it's awful.

Of course, baby may be the wrong word for it. Who knows how they have mutated humanity in their warped thinking, to make 'improvements'?

No, this is a living hell, frankly. If it wasn't for being able to talk to Sheila, I'd be stark staring bonkers by now.

What's more, there's no end in sight. At least normal human beings can look forward to death, if they believe in the afterlife that is, but even that is denied me.

Please listen carefully to my earnest plea. Do not accept any so-called improvement to yourself or linkage to a machine or anything of that kind. It's utterly degrading. I should know!

Frankly I just hope we really are aimed for the heart of the galaxy, at so-called Sagittarius A Star, and that when we finally get there, we get trapped by the gravity field so that we fall into the black hole. Then at least I will be crushed when we get to the centre. I wonder what it will feel like to get stretched into spaghetti, because apparently the gravity becomes so strong as you fall into a black hole that it pulls the closest part of you quicker than the rest of you, so if you fall in feet first, you get stretched out fantastically.

There's one curious thing about entering a black hole. There will come a stage when our spaceship will not have sufficient power to escape falling in to the galactic core no matter how hard we try, but the black hole exerts such a strong influence that even if we fall in from that

point at the speed of light, it could still take several thousand years to get to the middle. How cheerful is that?

Don't expect any more emails for me. I'm far too upset.

Sheila sends her love. She's not much better.

Chris

-oOo-

"Right, Ben. Now we are ready to listen."

It was the first really hot day of the summer. The family was seated round the dining table for Sunday lunch, anticipating one of Araminta's predictably excellent roasts. There were two huge chickens today, because in addition to David, who seemed to have become a permanent fixture, Bruce's second cousin Banjo and her husband John had come to join them. Unlike many of their so-called friends, who couldn't cope with Bruce's decline, Banjo and John had kept up their visits. They tended to come about once a month. Flossie and Peter, on the other hand, had totally given up on the Winters, although Banjo and John were still on good terms with them. Banjo was upset about the rift; privately, she reckoned that Flossie had never forgiven Bruce from marrying Araminta rather than her. There was the added complication of there being no children; Banjo had never discovered why Flossie and Peter had remained childless, but it seemed possible that one or both of them were not happy about it, and visiting a family with such delightful youngsters would only exacerbate the problem.

Louise had been in charge of making the stuffing and bread sauce, both out of a packet but fine nevertheless, while Hannah and Chloe had been preparing roast vegetables, namely parsnips, peppers and sliced butternut squash. David's task had been to pour Bruce and himself the tiniest dry sherry and consume his portion. Mark had been busy with his headset.

Ben was only too ready to begin his account.

"Well, we found the way in and the workshop was intact with all the gear and everything, but when we got to the far end, another sub came in and started firing at us and we only just managed to escape with two minutes of air left by the time we got to the surface, and I still think they may come after us."

"You're too quick!" Hannah complained. "Please go a bit slower." Chloe looked beseechingly at David, but Ben started up again.

"Okay. We hired the sub from a place in Funchal on the mainland. A two man affair, yellow, nothing very special. We hooked it to the car and flew over to the islands. Then we got in and submerged. The trench took a good deal of finding, and we were on the verge of giving up, but we persevered, and we found a part where it was much deeper, and we entered the tunnel where the roof was still there. Is this any better?"

"Much," said Bruce. "What did you find inside the workshop?"

"It's an enormous long hall," David broke in. "It looked to me as if everything was still as it had been, judging by your description. Great towering pieces of equipment. Not much sand had found its way in. The headlight on the sub was a bit frustrating, as the beam was not very wide, so it was difficult to get a full impression. We made our way slowly to the far end..."

"And that's when the other sub came in behind us," Ben interrupted. "I saw it first. We had to put our lights off for fear of being seen. Then we crawled back along the side wall, but it was impossible in the dark, and we scraped the paintwork, so we had to put the lights on every now and then to get our bearings, and on one occasion they saw us and fired a harpoon gun."

"I'm not surprised," observed Banjo. "I expect they thought you were stealing up to attack them, suspicious behaviour like that. What did you think you were playing at?"

Ben stared at her. "But it wasn't like that at all!" he began.

"I wouldn't be so sure," she replied. "I think if I was in a sub, and I suddenly saw another sub turn on a headlight a few yards away, I would feel very threatened. I reckon they could easily have decided you were hostile."

This was a new idea to the boys.

“Well, that thought did not cross our minds,” David said. “Anyway, whatever their intentions, we did not stay to argue. We shot out of the place as fast as we could. They didn’t come after us.”

“I reckon they were taking the computers,” Ben went on. “To try to read the hard drives.”

“Waste of time if they were,” Bruce observed. “When the robot announced the end of my tour, the computers all went dead. Jim would have arranged for all the memories to be wiped clean. Have no fear on that score.”

“Are you sure?” queried David.

“Certain. Jim thought of everything. When the robot said his secrets were going to die with him, then they were going to die with him. You’ll probably find the computers were special ones, designed to be allergic to sea-water or something, or perhaps turn into fish food. He was very inventive like that.”

“Great,” said Ben. “So those villains in the other sub will have been frustrated. They will trace the hired sub to us, and come looking. Might turn up in the next few minutes, I should imagine. Did anybody barricade the door?”

“Now calm down!” urged John, who did not often speak. Everybody listened, because when he had something to say, it was generally worth hearing. “You have no idea of the motives of the other sub. You are too suspicious. I can understand that, because I am naturally suspicious of people myself. But on the whole, others are not out to get you. I agree with Auntie Bang; they were probably terrified.”

“But why did they turn and aim the searchlight at the exit?” asked Ben amidst the laughter. The girls were busy enjoying the reference to Auntie Bang, which had been their private family name for Banjo when they were little.

“How else would they know whether you were leaving or not? You might have been re-grouping for a second assault. Now, I have a suggestion to make.”

John had everybody’s attention.

“You need to team up with those people. Maybe together, you can discover the secrets of the replicator and do good for humanity, but if you allow your cave-man instincts to govern you, with all this conspiracy talk, then somebody is going to get hurt. Think about it.”

This logic did seem to be highly sensible.

“Very good, John,” Bruce declared. “I think you’re wise.”

Ben was clearly dissatisfied. “I’m unhappy about it,” he declared.

“Well,” John continued, “of course, it’s much more fun to be under attack from mysterious secret agents or whatever, but that’s not how it goes in real life. Leave a message for those people with the hire company, inviting them to get in touch, to hear something to their advantage.”

David caught Hannah’s eye unexpectedly. She was looking at him. This was exciting but difficult. He was conscious of a growing problem. When Chloe, Hannah and Araminta had met them on their return, full of concern, it had been Hannah’s warmth towards him that had meant the most, followed by Araminta’s. And yet, he was very fond of Chloe. Perhaps his feelings for the Winter Women as he called them were set to rotate from one to the next in turn. Oh dear; why was life so tricky? At least Louise was out of it, which was something to be grateful for, although she seemed a bit distant. Almost frosty. Perhaps he should give her another game of tennis some time.

Bruce was speaking. “I should give up on the underwater lark if I was you. Why not go and have a look at Sahara golf? You might learn something there. Someone should go.”

Araminta was worried. “Dear, there’s nothing left there now. The government sold the glass, and the site was returned to desert at their request.” How could Bruce have forgotten?

“I know!” he replied, somewhat crossly. “Did you think I’d forgotten? No, there was a replicator there, for creating the water, and I bet most of it is still in place, buried deep down.”

“But all that sand!” David protested. “You can’t dig down through sand!”

“Only on the surface,” Bruce replied. “The site was chosen because it was rock. I reckon there will be a service tunnel or something if you look around.”

Ben was thrilled. “Dad! Brilliant! Shall we?” He looked at David.

The latter said nothing, but the spirit of adventure was stirring. Perhaps they might get into difficulties again, requiring further feminine concern and ministrations, which would be nice. It was worth investigating.

-oOo-

Araminta's mother was always calm and reassuring. She and her daughter were enjoying a coffee at Gramp's, as the grandchildren called her home.

"I do understand that it's very difficult, Minty."

"Mum, it's not just hard; it's impossible. And it's getting worse. Bruce is hopeless most of the time. Or rather, he perks up when there is talk about the underwater workshop or Sahara golf or something, and then slumps into nothingness for days afterwards. I find it so insulting, apart from anything else. He's still fixated with that wretched Jim Pond even when the man's been dead for all this time!"

Mrs. Foster had never known lasting pain in her marriage, although she and her husband had had their ups and downs, her husband's health being the main point of concern recently. She felt out of her depth.

"You're not saying that you want to end it, dear?"

"Of course not. In sickness and in health. We are together for life, no question about it. But it is terribly hard. I'm bringing up the five of them on my own, and dealing with an invalid."

"Do I need to remind you to pray?"

"Mum, I've prayed and prayed and prayed until I feel I'm broken in half with the effort. God is simply not answering. I've searched my conscience, confessed every possible sin I can think of and all that. I really don't believe I can do any more."

It was heart-breaking. Mrs. Foster got up and put her arms round her daughter, who gave a deep sigh.

"That's another thing, Mum; I've done so much crying that I haven't got any tears left to cry. I don't know what to do with myself."

"I suppose part of the trouble is that we are not used to this kind of thing. I read once that in Queen Victoria's day, infant mortality was running at two hundred and fifty deaths per thousand. So every home knew what it was to lose a child. It must have been awful, but I dare say you got used to it. With the advances in medicine, the ones they fail to cure seem so much worse to us I suppose. Or again, think of other countries overseas where the death rate is higher. There are places in Africa where life expectancy is only forty-eight, I'm told."

Araminta looked at her Mum.

"I know it's precious little help," she went on, "and I'm only mentioning it because God doesn't seem to step in there as we might expect. I find it really hard to understand how he allows all the suffering in the world."

Araminta was surprised to hear this coming from her mum, who seemed the rock of certain faith to her.

"I never knew you thought like that, Mum."

"It's been heart-breaking for your father and me as well, you know. We have hated watching your marriage sinking into more and more pain and feeling utterly helpless. If only there was something we could do! But there isn't. Sarah's just as upset as we are, but living in New York there's not much she can do."

Sarah did come across from time to time, but even with the latest cars, it was a bit far to come just for an evening, although some people had learned how to sleep soundly when on the move. But her work was so intense it was hard to get away.

"There's one thing that keeps me going, Mum, and that is the thought that God can bring good out of evil. He can use my ghastly experience in some way, if I co-operate with him. At least, that's what I believe. The one thing that worries me is that I will allow my upset over Bruce and me and

God not changing that to spoil my trust in God. Some days I wish he was there in front of me so that I could kick him in the shins. That's terrible, isn't it?"

"I dare say he can handle it!" Mrs. Foster replied with a twinkle in her eye. "I expect you've told him how angry you are with him, have you?"

Araminta paused. "Well no, not really, I can't say that I have." She gave a deep sigh. "I'm not sure I want to, Mum."

"Darling, I think you need to have one of your armchair heart to hearts with God at one in the morning when the family are all asleep, and tell him what you've just told me."

"It's good advice. Oh Mum, I feel so low."

Mrs. Foster held her daughter tightly for a long time. She knew her suffering was very great. It would be no good mentioning her worries about her own husband.

"I'd better be getting back. Bruce needs me!"

Araminta disengaged from the hug and stood up. How good to have your mum so close and so ready to understand.

-oOo-

Araminta was in deep sleep when the bleeper under her pillow went off. She struggled to wake. Why on earth ...?

Oh yes. It was one in the morning, the moment for an armchair talk with God.

Good. Bruce was sleeping quietly. Araminta slipped out of bed, pulled on her winter dressing gown and fluffy slippers as it was a bit chilly, and tiptoed out of the bedroom. There was a moon, which was convenient; no need to put on any lights which might disturb somebody.

The music room. That would be the best place. The scene of so much happiness for Bruce, indeed for them all, before the tragedy struck.

By the time she had fetched a glass of water and settled herself in the padded leather armchair, her mind was composed. It would be a 4:6 session. Philippians chapter four verse six, that is: 'Tell God every detail of your needs in earnest thankful prayer...' Important to remember to give thanks for everything as well as outlining the needs. Then when it was done, the rest of the verse would follow on: '...and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your heart and mind...'

She had been taught this verse some time in the past, she couldn't remember when or where. It had proved useful before in times of crisis.

She had added her own bit to the procedure; the four - six also represented the outcome between her and God. As senior partner, he was to have six, and she was to have four, as it were. She would have her say, as a significant shareholder, but then he would decide.

There was no way she wanted a fifty - fifty situation. That would mean he was not Lord at all. No, it was like Christ in the garden wanting to escape crucifixion, when he said 'not my will but your will be done.' That had been nought - ten. She couldn't manage as much self-effacement as that, but she could cope with forty - sixty, or rather, four - six. God was big enough; he understood even if other more spiritual people would not.

Now where to begin. She paused. It would be best to speak out loud.

"Oh God," she began, but she got no further. At that moment, there was a sound. Surely not?

Araminta watched, fascinated. A slender hand was reaching inside the window from outside, and undoing the catch. Who on earth had left it open? She ought to cry out, but something made her hold back.

For one thing, it was a woman's hand. The fingers were delicate, and the sleeve was of white lace. Hardly the normal wear for burglars, Araminta reckoned, not that she knew much about it.

The window was soon wide open. There was a heave, and a head and shoulders appeared. After a few moments of struggle, a girl not much younger than Araminta was in the room, dusting herself down. She certainly had the slender figure for a cat burglar; she would have been able to get in anywhere.

Araminta waited until she had pushed the window nearly shut before saying in a quiet voice, "hello Sam."

The effect was electrifying. Sam stifled a shriek as she whirled round to face the armchair.

"Don't do that!" she gasped. "You almost frightened me to death!"

This was too much. "You burgle your way into our house at one fifteen in the morning, and then when you are discovered you make a protest? Who do you think you are?" Araminta was enjoying the scene too much to be angry. That might come later, but the pleasure in being one up over this intriguing girl had the upper hand at present.

Sam was at a loss. Araminta needed to seize the initiative. "Now, I could give you a really hard time over this. I'm as strong as you. All I have to do is start screaming, and grab a hold of you, and my teenage children will be down here before you can get away, and then the police can be called and so forth. If you try and escape, that's what I'll do. But I have no desire to do it. What I want is for you to sit on that chair and talk to me and tell me the truth. I can see you're in trouble. If you are straight with me, you will not get into any further trouble. I swear to it. Now, do we have a deal?"

Sam could see she was cornered, but she also sensed that Araminta was not hostile - why, she had no idea. The thing to do was to make the most of Araminta's good will.

"Alright. You're on."

Sam slumped down on Bruce's office chair. All of a sudden, she started to cry. She was clearly under great strain. There was a subtle difference in Sam from how Araminta remembered her. She had changed in some way, emotionally speaking. As to her looks, she found herself comparing the delicate pink of Sam's face with almond blossom against a blue sky. Hopefully the outcome of the visit could be like a beautiful spring day if she handled this situation well.

"Now tell me what's going on," said Araminta gently.

Sam cried for a full minute before gathering herself. "You have every right to be angry with me, not just because I've forced my way in here, but also for what I did in the past. I feel bad when I think about how I used you and Bruce, barging in on your family like that. It was no way to behave. I'm truly sorry."

This was unexpected. Araminta had found Sam's first intrusion difficult. A dozen years earlier, she had made her way in through the other window in that room, having smashed it a few hours earlier, it turned out, and claimed that she was Bruce's long lost daughter. Although Bruce had been satisfied that the claim was genuine, Araminta had never seen the test results, and neither had Bruce, so she had always been uncertain about it. Then Sam had married unexpectedly, since when there had not been a word from her. With the passing of time, Araminta had all but forgotten her. How extraordinary that she should turn up now, out of the blue!

"I appreciate your apology." Araminta was feeling generous, and Sam was not the type to apologise easily. "Now, what's up?"

Sam composed herself. This was better than she could have hoped.

"Our marriage has had its ups and downs, but on the whole it's been a happy one, up until about two years ago. Then Cecil began to go distant on me, and moody. I couldn't discover what was wrong. We started having rows; serious ones, not just trivial disagreements. I hated it. I was sure there was something underlying it, but I couldn't discover what it was. Cecil began spending more time away from home, and I did not know where he was."

"Are there any children?" Araminta interrupted gently.

"No. Cecil was never keen. I was dubious, with my background, and we never got round to thinking seriously about it. I suppose that with my unhappy childhood, I've never been too sure about bringing a child into the world. I would hate for the little mite to end up feeling unwanted."

"Oh Sam!" Araminta felt truly moved. The girl clearly had deep problems and issues that needed resolving. "So Cecil was growing increasingly distant."

"That's right. I tried to talk to him about it, but he wouldn't. I felt an invisible wall was growing up between us. It was horrible. I could have coped with almost any problem, I felt - drugs, women, gambling, but the feeling I was losing him and had no power to prevent it was worse than all those. Whatever it was that had started it, the lack of sharing became the problem, for me at any rate.

“Well, I couldn’t stand it, so in the end, I determined to find out what had started the whole thing off. While he was away, I searched the flat from top to bottom. It took a lot of finding, but I discovered it in the end. It was most strange, actually. I’d been food shopping, and as I was coming into the block, I just suddenly knew that I had to look under the floorboards in the airing cupboard. I put the shopping away, and then fetched a torch because it’s rather dark in the airing cupboard, and got down on my hands and knees.

“It only took me two minutes to find it. A short length of floorboard was loose, and when I lifted it up, there was a little wooden box which was just the right size to fit between the timbers that support the floor.”

“I know; the joists.” Araminta bit her lip, immediately regretting her remark. Why interrupt on something so trivial? She must not get like Chloe! Thankfully, Sam was in full flow.

“Whatever. I was very careful, I can tell you. I noted its position exactly before I lifted it out. Then when I opened it, there were several papers and two or three bank books. I noted the order they were in, and then studied them. It was all too clear. Cecil had wealth I had never dreamed of, but over the previous three years, the in-payments had fallen off sharply and increasingly large sums had been taken out. It was obvious that he was losing money hand over fist.

“I felt very scared, not just because of the money itself, but because there was obviously a large area of his life that he had never told me about. I thought we had been close, but I had been deluded. Why had he kept it all secret from me?”

Sam seemed to be expecting a reply. Araminta struggled. “I really can’t think. I have no idea. Sam, I have no insight into your marriage at all; I’ve never even met Cecil or clapped eyes on him.” Then she had another thought. “What were the papers?”

“Very weird. They seemed to be share certificates. One was for the Zidokos Mining and Exploration Company, a hundred thousand shares. Another was for Sidokos Holding Company - spelt with an S not a Z, I noticed, but I reckoned they were connected, just eight hundred shares, and the third was a legal document with signatures which I couldn’t take in. I did not like to linger too long, you understand; I never know when Cecil might return.”

“Perhaps the money he withdrew was to pay for the shares.”

“But why draw it all out in dribs and drabs over two years? You would expect it to be in one lump sum, it seemed to me. Anyway, I’ve made extensive enquiries about Zidokos, as you can imagine, and turned up nothing at all. I’m worried he has been taken for a ride hence all the funny behaviour.”

Araminta was feeling puzzled. “But why come here at dead of night?”

Sam hung her head. “The only person I knew who had any experience of mining and exploration was Bruce. I hadn’t the nerve to come openly, so I was going to look in his study and see if there were any clues. I know it was very wrong of me.”

“Were you after his money, Sam?” A straight question, put while studying Sam’s face closely.

“NO! I promise you no. Anyway, our own personal finances are unaffected. I didn’t know about all this secret wealth of Cecil’s. That’s what I feel so upset about, that he had kept things hidden from me. It feels like he’s been lying to me all these years. It’s absolutely horrible, Araminta.”

Araminta went over to where Sam was sitting, knelt on the floor beside her chair, and put her arms round her. She probably ought to be angry, but the fact was the girl always had been pretty mixed up, and to come looking for information at dead of night was probably par for the course. It seemed likely that it was the truth. She was clearly in a lot of pain. It was a moment for giving love and support.

Sam cried for quite a while. Then she suddenly stiffened and stopped. “I must go!” she said simply, and stood up. “You have been very kind. I don’t deserve what you’ve done for me tonight, and I’ll never forget it.”

“Do you want a bed here?” Araminta asked, already knowing the answer.

“No. I’ll be fine. Thanks again, a million times.” And with that she went out through the door, and a moment later Araminta heard the front door open and close softly. How extraordinary, she thought to herself.

She closed the window carefully. How it had been open at all remained a mystery. As she was climbing up the stairs, she realised that not only had she no clear idea of what Sam had come looking for, she also had no contact details. That was foolish. Still, the thing to do was to let things be. It was time to get some sleep.

-oOo-

“What’s up?” asked David when the front door opened in response to his ring. The whole family seemed to be in a turmoil.

Chloe was pleased to see him. “Louise has lost her ring. It’s particularly special, as it belonged to her great grandmother. We’re all hunting high and low.”

David instantly knew what to do, and that he should not make a fuss about it. One of his aunts had once told him about the time when she had lost her engagement ring, and he had never forgotten the story. It was a beautiful diamond, set in silver. It had gone missing, and everyone had searched high and low. In the end they had given up.

Then later in the week they found that one of their silver teaspoons had gone missing. The most likely thing was that it had got swept into the waste bin along with the leftovers on a plate, so her fiancée generously went out to the dustbin and started searching through the dustbin liners. He found the teaspoon, but what was that glinting there... It was the ring! They had given it up for good. The bin would have been emptied by the men into the dust cart next day, and the precious ring would have been thrown in the incinerator with the rest of the garbage. As it was, it was a great pleasure for the young man to produce both the teaspoon and the ring. His aunt had admitted to David that it had been worth the trauma of having the ring go missing to experience the joy of having it returned. She had clearly been very moved by the experience.

All this had remained in David’s mind. He waited until he was unobserved, as he did not want to draw attention to himself. Then he slipped out quietly, and went round to the dustbin. He moved it along a few paces so that it would be out of sight of the windows, laid the bin carefully in its side and sat down next to it on the concrete.

The Winters were careful over their rubbish. The dustbin liners were always neatly knotted at the top, and the bin was kept clean and fresh. Garbagology was not David’s strong point, but this was about as good an experience of it as he could hope for. All the same, as he undid the first sack, he could not help feeling somewhat irritated. Surely it was asking for trouble to entrust a precious ring to a thirteen year old girl. Couldn’t they have waited a year or two until she was a bit older and more sensible?

As it was, Louise had become quite hostile to him. David couldn’t understand it. He had gone out of his way to be kind to her, playing her at tennis and encouraging her to believe in herself. And now the reward was anger! Oh well, teenage girls. There was no accounting for them. Still, if he could find the ring, it might help.

The first bag was dominated by potato peelings and the remains of the pig’s liver. Simply offal, David found himself thinking, in a Bruce-like moment. Thankfully there was some lightly soiled kitchen towel in it as well, so he could clean himself up a bit before tackling the second bag.

This was almost all paper. There was no kitchen waste. It was more a case of fanning the papers in case the ring was wedged between.

David went through the sheets quickly. Some of them really should have been shredded for security reasons, or at least torn up. He made a point of not studying them. Here were some photos. It was hard not to look briefly at them.

He gave a gulp. Who was this stunning girl, about his own age?

David had heard talk of love at first sight and always dismissed it, until now. Instantly he was smitten. She was so lovely. Such dress sense too; the lace suited her. He began to tremble violently in every limb. This was ridiculous, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away. Then it hit him. The background to the photo was Bruce’s music room. The girl had been photographed in the Winter’s home!

He looked at the other photos. They were all taken from the same position, looking down from near the ceiling. How odd. None of the other photos had caught the delicate facial features, although one showed off her figure quite well, despite being somewhat blurred, as if she was moving quickly. But who was that sitting in the chair behind? Why, it was Araminta, wearing her dressing gown.

David's heart was beating quickly. He dimly heard the cries of joy coming from inside the house - the ring had evidently been found. There was too much to think about. Why was Araminta entertaining this girl in her dressing gown? Surely it couldn't mean... David dismissed the thought from his mind. Araminta was not involved with another woman, and never would be; he was sure of that. No. It must be an old friend she knew well, or perhaps a relative, someone she did not need to dress for. David peered at the wonderful girl closely; was there a family likeness? It was hard to tell.

"David!" Chloe was looking for him. There was just time. Knowing that he was doing something momentous, David gathered up the five photos and slipped them into an inside pocket. Then he bundled up the rest of the rubbish and re-knotted the liner before restoring it to the dustbin, and the bin to its home. Thankfully, nobody discovered what he was up to. He cleaned his hands as best he could on the lawn, and made his way indoors.

There was Chloe. "Where have you been?" she asked.

"I was looking outside," he answered, truthfully. "Has the ring been found?"

"Yes. It was on the floor in her bedroom."

"I'm glad. Quite a shock to have found it had gone missing."

"Too right. Everyone's very relieved. What's the matter?"

"Nothing." Oh dear. This was going to be very hard.

"Right. Now, we all want to come to the Sahara on Saturday to have a look."

"I'm sorry?" David's mind would not go into gear.

"Sahara Golf. To look for a way down, remember? Hannah Ben and I want to come, and even Louise and Mark are joining in. We're not missing out on the adventure."

The adventure. David had lost all enthusiasm. What on earth was he going to do?

-oOo-

David spent the rest of the week in a hopeless daze. He simply could not concentrate on work. The beautiful girl haunted his every moment.

It had only taken a few minutes to work out that the photos had been taken by the new security system that had been installed since Bruce's filing cabinet had been tampered with, allegedly. David reckoned there had been an intruder. No matter how far gone Bruce was, a man like him would have a sure instinct about a thing like that.

The little camera had been installed on the top shelf of a bookcase. Because the aim was to catch somebody rather than simply scare them off, the system was set up to record any movement in the room once it had been primed, and then to print out the results at eight in the morning. This meant that you could see at a glance whether there had been anyone in the room at night, because there would be a print in the out tray. Then it would be a matter of alerting the police. There was nothing of value in the filing cabinet anyway.

So the interview had taken place at night, hence the photos. When David studied them, there was nothing to suggest the hours of darkness, but with the modern technology, there was no way of knowing. Nowadays you could even get crystal clear results in thick fog, what Bruce's Granddad would have called a pea-souper. David enjoyed hearing the stories of Granddad. He had never known his own grandfathers, as they had died before he was born.

So who was it that Araminta wanted to talk to without anybody else knowing? It was a mystery. One thing was certain; David could hardly ask her about it straight out. "Araminta, do you ever talk to beautiful girls in your dressing gown in Bruce's study under cover of darkness these days?" No, it was not the way forward. But how on earth could he discover the girl's identity?

There was only one thing for it. He would need to make discreet enquiries, even though it felt most distasteful. The children might know. Neighbours too. Maybe, and here David's heart missed a beat, there would be an entry in Araminta's diary, perhaps giving the girl's initials. This really did feel underhand, but surely it was a case of great need. At least, it was to him, but would the others see it that way?

Oh dear. Supposing he did manage to find the girl's identity and they met, then surely Araminta would get to hear of it, and that could be difficult.

David racked his brains, but he was getting nowhere. What was he going to do?

The day for the Sahara trip soon arrived. Now there was a new purpose, to try to discover something through apparently innocent conversation. It would require delicacy, tact and skill, attributes which David felt he could summon up when required. Maybe it could be fun as well.

The young people gathered on the lawn, and the car descended obediently to their feet. It was nice that Mark was coming. He was so quiet, it was hard to get to know him. Perhaps he was also observant, and might be able to help trace the girl unwittingly.

The twins generously offered Louise the front seat. The boys went in the middle, while they went at the back. David was in charge of the vehicle, although there was nothing to do. The weather was overcast, so the views would not be good. Never mind; it was an opportunity to talk to Louise, provided she wasn't too grumpy.

David had an idea. Once they were at cruising altitude, he turned to her. "That's a nice outfit, Louise. It goes well with your lovely blonde hair."

Louise said nothing, but she coloured slightly.

"You know," David went on, "you would look good in lace I think; a close fitting white top with delicate sleeves, and a light blue skirt of some floaty material with a hint of pink. I can just imagine you like that."

It was the best description of the girl that David could manage. If only Louise would reply, "that sounds like ...!"

"I'll think about it," was all she said. "Thank you for the advice."

"Not at all. You already have a commanding presence. I bet you're in demand."

"Certainly is," said Ben behind. Mark was deep in a computer game. "Not like Mark, who is so much into virtual reality that he's virtually never here. David, he's thinking of having an implant. Do you have any views?"

"I'm sorry, you'll have to explain."

"It's the latest thing. Instead of hand-held games, you can now get a chip wired into your brain which you can download to, and then you play the games in your head."

"Come again?"

"It's a small implant at the back of the neck. A few of the boys at school have had it done. There are clinics springing up all over the place. It's going to be really big. I'm waiting for a few years because the chips are bound to improve, and I reckon it's worth hanging on, but Mark can't wait."

"Is it expensive?"

"The electronics are cheap. It's being fitted that costs the money, and I don't imagine that will get any cheaper. Mark's been saving up."

"It sounds rather drastic, having something wired into your brain."

"It goes into the spinal chord. They tested it for several years apparently, and it seems fine."

"So you can play games whenever you like?"

"No limit. You can look like you're paying attention in class, but really you can be gunning down the opposition in underground tunnels or whatever takes your fancy. You can even programme dreams to have while you're asleep, apparently."

"It's really weird." Louise spoke with feeling. "I think it's wrong."

David did not want to sound like an adult, but he felt he had to ask. "What do your parents think about an implant for Mark, then?"

"They don't know," said Ben. "You don't have to tell them when you're over fifteen, and Mark's birthday is not that far off. He reckons they won't much like it, but they'll have to accept it."

Anyway, it should help with his studies too, apparently. Every week there's more and more you can download."

This was awkward. David was now party to sensitive information. If he told the parents, that would alienate him from the youngsters, but if he didn't and they discovered later that he had known and not told them, it could be difficult. He wished he had not been put in this position.

"Don't any of you girls consider it," David said. "Women should be pretty rather than stuffed full of knowledge in my opinion." It was bit provocative, and the response was as expected.

"Thanks a million!" exclaimed Hannah. "Better to have your brain filled with something worth while than rubbish views of that kind!"

Ben was inclined to argue with this, and for a while they were hard at it in the back, and David had no part in the conversation. Louise seemed lost in her thoughts beside him.

A bit later, Chloe handed round a snack to keep them all going.

"Now," said David, "to serious matters. I have no idea what we are going to find when we get there. My hunch is that other people will have looked before us, so there is precious little hope of discovering anything new, but you never knew. My advice is to look in unexpected places, like a few miles away from where the glass domes stood. A service tunnel might not have been located immediately beside or in the dome, if you think about it. I suggest we split into twos and search around. Report anything at all interesting, and take photos. How does that sound?"

"Great," said Ben. "And may the best man win."

"It's not a race!" said Chloe.

"Wanna bet?" asked Ben.

Eventually, they reached their destination, and the car sank to the ground. When they climbed out, the heat was intense.

"You lot are severely overdressed," said David, who had come prepared in shorts and tee shirt. The others all had tops with arms and long trousers. "You'll roast."

"Not with our temperature control!" laughed Ben. "It works best if you are fully covered. We'll be fine."

To David's surprise, the twins wanted to go together, and so did Mark and Ben. This left him and Louise to make the third pair. He had not anticipated this. Oh well, it was a case of making the best of it. Treat her with kindness whatever her attitude, he thought to himself.

"Where would you like to look?" he asked.

Louise pointed to a rocky outcrop a few hundred yards away. "Let's try there," she suggested grumpily.

It seemed as good as anywhere, so David checked that the car was secure, and then they switched on their flying suits and kicked off. He was already feeling over warm. These temperature controlled suits the others had were certainly worth the expense if you had any reason to visit Africa for long.

They glided over the rocky surface. David was dimly aware that the other pairs had both gone in different directions. It was impossible to see any signs of previous human activity on the ground beneath them. It was hardly surprising; no-one would ever dream of trying to grow anything there.

"Let's look down there at ground level," said Louise, pointing to the base of the rock. They glided down and landed. There was virtually no sand here. The ground was covered with stones, but you could walk on the bare earth between if you watched your step. They peered at the rocky walls.

"What's this?" said Louise, pointing into a crack. David came close to have a look.

Suddenly Louise seized him and before he realised what was happening, she was covering him with kisses. "Oh I love you!" she gasped, fighting for breath. Her intensity was amazing.

This was ridiculous. How absurd! But deep inside, David knew he needed to handle this carefully or Louise could get hurt.

"Take a grip, Louise!" he spluttered when he finally had the opportunity to speak. The words were not well chosen. She clung to him even more tightly, shaking and trembling with emotion.

"I'm never going to let you go!" she exclaimed.

“Louise!” he said, perhaps rather fiercer than he meant to, eventually disentangling himself. This was totally unexpected. She must have interpreted his friendliness as a sign of personal attraction and formed a huge crush on him. Could he have foreseen this?

Suddenly, her mood changed. “Oh I hate you!” she shouted, and began raining blows on him with her fists. Her violence astonished him. “Go away from us!” she insisted. Then she was suddenly hugging him and crying again. She was so impetuous, in complete contrast to her earlier moodiness.

“Louise, please calm down. It’s no way to behave. Now, I can see you have very deep feelings. That’s great, but they need to be handled in the right way.”

She was still holding on to him, but before long she grew calmer. Soon she was crying steadily. He patted her back.

“I think it’s best that we rejoin the others,” he suggested when she had calmed down. He himself was feeling very churned up inside. Her outburst had awoken deep feelings inside of him, despite his best efforts. How difficult.

She nodded at his suggestion.

“Here, have my handkerchief and dry your eyes.”

She took the hanky and dabbed her face with it. The others were bound to see that she had been crying, but David could not help that. The important thing was not to be alone with her any longer than necessary. However, they couldn’t set off yet as she was still producing the occasional violent sob.

She held his arm. “David, I’m sorry. I do feel so strongly... I don’t know...” The words would not come.

“Don’t worry about it. I think you need to find an adult you trust and talk about it, probably your mum. Powerful feelings are normal in girls your age.” I have trouble with them myself, he wanted to add, but decided it would be better not to.

Louise snuggled up next to David, who tried to assume a protective fatherly role, with only limited success. They waited a few minutes longer. His mind was running over their previous meetings. Perhaps he had rather rushed her into the tennis. Oh yes, and telling how she would look good dressed in lace and a floaty dress. Not a good idea in retrospect.

As they flew up from the ground, Louise said, “Let’s not return yet. We’ll look around a bit longer. I feel calmer now.”

David was just wondering what to say to this when his phone rang. It was Ben.

“I think you should come and look at this.” He sounded very excited. “Can you see me waving?”

Louise had already spotted him a mile off, and was shooting off in his direction. David felt he had better follow. Hopefully it would provide a distraction. All the same, he could have done without this complication with Louise. He was involved with enough Winter girls as it was. Perhaps it was time to duck out. But then, what about Araminta’s beautiful friend? He couldn’t just take himself off. It was out of the question. How difficult.

Ben guided them down to where the girls and Mark were standing.

“We saw this slight depression in the side of the hill,” he explained. Mark said nothing but motioned them to look at his hand-held workstation. They all peered at the screen. Louise seemed to have forgotten her outburst, and had used David’s handkerchief to good effect. Perhaps the incident would pass unobserved, although David could feel bruises developing all over his chest and arms. That girl was certainly strong. Perhaps she should take up boxing, if girls do that kind of thing.

David blinked a few times. He needed to concentrate. Then he saw it. There appeared to be a doorframe on the screen.

“Does that thing double as a metal detector?” he asked.

“Not really,” Ben explained. “Mark has adapted it. It does the job pretty well. We think there is a wooden door behind that sand, with a metal surround. The wood doesn’t show up.”

It did seem likely.

“I’ll summon the car,” David announced, pressing the button. The splendid vehicle soon landed at their feet. They got out the spades that had been stowed in case they should be needed and started

to dig. It was hot work for David, but the others found it no effort with their special suits. Soon there was the sound of a spade ringing on a wooden surface. The trouble was that as fast as they dug, sand would flow in from the sides. Still, they were making headway.

After another few minutes, the door was becoming visible. There came a moment when it was possible to clear the lock. Sure enough, it was a secure one.

“I don’t know whether we are going to achieve anything more here today,” David was beginning, when a noise from Mark’s throat silenced him. Was that speech, he wondered?

Mark went to the car and brought out a little package. He opened it by keying in a password, and extracted a small drill. He expertly fitted a drill bit, and advanced to the door. He bored a small hole in the middle of it. Then he got out a roll of some cable. It was thin, but David had a hunch that it would be very strong. He fed one end of the cable into the hole, and then attached the other to his games console. That thing was evidently much more than a mere toy, David reflected. There was a shrill whining sound for a moment. Then Mark disconnected the console. He pulled on the cable, which appeared to have bound itself to the inside of the door in some mysterious manner. Satisfied, he unrolled the cable, found the lifting mechanism on the under side of the car, and clipped the cable on to it.

“Stand back,” he said. Nobody needed any extra encouragement. David’s estimation of Mark was shooting upwards by the minute. He might not say much, but he could tell from the reaction of the others that when it came to practical tasks, he was the man for the job.

Chloe and Hannah held on to David, one on each side. Louise stood apart, looking uncomfortable. Ben was chuckling in anticipation.

Mark was soon in the car. There was a terrific jerk backwards and the door sailed easily out with a splintering sound. Part of the lock was left behind. There had only been two very basic hinges; concern about people breaking in had not been in the mind of the designer.

“Very good, Mark,” David said as the car settled and he rejoined them. “That will have set off an alarm somewhere no doubt, but as the complex has been out of commission for some years, I doubt that there is any bell left to ring. It’s a shame we didn’t bring a torch.”

Ben had already stepped forward and was peering inside. He reached forward and at once there was a blaze of light. “The power’s on!” he announced. There was a passage leading forward. He and Mark strode on in. “Stairs!” Ben announced when they had gone thirty paces. “We’re going down.”

“I wonder if somebody should stay with the car...” David began, but Chloe had grabbed his arm and was already propelling him inside.

“Come on you two!” she insisted to her two sisters. Hannah was game, Louise was less certain. The car should be fine, David thought to himself. There’s no-one else anywhere near. It was locked.

The stairs were quite steep and narrow, but there was a good handrail on both sides. After about twenty, they reached another length of passage, which in turn led to another twenty stairs down. David could hear Ben and Mark up ahead. The three girls were just behind him.

“Look, I feel most comfortable being the back marker,” David said to them. “You three catch up the boys, and keep together. I don’t like the thought of the passage dividing and us going different ways, so can you tell them to wait if that happens?”

“Don’t worry,” Hannah called over her shoulder striding ahead. “We’ll be sensible, won’t we Chloe?” The two girls laughed.

Louise hurried to catch up the twins. It was surprising how quickly the girls’ footfalls became inaudible. Sand probably muffles sound, David thought to himself. He followed on more slowly, his mind in a whirl. He could use a little space, to be honest. There would soon be shouts if there was anything to see. He wondered what they would find.

He was half way down the next set of steps when the lights suddenly went out. This was very threatening. Thankfully, he kept his grip, and had been looking where he was going, so he was able to descend the last six steps without mishap. He was just about to call out to the others when arms flung themselves round him and for the second time that afternoon, there was a girl kissing him.

This was terrible. Louise was of slighter build than her older sisters, but not much. He simply could not afford to feel his way to a conclusion as to who it was by using his hands, as he had once done in a game of Blind Man's Buff at a children's party. There was only one thing for it.

"Please," he whispered quietly, with pleading in his voice, "who is it?"

There was an exclamation and the arms withdrew. "Well! Who did you think it was?"

It was Chloe's voice. Oh dear. Now she would know there was competition.

"Well it might have been Hannah pretending to be you. She's such a prankster. I wouldn't put it past her." Don't mention Louise.

"Hmm." Chloe was clearly suspicious. Her amorous overture was not turning out at all as she had intended.

"Look, Chloe, this could be serious. We don't know who turned the lights off. We may have visitors between us and the exit."

"I bet it was the boys. There's probably another switch further on. Oh David, do you love me?"

Chloe was anxious, and rightly so. He would need to talk to her. In an instant, David knew he should tell her about Louise after all.

"Chloe..." No! He must not mention Louise. It was bound to backfire if he did. How could she possibly understand?

"Chloe, I'm very fond of you, and I would like to love you, but the truth is..."

"Don't say any more," she shrieked. "Oh David!"

She was in his arms, sobbing. "Oh David. I so wanted it to work." She was deeply upset.

Was it a revealing remark or not? Perhaps Chloe had felt the same way, that their relationship was not deepening into love in the way she wanted. Better to find out now than later.

"You girls are lovely." This was a hundred percent true. All of them. "It's been really great joining in with your family." It was bound to come to an end now. "I admire you all very much."

Chloe just cried.

In the midst of his concern for her, David was feeling uneasy. The lights were still off, and there were no sounds from ahead. It was feeling less like a prank by the minute.

"Look, we need to find out what's going on. This situation could turn nasty."

At that moment, there was the sound of footsteps from ahead accompanied by the sound of heavy breathing. Somebody had been under heavy exertion.

"Louise!" said Chloe. She could tell who it was even in the utter blackness. "What's up?"

"It's Mark. I think he's hurt."

"Did any of you three put the lights out?" David asked.

"No."

This was serious.

"Right." David needed to take charge. "Lead the way. Are there more steps?"

"Yes. One set, then another passage, and then we were just beginning the next set when the lights went off and Mark fell."

"Okay. I think it's best if you two wait at the top of the next set of steps, and I will feel my way down. Ben and I should be able to carry Mark out. If anybody comes from the surface, then make peace with them. If you hear someone coming, it would be best to call out so that they hear you well in advance. It would not do to surprise strangers underground suddenly; they might have a weapon and use it." There was no point in avoiding the issue. The girls needed to be realistic. "Where's Hannah?"

"She went on with the boys."

"Right. Steady! This is the top of the steps. You two wait here. I'll go on down."

Descending unfamiliar steps in the pitch dark was not David's idea of fun, but it had to be done. He felt for the handrail.

"Ben? Mark? Hannah?"

Chloe was calling out.

"Coming," came the cheery reply. They were not far off, either. Her hearing must be very sharp. David had heard nothing.

“Great news,” David yelled. He stood still, straining his ears. After another minute he could hear them.

“You’re close to the foot of a set of stairs,” he called when he judged they were getting near.

At that moment, a tiny light began to glimmer down below. Gradually it grew, and before long, the three of them came into view. Ben and Hannah were supporting Mark, who was hobbling. He must have twisted his ankle. It was his hand-held that was providing the glow.

“Okay, next set of stairs,” Ben said.

Mark came first, hauling himself up one step at time, in obvious pain. David grasped him at the top, to help him up, but sensed from Mark’s response that this was not welcome. Mark turned back to let the faint light from his console dissipate in the stairwell. It was just enough to help Hannah and Ben climb up without difficulty.

“Well done, well done,” said David warmly. “Right the others are just along here. We had better make our way back to the surface as best we can. I’ll bring up the rear.”

For the remainder of the return journey, Mark went up the stairwells first, with Ben assisting him. Then the light was shone back for the three girls. To David’s dismay, each time it was his turn to climb, Mark would begin to set off again, and the faint glimmer would be extinguished. Whether it was that Mark reckoned he did not need the light, or whether he was against David in some way was unclear. I think I’ll assume the former until proved otherwise, David thought to himself. All the same, he did not have a good feeling about the events of the afternoon. Things had taken a decidedly bad turn. He had an uncomfortable sensation in his stomach that everything was about to go horribly wrong. He wondered whether he was going to be sick.

Then with a lurch he remembered the danger from outside. What if intruders had got them cornered? Should he be leading at the front, in case shots were fired? He quickened his pace, tripped and fell. This terrible darkness! He would always be sympathetic to blind people in future, if he got the chance. He was vaguely aware of blood on his lip as he pulled himself up.

Was this the last stairwell? They should have counted them on the way down. How foolish he had been! There were shouts ahead; David could not make out the words. His heart was racing.

Suddenly, the lights came on. The contrast with the darkness was intense; David nearly lost his footing again; he must take a grip on himself.

Oh thank goodness, that was the last set. No, the lights had gone out again. This was awful. At least the others were up. There was enough light from outside to see. He hurried forward. Oh no, there was a figure standing facing him, a female, her back to the brilliant sunlight. Where were the others? What was she holding? With a rush of adrenalin, David realised it was the Araminta’s beautiful girl pointing a gun at his head. It was too much. He fainted right away and everything went black.

-oOo-

When David came to, he found they were already airborne. He was lying rather than sitting in the front passenger seat, which had been tilted back for him. Ben was at the controls.

“You gave us a fright!” he said as David stirred and opened his eyes.

“What happened?” David asked.

“You gave a shriek and collapsed. We wanted to go back down, but we decided we’d better not, so we’re on our way home.”

“How’s Mark’s foot?”

“Oh it’s fine. He can be a drama queen when he wants to. He’s twisted it a bit, but there’s no sign of any swelling or anything.”

David wanted to ask about the girl with the gun but something alerted him to keep quiet.

“There was no mystery about the lights,” Ben continued. “I had thought it was rather a funny switch when I first pressed it. Hannah told me that switches like that stay pushed in for a certain length of time and then pop out again, switching themselves off. It’s a way of saving energy. Ridiculously old-fashioned. I can’t think why they were installed here. There must have been other

switches along the passage that we didn't see; we should have been pushing them in as we went along."

"Oh, right." David couldn't make sense of it. He would have seen the switches, surely. "So there was nobody else besides us?"

"Not a soul. You seem overdone. You need a good rest."

The girls and Mark in the back had not shown the slightest interest. David felt sick.

"I think I'll close my eyes," he said. This was awful. He had not had a hallucination for many years now, and he had fervently hoped that he had seen the back of them. Why had everything gone horrible? Why did all his attempts to date women turn to dust and slip through his fingers? He had so hoped it would turn out to be different this time. He wanted to cry, but this was not the time and place. Squash it all in. It can come out later.

David drifted into an uneasy sleep. The beautiful girl was there, aiming her revolver at him, but she never seemed to fire. Oh get on with it! Kill me now, for goodness sake! Why wait until we know each other well? Put me out of my misery...

-oOo-

David came too once again. He was lying in a bed in Bruce's music room. The bedclothes had been rolled back, and he was bare chested. Someone was massaging him very gently... It was Araminta! With embalming oil, most probably. Something moist and soothing anyway. Perhaps he had died. Perhaps it was another hallucination. The look of concern on her face touched him deeply.

He made to speak, but she put a finger to his lips.

"Try not to worry," she said. "Louise has explained everything. You're not to blame."

David's questioning look prompted more. "She was as white as a sheet when you all got back. I got her on her own and told her she had to tell me. She has a teenage crush on you, as you have discovered, and she's so, so sorry for hitting you so violently. She was scared stiff that you were dying. I told her you were good for a few years yet. The relief on her face was amazing. You should have seen it. You really have scored a hit there, you know."

There were too many references to hits in that speech for David's comfort. However, the gist of it was clear; he could reasonably hope for a cessation of Louise's loving blows for the time being at any rate. She did seem to be contrite.

All this was accompanied by the gentlest of massages. It was deliciously sensual, and made the pain bearable. In other circumstances it would have been highly pleasurable, but there was too much on David's mind.

"How's Mark's foot?" he managed.

"It's fine. He'll be running about again in a day or two. Now just try to stay calm."

Some of the bruises were throbbing. David wondered what Araminta was applying. It was certainly helping.

"Araminta you're very kind. I don't deserve your love and care." David wanted to confide in her about the pictures, but when it came to the point, he found he couldn't do it.

"That's a lovely jacket you have David, with all its contents."

David stiffened. She knew already!

"Try to relax, and stay calm." She was enjoying this, he could tell. She was also highly amused. Now what was that about?

"Do you collect pictures of pretty girls, I wonder?" The gentle massage continued. "I bet there are scores of them in your flat."

"Look, it was when Louise had lost her ring. I knew the place to look for it was in the rubbish. I didn't mean to pry, but I came across the photos, and she is so lovely!"

"David, you'll have to decide which of us you admire most. You seem to have fallen for every one of Bruce's daughters. You can't have all of them, you know!"

She wasn't the least bit put out. She was laughing at him, but not in an unkind way. David suddenly felt understood as he had never felt before. It was as if she could see the inner hidden places of his heart, and far from being horrified, she liked what she saw. It was amazing.

Then it quietly dawned on him. The girl he was after was a daughter of Bruce's! But not by Araminta, surely. He caught her eye, and shifted uncomfortably.

"Now, you've had an emotionally draining time. I suggest you sleep the clock round. Are you hungry or thirsty?"

A glass of water seemed called for. Then the covers were pulled over and David was left in peace. It was quite like being a child again. It was so good to feel cared for. Whatever happened, he must not let this family down.

Think of that. The girl was another of Bruce's daughters. The man was extraordinary...

-oOo-

David spent several days in bed. Louise only looked in once to say sorry. Hannah was busy, and the boys were occupied, but Chloe was magnificent. She saw to his every need. This was all the more remarkable because he had told her he didn't love her. It was clear that she really cared about him. Now that she had learned about Louise, the incident in the dark was forgotten. It seemed David could do no wrong. His heart warmed to her. But had her mum said anything about the photos, he wondered?

It was strange that he felt so weak. He couldn't understand it. It was not his normal style. Perhaps he was catching Winteritis. At all events, he felt he understood Bruce better. The man had been through a deep trauma. Small wonder the body was unhappy about it.

On the third day, everyone gathered at supper. It was one of the lovely things about this family that despite their busy lives, they managed to eat together. David was feeling much brighter. Bruce was hearing from the boys. Ben was in full flow about the school day.

Mark seemed lost in his thoughts. David suddenly remembered the conversation in the car.

"Mark," he asked without thinking anything of it, "are you really going to get an implant?"

"David!" said Chloe, shocked. What did she mean?

"An implant?" Bruce choked on his food and began spluttering. "Mark, no," he gasped, going red in the face. He seemed very worked up.

"Have a drink of water dear," Araminta began, but she was too late. Bruce was rising up out of his seat, trying to speak despite the constriction in his throat. He seemed unable to swallow. Suddenly, to everybody's horror he clutched at his throat, made a most unnatural gulping sound, and slid gently onto the floor.

"Dad!" cried Hannah, aghast. Everybody stood up.

"Fetch an ambulance" ordered Araminta in a faint voice. She had long feared something of this kind.

Chloe hurried through to the phone.

"Idiot!" hissed Louise to David, who was finally grasping that this was not a subject to raise in Bruce's presence. Why had nobody warned him? It had seemed right to him to have the topic out in the open. He had made a mental note to raise it when he first heard of the idea. Surely Mark couldn't go ahead with a thing like that without his parents' knowledge and consent?

Bruce was kicking and making choking sounds. To his horror, David realised that he was going blue in the face.

"Clear his airway!" he said. Hannah got down beside her dad and put her fingers in his mouth, but it was too late. With a final convulsion, Bruce lay still. He had passed out.

The ambulance men were there in five minutes. They soon sucked out the obstruction. However, they were grim-faced. Bruce was whisked away; one of the men was doing compression on his chest to re-start the heart. There was just room in the ambulance for Araminta to go with him.

It was all to no avail. Twenty minutes later, the dreaded news came through that Bruce had been found dead on arrival at hospital.

David felt as if a stake had been driven through his heart. He stumbled out of the house, wondering if he would ever return. It was a complete nightmare. How could he have been so foolish?

-oOo-

The doorbell was ringing.

“Go away!” said David fiercely, but not loudly, in case the person should hear. He was hastily going through his filing cabinet and discarding old documents. Really a lot of this stuff should be shredded, he thought, but who cares? Indeed, I hope somebody does steal my personality or whatever they do, and smash me into the ground; it’s all I’m fit for.

He angrily thrust another set of past bills into the bulging dustbin liner. The doorbell was still ringing. Drat the person!

It had been a job keeping the Winters away from his flat, but it couldn’t last. Really he should have tidied it before. This filing cabinet overhaul was long overdue. David had been taught to do it every year on New Year’s Day, but he had never bothered. Now it was essential, otherwise where could all the other papers littered round the flat be put?

“GRR, GRR!” growled David through gritted teeth as the doorbell rang again. This time there was the sound of the letterbox being pushed open.

“David? David?” It was Chloe’s voice. “I know you’re in there. Please let me in. I’m terribly worried about you.”

It was no good. Oh well, she might as well know the truth. Feeling heavy in every limb, David dragged himself to the front door. He slid back the chain.

“Promise you won’t be angry,” he said in a resigned voice.

“Oh David!” Chloe’s voice was full of concern and compassion.

David opened the door.

With a sob, Chloe flew into his arms. David felt the tears begin to come. So far he had been unable to cry, probably because he was too shocked, he told himself.

They stood holding each other for a long time. Then David reached and closed the door. “Thanks for coming,” he said. It was important to be kind.

Chloe led the way through to the sitting room, carefully side-stepping the numerous piles of books and equipment, outdoor shoes and umbrellas, and the week’s groceries (non-perishable) which had still not been put away.

The sitting room was a frightful mess. Chloe turned to him. “It’s a lovely flat,” she said simply.

This was too much. David broke into a smile, and began a huge laugh. How kind of her! Then without warning the laughter turned to tears again. He was so upset!

“Oh Chloe! I feel so awful I can’t begin to express it. It was a terrible day for your family when I arrived on the scene. All I’ve done is bring havoc and destruction. I am so, so sorry; you’ve no idea. I’m so grateful for you turning up here and trying to be nice to me; it can’t be easy, but it’s your generous nature to attempt it. I really mean it; you’re very kind. I don’t suppose we’ll ever see each other again. Thanks for all the fun we’ve had...”

“David, stop. Please stop. I feel I’m losing my mind! Honestly you can talk a lot of rubbish at times.”

David looked at her, intrigued. What could she be talking about?

“You’re not responsible for Dad’s death! It’s not as if you shook him by the throat until it killed him.”

“Please don’t try to lessen what I did.”

“No, you don’t understand. I’ve talked with the others. They all knew that Dad would flip when he heard about Mark having an implant. The conversation about it in the car was for your benefit. None of the rest of us had the courage to tell him, but he had to know, and we reckoned you would come out with it. You were only doing what we had planned. So cheer up. Dad couldn’t take it. He was as good as dead anyway. Relax. It’s okay.”

“Hang on. I was supposed to mention it in his presence?” David was feeling shocked.

“Yes. None of us think Mark should do it - Louise doesn't count - and Dad had to know before it was too late. It's the kind of thing he feels strongly about.”

“I see.” This did put a new light on things. David's mind was in a turmoil. He walked over to the window and stared outside, trying to gather his thoughts. “When you say he was as good as dead anyway, what did you mean?”

“I didn't know, but apparently the medics had told Mum that it was extraordinary that he survived his collapse when we were children. They reckoned he could go at any time. You've seen how feeble he has been. I can remember him...” Here Chloe began to choke. David went over and held her. She struggled to continue. “I can remember him being full of energy when we were little. It's been so sad seeing him fade. Each year he's been weaker than the one before. I suppose we got used to it, but I have to confess, I never thought he would actually die. He seemed indestructible somehow. Perhaps we shouldn't have told him about Mark.”

“I expect your mother is very upset.”

“She is devastated that Dad has gone, but she's not upset with us. The incident at lunch may have sparked it, but it could have happened at any time. David, please come round, and you'll see for yourself. It will do a lot of good if you come, believe me!”

David did not know what to think. Chloe was missing her Dad very much, no doubt about it. The firmness and resolve she had shown when she came in were real, but they were paper thin. Underneath there was a lot of pain. David wondered how Araminta would react if he were to call.

He turned back to the window. “I need to think,” he said.

He stared out. He had spent a lot of time here over the previous days. His flat was quite high up in the block, giving him an extensive view.

“Come and look,” he said. Chloe came and joined him. “Do you see how at every moment, somewhere there's a car ascending? Just occasionally there is a moment when there is no car to be seen, but those gaps are few and far between. I stood here for over an hour yesterday, and there wasn't one. I like to count how many cars I can see at any one time; just the ones going up or coming down, not the ones flying overhead. My record's nineteen.”

Chloe said nothing. It was understandable. At a time like this, he needed a means of escape.

David continued. “You know, future generations will not be able to remember what it was like when the cars were all on the ground. I still can, and your father could. It's the same with any new invention. It spreads everywhere, and after a bit we can't imagine life without it.”

David turned and looked at Chloe. She was really nice, he had to admit. She would make somebody a good wife. “I don't suppose you can imagine life without your Dad yet,” he said.

“David, it's really weird. I feel as if a stone slab in a step which I always thought would last for ever has suddenly gone, meaning that if you walked on that step without looking what you were doing, you could twist and ankle or have a nasty fall. The step is no longer safe, not trustworthy. It's such a strange feeling.”

It was well-expressed. “Where is the step?” asked David gently.

“It's only in my mind. I sometimes imagine living in the country in the olden days. Do you know Constable's picture *The Hay Wain*?” David shook his head. “Oh well, it was painted centuries ago, and it shows a cottage in the country, and I've sometimes wondered what it would be like to live there. Anyway, it's the doorstep for that house. An imagined one; you can't see the door in the picture.”

David fell silent. He watched the cars ascending and descending. All so busy and full of purpose. What was there left for him in life?

Chloe had slipped away. A few moments later, he heard the sound of running water followed by the sound of washing up. How kind of her. He went through to the kitchen.

“Now, you're ruining my system.”

She looked at him inquisitively.

“When it's time to eat, I select the oldest unwashed plate and deal with it. Soon there'll be no dirty ones left to choose if I don't intervene.”

“David, you are shocking. Do you have a tea towel?”

Yes, there was one. It would be nice to have things tidied up a bit. Alright, perhaps he would call at the Winter home. He had already lost pretty much everything, really, so what else was there to go wrong?

-oOo-

The day of the funeral eventually arrived. David had been dreading it. At least the weather was kind. If anything, the morning was rather hot.

He chose to walk as it wasn't far. The Winters had no connection with the huge Victorian church where it was being held; they had chosen it for its size. A large crowd was expected.

Long before he got there, David could see that the car multi-stack above the gothic building was already filling significantly. There was going to be a huge turn-out. Perhaps he might not get in. That would be awful. He hurried along.

He need not have worried. This church was go-ahead, it seemed, and had fitted the latest hover-grip balcony a few weeks before. This was effectively a tier of see-through seating, stretching from one wall to the other, using anti-gravity for support. It had been designed as a way of increasing the number of people you could get into a hall without the need for a lot of structural alterations.

The earlier versions had been completely invisible all the time, using a new technology which bent light beams around the obstruction, but the trouble was that only the hardy would use them. Anybody who had the slightest fear of heights found the balconies unbearable, because they felt so insecure. David had read about the new invisibility. It seemed that the light-bending claim was only partly true. Yes, they had succeeded in bending tiny amounts of light, but it was only the smallest proportion of all the light travelling in that line of sight. Effectively what they had done was to make a recording of the bent light path and amplified it so much that it obscured the true light path, giving an impression of invisibility. Or something like that.

The new balcony version was more user-friendly. No attempt was made to render the structure invisible until everyone was seated. Then, the whole edifice, that is balcony and people together, could be rendered invisible to the people behind, using the light-bending technology. Provided nobody stood up, or threw something up in the air above them, there should be no obstruction to the view or the sound for those seated behind. There was the usual slight shimmering which was mandatory for all invisibility situations as a safety feature, but people were getting used to ignoring that by now. However, the seating with its supporting floor stayed visible for the people actually using the balcony, which was reassuring for them.

The only downside to the new version was that people no longer disappeared as they climbed up the stairway, as they had done in the earlier versions. It had been fun for the rest of the audience to watch a succession of seeming Indian rope tricks.

People were filling up the balcony, David could see. All the same, he was relieved to be able to find a seat on the ground, at the end of a row about two thirds of the way back. He would feel inconspicuous there.

The family had asked him to sit with them at the front, but he felt utterly unworthy. The fact was, he could feel one of his depressions coming on. Yet again, his attempt to find a life partner had failed. The idea of taking on somebody as young as Chloe had been pretty hopeless from the start, to be blunt. Still, things had seemed promising for a while. Why was it that he could not relate properly to girls? It was such a source of pain to him. However, if he tried to live as if they didn't exist, that didn't work either.

He was lonely at a deep level. People at work found him sociable, and did not realise his true nature. Girls always went off him before long, although to be fair, Chloe hadn't done so far. She was unusual in that way. No, in this instance it was he who was restless; he had been smitten by the photos of the oldest daughter. But what chance was there of pursuing her now that he had nudged her father into the grave? Also, she was never referred to and never showed up, so what did that mean? He had not liked to ask. It did not feel promising.

In another setting, he could have fallen for Araminta, who was of course now available, but how could he transfer from the daughter to the mother? Especially in these circumstances. The idea was absurd.

There was one thing. At least his own personal gloom fitted the occasion. Perhaps he could find some obscure comfort in that.

The crowd was awesome. The ancient pew was already full. Then the wardens showed another two people into it. This meant that although the assembled bottoms fitted, theoretically, in practice some of the occupants had to sit forward and some of them back. It's these women, David thought in a savage moment; they all need utter surgery to reduce their torso size. No, that was thoroughly unkind. Bruce would never have entertained such an idea for a moment.

Then, just after the opening hymn had been announced, another three people were ushered into their pew. This was unbearable. But the squash was nice for the family, which was what mattered.

After some preliminaries, somebody called Bill stood up and spoke about Bruce in the days before his accident. David had not seen him before. It transpired that he and Bruce had been close friends for years but had drifted apart somewhat, although their wives were still close. Most of Bill's talk was familiar, but David was surprised to learn that Bruce had run a number of homes for homeless people at one time. The experiment had ended in failure, as Bill had anticipated. Next there was a Bible reading and an address from a clergyman. David found it hard to concentrate. Judging from the child's fingers poking up above the invisible balcony, as if out of nowhere, he was not the only one. The attempted animal shapes did look most comic. He could just make out the twins and Louise sitting next to their Mum not far from the clergyman. Louise was stifling a yawn. He couldn't see the boys. There was no coffin; that had been dealt with earlier at the crematorium.

There was another hymn which David didn't know, then prayers. Everybody in their pew bowed forward as best they could, except David who sat back, for the general welfare. So it was that he was the first to see the girl in the photos come walking along the side aisle, holding a three legged stool and a musical instrument in a case. There was no doubt that it was her. She came within two paces of where he was sitting. She was just as beautiful as the photos. He also caught a delicate scent as she went by. He went hot and then cold all over.

He should have concentrated on the prayers, but it was out of the question. All he could do was watch as she stopped beneath a large stained glass window, set up her stool, and seated herself. Then to his astonishment, she got out her saxophone, for that was what it was, and placed it to her lips. She began to play the lowest, quietest note. The prayers were still in progress, which seemed odd.

The sound was so faint that not many people realised what was happening. The gentlest hum filled the air. Before long the entire building was resonating. Then the note changed slightly. Heads began to lift. The girl was playing a long slow, solemn funeral oration, with her eyes closed. If she felt conspicuous, she didn't show it. It was no music that David had never heard before. The bewitching sound rose and fell, ever so gently, always scarcely audible. You could have heard a pin drop; the effect was breathtaking. She was clearly a wonderful musician.

David found he was studying her intently. It was a revelation that a girl could look so stunning in black, even when playing a saxophone. It was the hat that did it; the lace and the pink flower and the trim hair, it was all so entrancing.

Now the music was gathering pace. David was dimly aware that the clergyman had finished the prayers; he stepped forward and whispered to Araminta in consultation. He then returned to the front, and simply held up the service card and pointed to the bottom of the back, which explained where the refreshments could be had, and quietly made his way out of the building. None of the family moved, but after a few moments some people near the back stood up and tiptoed silently out. This encouraged others to make their exit too. Before long, half the congregation had left. Some had walked past David, momentarily blocking his view of the minstrel, to his intense annoyance. How could people leave during this wonderful serenade? It seemed extraordinary.

Bruce's talented daughter was gradually working up to the climax of the music. Great peals and ripples of deeply soulful music filled the air. It was hard to get hold of a melody; the effect was

produced more by repeated patterns of sound. Now the notes were rushing along, but still with no sense of hurry. There was always a quiet dignity. The volume rose, and the pitch rose too in sympathy. The sense of loss and yearning conveyed by the music was compelling. Then without warning, the soliloquy was clearly coming to a close. There were a few long notes, as at the beginning, and then a beautiful deep sound, which gradually faded into nothingness.

The church remained still after she had finished. It would have been a travesty to clap. Then in their ones and twos the remaining guests made their way out. David stayed where he was, breathless, watching her pack away her instrument. It had been extraordinary.

Here was Araminta, flanked by the girls. David looked up nervously.

“Come and meet Sam,” she said. She seemed very composed. This family never ceased to amaze him.

“Sam,” Araminta said as they walked across, “that was wonderful. It was the most lovely surprise. Thank you so much. It would have meant the world to Bruce. He would have been thrilled.”

Sam put her arms round Araminta’s neck. So the music had been unscheduled. How extraordinary!

“I’m so sad for you.” The girl’s voice was lovely too.

“Sam, I want you to meet David. He has been our investigator in chief.”

Sam held out a delicate hand. David shook it respectfully. He hoped she would not notice how much he was trembling, but being as sensitive as she was, she was bound to. Perhaps she would put it down to him being moved by the sad occasion.

“Investigator? Whatever does that mean?” she asked, with a puzzled look in her eye.

Ben had arrived. He spoke up enthusiastically. “Finding out about Jim Pond. He taught me scuba diving, and we even hired a submarine to go into Jim’s underwater workshop. We’ve been exploring tunnels under the golf complex he built in the Sahara too. David’s a genius.”

David’s heart thrilled. This was going better than he had dared to hope.

Sam clapped her hands with glee. “Oh that’s wonderful. David,” she declared, looking at him with beseeching eyes. “Will you help me? My husband went missing three weeks ago, and I’m at my wits’ end. Will you look for Cyril and bring him home?”

David staggered. There was a husband! The thought had never entered his head. How dreadful. He heard himself replying.

“Of course I will.” And he would. In that moment, David knew he was going to leave no stone unturned. Although he already longed, hoping against hope, that the husband had been killed, irreversibly, hopefully without any suffering, yet he would do everything in his power to find him and return him to his wife. Now he had a purpose to live for. Life need no longer feel empty and barren. He had found his calling.

There was more he needed to say. “I will search for him high and low. It will be a pleasure.” He hoped his face did not betray his sense of devastation.

The look of gratitude she gave him thrilled him to the core. The trembling would increase so! Here was Chloe, putting her arm round him. How kind and supportive. Araminta seemed pleased too, even delighted. He would do them all proud. He would show them. Far from life being over, his day was about to dawn.

Let it come. Let the sun rise!

-oOo-

From: Mission 702

To: Undisclosed Recipients

I’ve finally discovered an advantage to my current state, ‘sans teeth, sans taste, sans eyes, sans everything’, as the bard put it. We have finally reached the core of our galaxy, Sagittarius A Star as it is called, and we are plunging headlong in towards the massive black hole. I

always hoped we would. I'm going to describe it in detail, but before I do, some news from the journey in.

Goodness knows how many children Sheila and I left behind in the habitable star systems we passed. It might have been just a handful, or hundreds of thousands. We have no way of knowing. I suspect nearer the latter, but it's only a guess. It's so dismal to have her there right beside me, if I am to believe it, but not be able to relate. Also, it would have been nice if our offspring could have got in touch. Perhaps they did, but the computers censored the messages. Anyway, what does it matter, because unless they had refits like me, they will all have died centuries ago. How crazy to outlive your great great great great grandchildren!

I hope Sheila enjoyed the trip. I never liked to ask what qualified her to come. Perhaps she has been giving birth to replace all the ones she bumped off earlier; I don't know. It seems strange to have committed the future of the human race to convicted criminals, somehow. Are there no people of integrity around that could have done the job better?

I had hoped there would be plenty to see on our journey here, but frankly, it's been a disappointment. Even the star cluster with its thousands of stars in a small area was a washout. We could see the globular cluster from a huge distance, glowing brightly, but by the time we got there, the stars in it were so far apart that it did not feel like a special place at all. The difficulty is that space is just that; almost all space, and although there are exciting things like giant stars and black holes and all sorts, you don't come across them if all you do is travel in a straight line. It's dismal really.

Anyway, after many thousands of years of travel, by your time, we are here at last. It doesn't feel as if the ship can go any faster, and yet we are gripped by a terrific acceleration. Or is it the increasing gravity? It's hard to tell. Impossible, actually.

You see, I can't feel the heat, and I don't have any sensation of being pulled apart, and the view is superb. Those are the advantages of having your body removed. You can't see a black hole, of course, but you can see the glow of the heat coming from it, and all the stuff falling in. Also, you can't see any stars beyond the black hole either, so you can infer its presence from its silhouette. After a while, you think you are really seeing it. Perhaps you are, I don't know; my eyes are not my own any more as it is.

It's so big that we have been watching the glow for years already. About two stars a year get sucked into it. That's a firework show to rival all I can tell you! The star gets pulled out of shape into huge streamers, whirling round and round the black hole, before plunging in. Think of the black hole as the hugest most powerful whirlpool you could ever imagine, even sucking in the light that goes near, and you won't go far wrong.

Come to think of it, perhaps it looks larger than it is, with all that confusion of the light nearby. Or the opposite; maybe it is even larger than it looks? I truly don't know, and frankly I'm past caring.

Anyway, now it's our turn. We are so close now that the glowing mass fills all our view. It's scarcely black at all now that we're this close! The edges are vast and off to the side, although now I come to look for them, there's a curious thing. The horizon of the black hole seems to be behind us. It's weird. In fact, it's getting more and more behind us every second. I have to look directly backwards to see it. However, at least the horizon is well-formed again. It is like a huge saucer astern, taking up a third of the sky, no a quarter of it. It's changing all the time. This is extraordinary!

Do you realise, I will be snuffed out in the middle of the black hole, so I am definitely going to meet God eventually. I feel cheated, you know, because I should have gone to my maker years ago, but I have been kept alive artificially by the will of people back at home who themselves died thousands of years back. It hardly seems fair.

There's a tremendous lot of debris rushing forwards with us now. Why are there so many grand pianos? Bluthners, Bechsteins, Steinways, those Germans knew how to make an iron frame; there are thousands of them! It's amazing. The whole sky is full of them in every direction, raining down.

Now the horizon behind is shrinking even more. That's the whole of the universe out there, contained in that circle, no bigger than a tennis ball now. It's getting even smaller. Now it's a golf ball. As I keep saying, it is simply unbel

-oOo-

David's heart was beating fast. He couldn't help it. Here he was, ringing the doorbell of Sam's penthouse flat! She and her husband must be well off to afford this place.

There was the shuffle of feet in slippers faintly audible through the door. David tried to appear as if he wasn't looking through the opaque glass.

She opened the door a few inches, on the chain. "Who is it please?"

"David the investigator at your service ma'am."

The door closed and then opened again. "Come in," she said simply. No smile. David wondered what that might mean. He was hopeless at reading the moods of women.

She led the way into the sitting room. There was a fine view out over some modern housing and of the country beyond. The place was sparsely furnished. The highly polished wooden floor had an oriental rug over it, which was flanked by a sofa and two armchairs. She offered David one of them with a flourish.

"Good of you to come," she began. "Now, what will you have to drink?"

"Cup of tea?" David wanted to keep a clear head. No alcohol today.

Sam swept out to the kitchen, and the kettle could soon be heard.

"Milk but no sugar, please," David called out.

She came back through carrying a tray. David got it this time. She had been crying, although you wouldn't know it to look at her beautiful face. She was upset! And no wonder. Her husband had gone missing without a word. David had thought she looked somewhat fragile, but perhaps she was simply pale through stress.

David suddenly wanted to run out of the flat. He felt deeply ashamed of himself. How could he possibly have wished the man dead? It was monstrous. What sort of evil, wicked, sub-standard burke was he? And how could he in all conscience take on this assignment, given his strong interest in Sam?

All hope that she would ever be his died at that moment. Still, his love for her was genuine, and he could at least give it some expression. He would make every effort to find her husband, even though that would be the end of it. He felt a great wave of helplessness, which he tried to keep hidden from Sam as best he could. She would probably miss it; she had problems enough of her own.

"Now," he said, as she poured out two cups. "Tell me the background."

Sam coloured slightly. "David I'm going to tell you things I have never told anyone else. It may be foolish, but I'm at my wits end as I said at the funeral, and if there is one thing I'm sure of, it's that Bruce's family are lovely people, and if you come with their approval, then you are trustworthy. So I've decided it's worth the risk."

David shook his head. "Sam, you're very kind, but before you weigh in, you need to know that I am a big disappointment to myself, and to everyone else who gets to know me well enough. By all means trust me with sensitive information if you want to - I can keep my mouth shut, but please don't think highly of me. I will do my best for you, which may not be very good at all."

It was a clumsy speech, but David wanted to respond in kind. She needed to know what she was taking on.

She smiled again, a pathetic, watery affair. "I expect you think he's gone off with another woman."

"Well, it did occur to me." Be sensitive.

"David, I'm quite sure he hasn't." She was looking him in the eyes, with great earnestness. "I don't believe it is possible. Still, you will want to check for yourself. No, I fear it is something sinister."

"You had better tell me about him."

Sam had evidently prepared for this. She picked up a manila folder from the coffee table beside her chair and handed it across. "It's all in there."

David undid the elastic fastening and opened it. There was a large photo of a man old enough to be her father. "This is Cyril?"

Sam nodded. "He's a lot older than me."

There were three more photos, showing different angles of the head. Then there was a sheet of his dental records. My word this girl was thorough! Then details of his work, which was freelance it appeared, something to do with hotels. There were letters from the last couple of years addressed to him by various business contacts. There were phone bills showing numbers called, most of which had names pencilled beside them. There was a copy of a CV dated some five years earlier. Yes, hotel planning rather than management. Then finally there was a brown envelope.

"Now, I reckon this is the heart of the matter," Sam said as he came to this. She went on to tell David about the under-floor hiding place. He was very interested.

"Can I see it, please?" he asked. She led him through to the airing cupboard, opened the door, got down on her hands and knees and rolled back the carpet.

"One minute," said David. "May I look before you open it up?"

She moved aside for him. He bent down to have a close look. Oh dear, she was rather near. David kept firm control of himself. Stupidity now might ruin everything. He studied the floorboards carefully.

"No, I can't see anything; you'll have to show me. What I wanted to know was whether you were meant to find this hiding place, or whether it was intended to remain hidden from you, and in my view it is definitely the latter."

"I agree. I had the same thought myself. If you move aside, I'll show you the hole."

David obliged. Sam had brought a small kitchen knife with her for the purpose. She gently inserted it between two of the floorboards and a short section of the wood moved along a little. She then prised it out, revealing the hole.

"That's clever," David remarked, turning the section of floorboard over in his hands. "It even has the heads of nails driven into it to make it look as if it is hammered down. And you say you just knew it was there, and that you had to look for it?"

Sam nodded.

"That's most extraordinary," said David. "And yet, in a curious way, I am not surprised. Bruce was a most remarkable man for knowing things intuitively, and I can understand his daughter inheriting something of the same."

Sam looked shocked. "I never thought of that before!" she said in awed tones.

David stood up again as she put the floorboard back in place. "Do you believe in God?" he asked her as they made their way back through to the lounge.

"That's a funny question!"

"Don't get me wrong. I don't believe in God myself. Well, not really. To be honest, I just don't know. But I'm fascinated that you knew where to look and what to look for. I reckon there's somebody up there on your side, if that doesn't sound too contradictory."

"I believe in looking after myself," said Sam, sounding somewhat brittle for the first time. "I have discovered the hard way that nobody else will do it for me. So my aim in life is to find out what I want to do, and then achieve it."

David nodded. "I was very impressed with your determination to play at Bruce's funeral, especially when I discovered it was unarranged. Wonderfully decisive." Sam looked unhappy. David was on dangerous ground. "Look, I didn't mean to pry. I don't know what came over me. It's none of my business. I'm here to find Cyril. I apologise."

"That's okay. I don't have anyone to talk to, as it happens."

David's heart went out to her. "Well, let's see if we can change that."

The contents of the envelope were as Sam had described to Araminta. David was puzzled.

"This Zidokos Mining and Exploration Company, and the Sidokos Holding Company. I understand you haven't been able to trace them?"

"Not at all."

"Right. I reckon they are important. A hundred thousand strikes me as a lot of shares. I have friends who are lawyers. I'll choose one, and get the low-down on this contract. It's the place to start, I reckon. Now, any diaries or anything?"

There was a diary which Sam had forgotten about, in a drawer. David asked to take it away, which was readily agreed. The address book was Sam's; her husband had made no use of it.

"There's no passport," said Sam.

"That would have been significant in the old days, but not now. ID card?"

"No. He kept it with him always, so that's no surprise."

"Bank details?"

"We have a joint account. I feel a bit sensitive about showing you the statements. There was nothing out of the ordinary; I checked."

Ideally, David would have liked to have the run of the flat, and scoured the bank statements, but he felt he couldn't ask for this. Sam had looked around carefully; there was no doubt about that.

"Car?"

"I've searched it thoroughly, and there's nothing. You're welcome to look if you like."

"So he hasn't taken a car of yours with him, I take it. Have you looked at the log of journeys?"

"Yes, but I find it was erased shortly before Cyril left."

"What do you make of that?"

Sam shifted slightly in her chair. "I have always made a point of trusting my husband, so I never looked in the log before. For all I know it may have been his habit to erase it on a weekly basis. So it may mean something, but it may not."

"Hmm." David was going through his mental check-list. "Any clubs or pubs?"

"We sometimes went for a drink together at the Crown and Feathers, but that was about it. There are no business associations that I know of."

"Right. Sam, you've been most helpful. I will start by searching for the Mining people, and also by ringing the people that wrote the letters, and see where we get. I can't promise anything."

"David, there's something else I want to say. You told me you admired me for playing at the funeral. I don't see it that way. I'm a coward really. The reason it was unscheduled was because I didn't dare ask if I could do it. I knew I had to, and if I asked, someone might refuse, and then where would I be? So I just carried on and did it. But I was dead scared, I can tell you."

"I understand." David did; he felt totally at ease with this girl. It was somewhat unnerving.

"David, you don't know how grateful I am. I feel totally comfortable about you looking for Cyril. The moment I set eyes on you, I knew you were someone I could trust. I'm really thrilled you have entered our lives. You're a gift from God!" She was looking him in the eyes.

This was absurd. "I thought you didn't believe in God?" David chuckled. "Look, I'll do my best, but I advise you not to hope." David stood up and began moving towards the door to leave.

"I won't. Send me bulletins?"

"Of course. Thanks for asking me to do this. I feel privileged."

As they reached the door, Sam gave him a hug, and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks a lot," she said, colouring again. She looked so vulnerable standing there. David felt sorry for her; it must be horrible living in a flat on your own when your husband used to share it with you before. He longed to stay a bit longer.

“I’d better go.” David was trembling again, with a mixture of excitement and fear. He was feeling somewhat sick. Sam was special; there was no other word for it. It was going to be very hard if he located Cyril and got him back for her.

-oOo-

David had been staring out of the window in his flat for half an hour when the phone rang. He shook his head. Really he must take a grip on himself.

It was Sam. “Look, a letter has been left for Cyril downstairs since you were here. Delivered by hand. Shall I read it?”

“Of course. I’ll jot down the details. Just let me fetch a pen.” David found something to write with and put the pad in place. “Right.”

“It’s printed notepaper, from the Grand Hotel in Athabasca, Alaska. Undated. The writing is in biro and says ‘See you here Thursday as arranged. Bitterly cold! Don’t forget your boots; I have crampons’. It’s unsigned. David, whatever does it mean?”

“Well, the writer was outside your block today for one thing, unless it was delivered by a friend. I’ll make enquiries to see if anybody saw the person, but my first reaction is that I need to go to this hotel on Thursday and check it out for myself. Leave it with me. Oh, are there any security cameras that might have picked the person up?”

“No, sorry. David you’re wonderful.”

“Don’t say that.” David would rather have said the opposite; do say it, and keep saying it. It thrills my heart! But instead he went on, “Thankfully I have some boots. I’ll take all my winter woollies.”

It was only after the call had ended that David remembered the entry in the diary. He had been going to tell Sam. Oh well, it did not seem important. It was for Friday, the day after the hotel rendezvous, and just said MAG in capital letters. The entry must have been made at least a month earlier, before Cyril vanished. It must mean something, but it was a puzzle. Unless perhaps something Cyril had written might appear in a magazine to be published that day?

-oOo-

A down side to the new car journeys, David reckoned, was that they were boring, especially on long distance trips. He could remember the days of his youth, when there were still airports, with all their hustle and bustle, and the noise and sense of adventure and excitement. Now, you simply climbed into your own vehicle, tapped in your destination, and whether the journey was five minutes or five hours, it was always the same; straight up, along, and straight down.

This was a long trip, and he had hardly begun. Still, at least David could go carefully through all the documents again. He had been putting in overtime at work, in order to be able to take off for a few days at short notice. Thankfully his employers were generous and understanding. He had even been able to negotiate taking off as much time as he needed over the next six months, unpaid of course, provided he managed his current assignments, kept in touch, and made himself available for international visits. David had the feeling that he might be clocking up the miles in this search. It was good that money was not an issue with Sam; there seemed to be limitless funds available..

The hand-written letter had yielded no further clues. However, the diary had contained a loose sheet of paper torn from a pad. It had a string of numbers and letters. David wondered whether it might be a code for a combination lock, or something of that kind. A proper sleuth would probably have memorised it, but David didn’t trust himself. Instead he had done the next best thing. Part of the lining of his jacket had become un-sewn and could be pulled out of the pocket, turned inside out, so David had copied the code carefully onto it in biro and pushed it back inside. He did not reckon anyone would think to look there. Then he destroyed the original. It felt a very bold thing to do.

There had been no indication as to what MAG might mean. Also, the mining companies were elusive. None of his workmates had heard of them. They promised to keep their eyes and ears open. David's hunch was that the thing had been a scam, and Cyril had lost a lot of money through it, and his disappearance was linked to that.

Perhaps he had taken his own life. However, this did not seem very likely; there did not seem to be money worries. In addition, surely he would have let Sam know in some way if he was going to kill himself?

Maybe he had been silenced. It was not a comforting thought. There could be danger. If David nosed about in a way that seemed threatening, then desperate men might come for him.

Would that matter, something asked deep inside himself?

David was horrified. Where on earth had that come from? What was he, depressed or something? Of course it would matter if he was bumped off.

To whom? The inner voice persisted. David was dismayed. He found he had no answer to this. Who really cared whether he lived or died? Perhaps he should simply slow the car down and jump out without turning on his flying suit. No, it was out of the question. Even if you could open the door when aloft, the safety devices that prevented objects falling from a car would kick in. Then within minutes, the social services would appear, and take him off to a mental hospital. You don't want to go in there, a friend had once advised him. If you're not already nuts when you go in, you soon will be. David had had a distrust of mental hospitals ever since, even though part of him was sure that his friend's view was probably an over-reaction.

Oh dear. Life was tricky at present. Getting involved with Chloe had been fun, but now everything had got rather heavy. There could be serious pain ahead. Things were definitely not going well. He was clearly very upset somewhere deep down inside, in a region of himself that did not often come to the surface. Whales, he thought to himself; they move about in the mysterious depths, and you hardly know they are there, but at any moment they are liable to surface and send up a spout of water. It was not a happy metaphor; David was hardly having a whale of a time at present. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

After what seemed an age, the car began to slow down, and was soon in vertical descent. The weather isn't very good, David thought to himself. He had been immersed in cloud for a while now, which meant it was thick at every level, since the car was set to search out the sunniest altitude where possible. Sure enough, it was snowing. David reached for his woollies. When the door was opened, the comfortable temperature inside the car would plummet.

He pulled on over-trousers and a sweater and an anorak. The car touched down before he was ready for it. He looked out. Thick snow was falling. That must be the hotel that he could dimly see through the window.

He climbed out into the bitter cold. The snow was falling fast, being blown into his face by the swirling wind. He screwed up his eyes. He had seriously underestimated the conditions. He would need to buy some thermal underwear.

The hotel was dimly visible through the intense gloom. David checked the time; it was three in the afternoon. Surely it should not be this dark already? He pressed the remote control, and the car slid silently up to join the multi stack as the door sealed.

David scrunched through the thick snow. He had always enjoyed snow as a child. The thing to do was to try to recapture that sense of fun, and not feel irritated by it. All the same, there was no feeling of hospitality.

But what was this? The hotel was boarded up. It was clearly not in use, and judging from the state of things, it had been closed for months. There was a notice. David went up close and peered at it. 'All enquiries should be addressed to Faulkner and Co,' it read, followed by a phone number. That was not much help. What was he to do now?

There seemed little point in hanging about and risk freezing to death. Then David had an inspiration. He walked back, summoning the car as he did so. It was soon at his feet. He climbed in, and then pressed the park button again. As he sailed up above the roof of the derelict building, he pressed Hide. The near invisibility that was the maximum allowed by law should be sufficient for

his purposes; nobody was going to notice him in this snowstorm. Then he could observe at his leisure. If anybody came to the rendezvous, he should see them before they saw him. Thank goodness for the modern cameras with all their gadgetry. There were the usual six on the car, just under the body work. Observing despite the poor light should be a doddle.

David had only been at it for a few minutes when the man's voice spoke to him, chilling his heart. It seemed to come from just behind his head.

"I'm taking control of the car. Make no attempt to resist. It is your only course of safety."

The car whooshed upwards at an alarming rate, with the terrified David clutching at the two arm rests, his eyeballs fixed and staring straight ahead but seeing nothing.

-oOo-

"Glow, are you sure you're wise?"

"Yes. My mind's made up."

The twins were getting into bed. They still shared a bedroom. They had discussed having separate rooms, but as Chloe pointed out, they would probably live in different places in a few years time, and so why not make the most of the chance to share together while they still had it? Hannah had happily agreed. The two sisters were very fond of each other, and had that deep mutual understanding that twins often experience.

"But after what he said, there's no chance it will come to anything. Forget about David! Someone else will soon come along."

"Hen, you didn't see the inside of his flat. I didn't just see the mess he's in with nobody to care for him; I saw something inside him that I'd never seen before. He looks very well put together, but he's lonely underneath. He feels dreadful about Dad dying from something he said. My heart really goes out to him. I can't just wash my hands of him, just like that. Anyway, I've heard what you said, so I'm going to send him a so-called text on this old phone. Great Granddad gave me the two of them years ago, and they still work. David and I used to send each other messages, which was great, because with the outdated technology, there was no way anybody else could eavesdrop. So I'm sending him one last one. He will only get it if he switches his phone on, and he will only do that if he is thinking of me, so if I don't get a reply, than I know it's the end. Get it?"

"What is that thing?" Hannah was curious. It was like nothing she had ever seen. It was so old for one thing!

Chloe demonstrated the phone. "You switch on here, like this. Oh yes, it has a battery."

"A what?"

"A battery. They had them in the olden days. It attaches on the back here. It needs to be charged up from the wall before you can use it."

"You what?!" Hannah's peal of laughter was infectious, and Chloe couldn't help herself. She broke out into fits of giggles. There was a furious pounding on the wall from Ben's room next door; he was trying to sleep.

Chloe had to stuff a pair of socks in her mouth to stop herself from laughing. Hannah was crying she was laughing so much. The idea of needing to power a phone from the wall before it would work was the best joke she had heard in ages.

Somehow the girls managed to calm down, but when Hannah realised that Chloe was going to type in a message to the phone, or worse still, would have to enter the words letter by letter, she exploded in laughter again. "I don't believe it!" she sobbed. Ben hammered the wall with his fists, which was not very effective, as it was a solid one, so only a muffled thumping came through. However, the girls knew what it meant. They managed to sober up.

Chloe was determined to succeed. She had done enough of these messages to know where the letters lay.

"It has 'predictive text'" she explained to her sister, "so it tends to understand what word you mean. It was good when it came out."

“What’s that nonsense there?” asked Hannah, pointing at the little screen. “‘Nip’ is only spelt with one P. Anyway, it’s gibberish.”

Chloe went back to the word and selected the alternative. ‘Miss’ was not a word to get wrong.

“Funny. It normally gets the common words right,” she said. “Nipp must have been added to its brain by someone. There. Now I press this... and this... and now it’s on its way.”

The little icon appeared, and then the screen went empty.

“That’s the best laugh I’ve had since Dad died,” Hannah said. “I must get one of those. I wonder if there are any more around.”

“It’s good to laugh again. It’s been so gloomy here since Dad went. Mum’s in a state. I’ve never seen her so low. And yet, we’ve all been expecting it for years.”

“She’ll get over it, but it will take a long time. You know, Glow, I miss him from the old days most, when we were little...”

-oOo-

While the girls chattered on, David was doing his utmost to get a grip. He was forcing himself to think, by talking to himself in his mind. Carrying on a mental conversation was a technique he often used. Nobody would have known from his face that anything was happening.

“Now. If they wanted to kill me, then why kidnap me? That means they want something from me. That puts me in a strong position. I wanted to find out who had taken Cyril, and this way I’m going straight to the captors. So cheer up. Things could hardly be better.” This was voice positive.

“But it’s not being in control of the car. I don’t know where I’m going. Maybe I’ll disappear for weeks too.” Verbalise the bad news as well; it was the best way.

“Now, to get control over the fear, think. How did they take over the car?”

There was a lull in the conversation. Then voice positive began again.

“They must have slipped something into the car when I opened the door outside the hotel. Something small and mobile, probably, with a loudspeaker. I wish I could see it, but I reckon I’m better not to look round. Yes, that’s it. It was able to read the signal when I pressed the remote, and gain access to the car’s command structure. I’ve heard of such things. Never thought I would see one. So. There’s no need to be frightened.”

“But...” Voice negative was lost for words. That was a good sign.

“Okay.” Voice positive was on a roll. “Need to call for help.”

Suddenly David knew what to do. He had Chloe’s old phone in his pocket. Send her a message! The only question was, could he work the buttons with his hand in his pocket, without looking at it? It was worth a try.

Very gently, David forced himself to relax. The car had reached cruising height and was now accelerating towards the north, it seemed, although he had got confused as to his sense of direction, so it was hard to be certain. The cloud was dense in the extreme. He slipped his right hand into his pocket. There was no response from behind. He pressed the on off switch. Now, he would need to put in the password. That was easy; he had done it many times before. Then wait a few seconds for the welcome screen to give way to the menu.

Hello, what was this? The instrument was vibrating in his hand. That could only mean one thing; Chloe had sent him a message. That made things so much easier. Well done girl!

It was out of the question to take the phone out of his pocket and read the message. But if he pressed the right button, then he could reply. So could he recall where the letters lay?

As far as he could remember, every number from 2 to 8 had three letters with it. However, the alphabet had twenty-six letters, so that meant two of the numbers must have four letters, but which two was it? The thing to do was to keep the message simple, and trust to his feelings if he was not sure.

He began carefully. Writing ‘help’ was easy; 4,3,5,6. ‘Helm’ appeared on the screen, unknown to David. ‘Car’ was 2,2,7 - he could remember that one. Stolen would be difficult. No, wait a moment.

2,6,3 for 'and', then 6,3 for 'me' should go first. Now, 7 - 's', 8 - 't', 6 - 'o', 5 - 'l', the so-called predictive text would make sure that the word would read 'stolen'.

All this time, David had been feeling more and more relaxed. In fact he felt totally carefree. The contrast with the terror of a few minutes before was remarkable. He had strong powers of resilience. He should not get so down about life. He had a great future ahead of him. It was time to cheer up. David gave a deep sigh and closed his eyes. He felt so happy.

The people who designed the slow-acting nerve gas were clever. The ingredient which lulled the victim into a false sense of security was a master-stroke. They seldom realised there was anything afoot.

David was out cold before he could sense what was going on. When the masters were sure he was well and truly out, the car turned in a new direction. Four hours later, it slowed, and then sank like a stone.

Although the battery on the phone was good for several hours, it wore out in the end. Its demise was probably hastened by the cold, as it had slipped out of David's fingers when he went under, and the car was barely warm. It would never be charged up again. The half finished message died too; it was never sent.

-oOo-

Even at night, the doorway was all too obvious when you got close. Wind had disturbed the sand and piled some up against the lower half of the door, as Ben had reckoned it would, but all the same the broken top half of the door stood out like a sore thumb to anyone looking from the right direction. But would they? The area was undulating, and you would have to be within a few hundred yards on ground level to see it, and the only reason there could possibly be for being at such a place in the Sahara desert was that you were looking for an entrance you already knew about. Unless perhaps you wanted a clear look at the stars, which were fabulously bright away from the lights of western so-called civilisation. Then you might miss the door anyway.

"We'll just have to hope for the best," Ben said to Mark. "Keep your eyes open for any signs of intruders since our last visit."

They shifted the sand with their bare hands, and soon had the door ajar. They slipped inside and switched on their headlamps. No relying on the wall switch today! The torches were modern versions of miners' lamps, attached to their helmets, only these ones were intelligent; when you looked to the right or left, the beam of light followed your gaze. It was amazing how a movement as tiny as that of an eyeball could be sensed by machine. Marvellous, really, Ben thought.

Mark took all this technology for granted. He strode ahead into the darkness, gripping his holdall tightly.

The cold nip of the night air outside was soon replaced by a bland warmth. "I reckon the temperature never varies down here," Ben remarked. Mark made no reply. Really he was so taciturn! He might as well have already had the implant done if one judged purely from his level of communication. It was scheduled for the following Monday. A school day had been chosen so that his mother would never discover. The school would accept a forged sick note next day without question; the boys had done it before. Ben was still uncertain whether to tell his mother what Mark was up to in advance so that it could be stopped or at least reconsidered, but he had let no hint of what was in his mind escape. This outing was too important. The thing was to get it completed first, and then worry about the implant afterwards.

Their feet made hardly any sound on the sandy floor. Ben found the silence oppressive. Mark appeared unconcerned.

As they reached the first ladder, Mark paused and spoke. "Nobody's been in," he said. "I left those squiggles on the third and fourth steps down and they are undisturbed. See?"

On both steps there was the faintest swirl in the sand just where you would place your feet.

"Right," Ben replied. Mark might be convinced, but he was not so sure.

They hurried forward. Each new stairwell led them deeper into the heart of the earth. Building this tunnel must have taken a lot of hard work, drilling through the solid rock, Ben reckoned. The sand had all but died away now; they were walking on dust. It was a desolate place.

Eventually they came to the door. It looked impossibly solid.

“I still think we should have told David we had discovered the door,” Ben urged.

Mark ignored him. He slipped the holdall off his shoulders and set to work. Had the boys known it, their equipment was not unlike the ECG heart monitor that their father had been wired up to more than once. Leads with sensors were placed on the door and held in place by suction pads. Only two were actually by the combination lock itself, on either side of it. The rest were spread around. Mark even attached three to the doorway, one on the lintel and one on each upright. Then he set the machine itself on the floor, connected the leads and put it on standby. Before long he was ready.

“Okay. We need to stand well back and keep completely still. I reckon it will take three or four minutes.”

They retreated some twenty paces until the previous bend. “That should be far enough,” said Mark. Without more ado, he pressed the button on the remote.

The red light on the small device turned green for a moment, but then turned immediately back to red. Mark swore under his breath, and advanced on the machine. Ben was secretly rather shocked. His father would have hated it. Not for the first time, he wondered what they were letting themselves in for. After checking the connections between the leads and the machine, Mark rejoined him. This time it worked. The light stayed green, and a number of tiny white lights which would have been invisible by daylight turned on and off with great rapidity. There was the gentlest humming sound.

The boys stood breathless. After about two minutes, there was a series of clicks from the door, which then opened with a squeak.

“Those hinges need oiling!” said Mark in a cheerful voice as they strode forward. He was clearly delighted. It was probably more to do with the success of his machine than with getting the door open, Ben reckoned.

“So what has it done?” Ben asked in a subdued tone. He still felt uneasy, and had been listening for footfalls ever since they had come underground.

“It checks a billion combinations every few seconds. I thought this door would have been made before parallel computers, and I was right. Do you know, I read once that in Granddad’s day, the so-called strong encryption they used then to protect coded messages was only breakable if you had all the computers in the world working on it for longer than the known age of the universe. Who would have thought that within a few years, one of my toys could have done it? So any combination lock over ten years old is breakable if you have the right tools.”

“But you didn’t even have to rotate the dials,” Ben said.

Mark said nothing. He was looking very pleased with himself.

The boys advanced to the door. “We don’t want to get ourselves locked in,” Ben remarked, as Mark removed the leads and packed everything away in his holdall. He was surprised to find himself in the worrying role. Normally he was totally carefree. It said something about Mark, he reflected to himself. Mark was fabulously creative, and increasingly fascinating to have around as he grew older, but his social skills were just about nil. Never mind. He and Ben understood each other well enough without the need for many words.

They pulled the door wide open. The floor was uneven, and there was soon resistance to the bottom of the door.

“Ideal,” said Mark, giving it an extra shove. The base of the door was now thoroughly jammed open. Indeed, Ben wondered whether they would ever manage to shut it again.

“Look, there’s a simple knob to turn to get out from inside anyway,” Mark observed.

The boys looked forward. It was more of the same passage.

“Remind me how parallel computers work?” asked Ben, as they set off again.

“Basically, the traditional computer does one operation at a time, so the tasks are spread along a straight line which you work your way through. That’s like water flowing along a stream. Then

came the machines which could work in two dimensions at once. That's like a wave starting at one corner of a swimming pool and covering the whole surface. Then came the multi-dimension machines which do the same in many dimensions at once; we're up to 512 dimensions by now. A tsunami flowing through the pool at every depth is just three dimensions. You can't visualise more; it's too complex."

"Yes. I know all that. But how do they connect these things together?"

"That's the tricky part, but basically, they use the old hard drives turned on their side, as it were, i.e. with infinite connections rather than the single input and output they used to have. Think of a modern computer as 512 hard drives stacked sideways with infinite pathways between them."

They turned the next corner, only to see another door ahead of them.

"Uh oh," said Mark, with some reason. This one was far bigger and appeared stronger. The huge lock on it was like nothing they had ever seen.

Ben was about to say something, but he never had the chance. Instead, his worst fear was realised. From behind them came a terrific bang, of metal on metal. The boys were terrified. Ben clutched at his stomach; he felt as if he had just swallowed an enormous block of ice and that it was chilling his insides to absolute zero. He found he could hardly breathe.

Mark was first to recover. He raced back towards the noise. For ever afterwards, Ben thought his was the bravest action he had ever seen.

As he rounded the corner, Ben could see what had happened. The door they had opened had slammed shut. As they stood staring at it, Ben was horrified to hear slithering noises coming from inside the lintels, followed by a faint clunk. Then silence fell.

"It's bolted itself tightly shut," observed Mark. He was clearly very frightened, Ben could tell; it was a point of principle with Mark never to betray weakness, but Ben could hear the tremor in his voice. If Mark was worried, then he had better be worried too.

"But we jammed it open!" Ben whispered urgently. "There's no way it could have shut on its own!"

This was terrifying. The boys stood breathless, waiting for a voice from outside, but none came. After a bit they breathed more easily.

"I don't think there is anybody there," Mark observed. "I think we would have heard their feet on the surface. All the sand had disappeared, remember."

"I'm not sure which is worse," Ben said. He was shaking. "How are we going to get out?"

Mark tried the little knob, but he already feared the worst. Sure enough, although it clicked as it rotated, it never engaged with the lock in any way.

"Can you work on the combination lock from this side?" Ben asked anxiously.

"I doubt it, but it's worth a try if we run out of options."

"Not yet," said Ben, who was gradually becoming more certain that there was nobody outside, either to harass them or to rescue them. "Let's look at the other door."

They went back along the passage and approached the heavy door.

"It's so solid!" Ben exclaimed.

Then the boys received a second shock. A man's voice spoke, "Thirty minutes of air remaining."

Both boys swung towards the source of the sound. There was a loudspeaker on the wall, and next to it a large red button marked Help.

Instantly hope surged in Mark. "It's a test!" he said.

Ben felt a fresh qualm of fear. "Didn't you hear what it said?" he urged. "Surely we should press for help. Although there may be nobody there."

"No!" urged Mark. "That's the last thing to do. If we do that we fail the test at the first hurdle, and forfeit all respect. Now, get looking."

Mark was already studying the door and its surrounds. Ben went back to the other door. It appeared hopelessly locked shut. Was there perhaps a place to press on the wall, or something, to open it? The wall was uneven. He decided to try anything and everything. After less than a minute's feverish pressing, it seemed hopeless. Then he remembered his phone.

"I'm ringing Mum," he called, although as soon as he spoke he knew it was hopeless. Nobody would be able to get to them within half an hour. For one thing, Mark's equipment was on this side of the door. They were beyond help.

It took precious seconds for Ben to discover that there was no signal. Of course not. They were deep below ground! They couldn't even communicate with the car. The car!

Ben hurried back to Mark, who was on his hands and knees at the foot of the strong door studying the floor intently.

"Maybe there will be enough air getting in here from somewhere, and then they will do a search on the car and find us!" Ben gasped.

Mark looked up at him with dismay written all across his face. "No chance. I disabled the flight monitor before we left home so that our trip would remain secret. Nobody will find the car. Anyway I moved it away from the door to confuse anyone trying to follow."

The full gravity of their situation finally hit Ben with the force of a sledgehammer. This really was it. The Help button was virtually certain to prove useless. Barring a miracle, they were going to die a horrible death from lack of oxygen in a few minutes' time. He sank to the floor in a state of complete shock, with unseeing eyes.

-oOo-

Araminta felt dreadful as she and the three girls made their way quietly into the church next morning.

"Good morning." The welcoming lady shaking hands was a new one that she did not recognise. "How are you today?"

"Pretty awful, thanks," Araminta replied breathlessly.

"Now, you will need this picture of a candle for the intercessions," came the reply, as the usual bundle of literature was thrust into her hands. "It will all be explained later."

Araminta could hardly believe it. The woman had asked how she was, she had given an honest answer rather than simply saying "fine thanks," and been completely ignored. It was basic that if you were going to have somebody on the door, they at least needed to have some ability to relate to the people that came in off the street!

For some strange reason, Araminta did not feel upset. In fact, she laughed out loud. It was so ridiculous! It could have come straight out of a comedy half hour on TV. Completely absurd. Then she caught herself thinking, all the same, it's had the curious effect of lifting my spirits. How daft is that?

Ah, there was Gnilla. She hurried over.

"Look, things are pretty desperate. Can we talk afterwards?"

"Talk now if you like. We can skip the opening hymn."

It was a welcome offer. "I'll join you later," Araminta whispered to the girls, who went on into the auditorium. She and Gnilla found a quiet spot out of the way and sat at a small table with two upright chairs.

"How are you?" asked Araminta, in full listening mode, determined not to repeat the welcoming lady's mistake.

"Life is tough, but you go first. I reckon your need is greater than mine!"

"Right. Well, there's still no word from David, which feels increasingly strange, but on top of that the boys have gone off somewhere in the car leaving no word and are not answering their phones. Really it feels too much."

"Car phone any good?"

"Well, that's the most worrying thing. I'm getting an error message - 'no such number.' Gnilla, I'm really scared. Do you think they could have crashed somewhere?"

This was very concerning. Gnilla hesitated. "Well, I would feel very worried if it was me. Okay sometimes there is no reply from a car, but the no such number message has an ominous ring to it. I've never heard of that one before. Can the car be traced?"

"If only Celia was still around, I would get on to her. She left the force, if you remember."

Gnilla was excited. "Well yes, she did, but the force goes on, and I reckon if you still have that number and dial it, you might well get through to somebody. There's nothing to lose."

"I see. I hadn't thought of that. I did think of Celia, but she's probably the mother of three by now. You remember, she was getting married."

"Well, give it a go."

"I will, as soon as we get home. Now, what's going on with you?"

"It's Bill. I think I'm losing him. He's been funny ever since Bruce died. He's been even more moody than usual, and that's saying something. I can't seem to get anything out of him. He seems to have lost interest in me altogether; that's the hardest part. I really don't think he's having an affair, but I guess this is how it would feel if he were. It's horrible."

"Oh Gnilla!" Araminta felt for her friend. "It was horrible for me when our relationship started to disintegrate, following the accident. I found there was nothing I could do to get it back. It was a terrible feeling."

"I used to feel so sorry for you, and now it's happening to me. If only he would talk to me!"

"I wonder if he's feeling guilty over Bruce."

"Tell me more."

"Well, he and Bruce have been drifting apart for years, but it seemed to get worse when Bruce was laid low. I don't think Bill copes well with problems, although of course, you know him better than I do. I just feel that when there's a difficulty, his instinct is to withdraw. Now he feels there's a difficulty with you, he's withdrawing. The more you try to sort it, the more he withdraws. Something like that."

"Yes. That just about sums it up. I reckon you're right. I have found that trying to sort it makes things harder not easier."

"I bet he feels he has let Bruce down in his time of need. He wasn't happy doing the talk at the funeral. I wished I had never asked him, not because he did it badly, but because I could see he was unhappy in the role."

"Look, you should go and ring that number now. If you hurry you'll be back in time for coffee. I'll explain to the girls."

Araminta was hesitant. "I feel I'm abandoning them rather."

"Go on. Don't worry. I'll tell them now while you go."

"Okay. Perhaps it's the right thing."

Araminta set off for home at a brisk pace. It was not that far. However, it seemed a bit much that her two truant boys should be ruining the Sunday morning with the girls. It was not that easy getting Louise to attend church as it was. She was probably only coming because she did not want to make a scene so soon after her Dad's death. The situation did not have a good feel to it. Although, come to think of it, Gnilla's Sylvia had not been near the church for years. She was giving her parents a really tough time. She was on the verge of dropping out of school. Araminta hoped it would not lead to drugs. She simply tried to show kindness whenever she met Sylvia, which was not that often these days. Silv as she called herself was almost always out with her friends. Araminta had encountered the friends once, which was quite enough. Just the thought of the one in the grey suede made her shudder.

Thank goodness that David was out of the way at any rate. At least that removed one complication. Chloe seemed to have got over him pretty well, on the whole, but her mother had a shrewd sense that if he turned up again, then she might have a relapse. Life without Bruce was different and brought its own strains, but it was not any easier despite not having an invalid to care for.

Araminta hurried along and was soon opening their front door. It would have been nice to have appreciated the fine sunny day, but she was only dimly aware of it. Just enough to feel somewhat resentful that there was no space in her life to enjoy things at present. Where were those dratted boys? She was worried about them, and somewhat scared if she dared admit it.

It only took three minutes to find the number, largely because with Bruce in the state he was, the filing cabinet had hardly been touched in recent years, so documents relating to twelve years before had not been moved.

She dialled through. After three rings there was a reply.

“Hello?” A female voice.

“Is that Celia?”

There was silence, and then the line went dead. This was most disconcerting. Araminta had the feeling that although no words had been spoken, the person at the far end of the phone had been troubled at being addressed as Celia. Oh yes; her real name was something different, wasn't it? They had met at Jim Pond's trial and shared a meal. Araminta was just deciding to ring through again and ask for Jo when the phone rang. She answered it.

“Mrs. Winter?” It was a different lady's voice.

“Yes?”

“You're through to Missing Persons. How can I help you?”

This was remarkable. Talk about prompt.

“My two boys went off in our car, and have not returned. What's more, the car's phone gives an error message ‘no such number’ when I dial it. I feel scared by that.”

“We get this all the time, but I'll look into it. Presumably the car left from your property?”

“Correct.”

“That should be sufficient to trace it. I'll get back to you. Try not to worry.”

“Thank you. I'll try.”

The line went dead. Well, things had been set in motion. There was not much more she could do other than pray. Was it worth it, she asked herself. Prayer had felt pretty ineffective recently, if she was honest. Perhaps Louise was right about God not being interested in us.

Normally, Araminta would have been shocked at herself for thinking this way, but to her dismay, she did not feel bad about it at all. “Oh dear,” she murmured. “I seem to be losing it.” God had always been a comforting thought before, but not at present.

The truth was, she was very unhappy, and there was not much to be done about it. Life can be very painful at times.

Araminta thrust down these thoughts. It was no good abandoning the girls. If she hurried, she might be back at church in time for the sermon.

-oOo-

“We're going to die!” Ben gasped. “For goodness sake, press the help button!”

“Stop it!” Mark was most insistent. “Ben, trust me I know what I'm doing. Just be patient.”

“But we've been searching the ground and the walls and found nothing. You've made no attempt to open either door.”

“I know. Try to relax. It won't be long now. The air quality is definitely worse.”

Ben was feeling sick, but despite himself, he somehow knew that Mark was right. It seemed madness, but if they pressed the help button, they would lose everything. Still...

“Mark, I'm sorry I dragged you into this mess. Please...”

“Ben, stop it. I wouldn't have missed it. I need to sit down.”

The boys both collapsed onto the hard floor. It was definitely harder to breathe. The air felt stale and horrible. Ben began to gasp, and came over all black. Just as he felt there was no air left to breathe and he was losing consciousness, he heard a loud click of a powerful lock opening. Then breathing became easier. He became conscious of a slight breeze. After a moment he opened his eyes.

Mark was sitting next to him, his eyes gleaming. “I knew it!”

“How?” asked Ben.

“This place is hi-tech, right? The temptation when faced with advanced equipment is to focus on the machines, the computerised locks and all that, but to forget about the programmer. You have to

remember that you are dealing with a human being behind the machines. Hi-tech people don't do anything so crude as take somebody's life, especially not by suffocation. They have no need to! In addition, Dad told us about Jim Pond, the inventor behind all this stuff, and if one thing was clear from his stories, it was that the man was a gentleman. There was no way he would rig up a booby trap that could prove fatal for someone. That meant that the area between the two doors was a test, as I said. There was no way of overcoming either door, which is what I was searching for, so you just had to sit tight and prove your courage by not hitting the panic button. Okay?"

"Well, I think it was a bit risky."

"Not at all. Ben, our job is to read the mind of the man. I'm all but certain that..."

He got no further. A rich male voice came through from beyond the door. "Would you mind coming through? I'm not waiting about much longer."

The ringing tone was anything but threatening, even if it was a surprise.

"Come on," said Mark, who seemed unfazed, "let's meet the ghost of Christmas Past." Both boys were familiar with Dickens' A Christmas Carol.

Ben felt it was time to show some leadership, so he went first. I hope our friend doesn't turn out to be the ghost of Christmas Future, he thought grimly, remembering Scrooge's grave. The central section of the huge door was standing open. It was round, and was the thickest door Ben had ever seen, the kind of thing that would guard a bank vault. Somewhat timidly, he bent down and stepped over the sill.

The passage continued ahead, but there was a door on their right standing open. Both boys felt drawn to go through it.

It was hard to get used to the light. There seemed to be a reflective surface on the walls. No; they were just white tiles, but with no variation. The ceiling was high, with bright lights sunk into it shining strongly downwards. The effect was almost blinding after the gloom of their lamps.

Ben soon grasped that they were in a washroom. There was no sign of the person who had spoken.

Mark was close behind him. "I'm ravenous," he said, handing Ben a chocolate bar. "Time for the emergency rations."

Ben had forgotten that they had brought some food with them. He found he was very hungry.

"Where's our friend?" he asked Mark in a whisper.

For answer, the door of one of the cubicles opened, and out walked a robot, all steel tubes, but in a human shape, with a metallic face with very realistic eyes. The mouth flashed a welcoming smile. At the sight of the alien robot, Ben's hunger deserted him, but he kept on with the eating despite it. They might not get another chance in a hurry. Besides, he needed to learn to master his fears. The thing was only a machine made from scrap metal even if it appeared intelligent.

Mark was magnificent. "Hello, I'm Mark and this is Ben. How do you do?"

"Pleased to meet you," said the robot. "Do you need a wash?" He indicated the WCs and wash basins.

This was thoughtful. "Thanks," said the boys. "We'll just finish our food first."

"Come through there when you're done," came the reply, and the robot vanished through a second door at the far end, which shut somewhat ominously. A moment later, the door behind them also closed.

Mark did not need to say anything. This was clearly another test. He and Ben looked at each other as they munched their way through the sticky bar.

"Anything to drink?" Ben asked. Mark handed him a drink in a carton. "Not much danger of germs in here," he added. It seemed strange to be eating in what felt like a public loo, even if it was spotlessly clean.

There was nowhere to put rubbish, and the boys had been brought up with a loathing of litter, so Mark put the wrappers and cartons in his backpack. There were two cubicles, so they each took one. Ben was soon finished. He pressed the handle on the cistern, but to his dismay, it came away in his hand, trailing a steel cable behind it. However, the cistern flushed correctly and the pan emptied.

"My handle's come off," he began. "There's a cable..."

Once again, he got no further. Mark had just pressed his handle as well, and an exclamation showed that it too had come off.

The rush of water in the cisterns seemed very powerful. Then to Ben's alarm, the WC bowl began to fill up from below. He stepped back with an exclamation as it began to overflow. He exited from the cubicle, only to bump into Mark, whose own WC was now flooding over the side of the bowl. Then to their horror, sprinklers overhead started spraying out water in powerful jets. More sprinklers set in the walls that the boys had not noticed also began to spew out water.

"So much for having a wash!" Mark called out.

There was no escaping the deluge of water. It was already up to their ankles. More water was pouring in every second. Then to Ben's alarm, the water which had been flowing in from some large grills set in the floor increased markedly. The depth of water was growing quickly.

The boys looked around. There was nothing to help them. "Looks like a swim. Well just have to tread water as the level rises," Mark called.

Ben looked up, and to his dismay noticed a large vent in the ceiling, covered by a strong grill. Any hope that air for breathing would be preserved if the room filled right up was dashed.

"Look," he pointed.

Mark grasped the situation instantly. They were caught like rats in a trap. But what could they do? There was nothing to investigate, there were only the wall tiles everywhere.

"There must be something we need to do!" shouted Ben above the noise of the rushing water. But what? Neither boy could think of anything.

"Maybe we need to escape through that grill," Ben suggested. This seemed most unlikely; the grill looked very secure. Attempting to fly in here would not be a good idea; the room was too cramped. You could permanently damage a suit if you switched it on in too confined a space.

It was horrible waiting while the water level rose. It was soon up to their chest. After a few moments, Ben kicked off. "I'm afloat already."

At that moment, there was a grim development. The water, which had been clear up to now, suddenly began flowing red. Even the water cascading down from above was now a dark crimson.

"It's horrible! It seems to be blood!" Mark called out. Ben was appalled. The smell was disgusting. A dead fish could be seen floating on the water. No, several of them. It was revolting.

The boys were now well out of their depth. There were only a few feet between them and the ceiling. The grill was heavy duty and looked immovable.

"We're going to drown!" yelled Ben above the noise of the water.

Mark was wrestling in his mind. "What does all this mean? What's the answer?" he called out.

Ben couldn't get it at all. His instinct for survival filled his mind.

Mark had been right about the last test, but not this one, it seemed. They had failed to respond as they should, and death was staring them in the face. However, a small part of Ben's mind held a different thought. There were only seconds left in which to speak; he would never get another chance.

"Mark, I love you!" he called out, as his head hit the ceiling for the first time. He really did love his brother, but he had never told him. It wasn't a thing you said, somehow, in normal life, but this was far from normal.

The effect was instant. The scarlet rain stopped, the boiling bubbling movement in the water ceased, and the water level began to subside. With astonishing rapidity, the water sank away, and the boys were soon deposited on the floor. In a few seconds, with a final swirl and a gurgle, the remaining water drained away into the grills. Mark was about to say something, but his voice was drowned by a hot powerful wind, driven by an unseen motor. After thirty seconds, this cut out. The room had been thoroughly dried by it, but the boys were still soaked. The red stuff had dyed their clothes, and they stank. Perhaps it had been real blood.

The exit door opened. "Come through!" came the robot's voice.

"Well, that was a lovely dip," said Mark cheerfully as they walked on through. "So refreshing!"

This was the bedroom, it appeared, with a splendid four-poster, an old fashioned fireplace laid with sticks and logs, a wardrobe and little else.

The robot appeared not to have heard. "Put on those," he ordered, pointing at two white overalls laid out on the bed. There were towels and sponges, with which they got off the worst of the red stain. To the boys' surprise, the suits were a good fit. They were heavy duty material in one piece that you stepped into before zipping up the front. The bottoms of the leggings fitted round your feet like shoes. The exactness of the fit was somewhat unnerving. The outfit was completed by heavy duty gloves in the same material.

"What did all that in the wash room mean?" Ben asked Mark under his breath.

"Beats me. Your remark was timely!"

Was that a smile on Mark's face? Ben found it hard to be sure.

"I do love you, bro," he said, feeling very self-conscious. "I thought we were going to drown, and so I wanted to say it while I still could."

"Waal, you just keep speaking out, pardner; that's what you're good at." Yes, Mark was touched, Ben could tell. The American accent was to cover his embarrassment, no doubt, but he couldn't disguise his pleasure at what Ben had said to him. Mum was right; it was good to share your feelings with people.

"My words seemed to deal with the water," Ben began, but he was interrupted.

"Mask," ordered the robot sternly. There were two helmets with plastic visors and a breathing supply which fitted over their heads. They put them on. Ben felt uncomfortable, not at wearing the protective clothing, even though it meant another test was coming, but because they could no longer talk, and they needed to understand what was going on. There was a deeper meaning here than merely undergoing a series of endurance tests; Ben was sure of it.

Suddenly, the fire erupted into flames. The robot gave an exclamation and went towards it. From his reaction, it appeared to be unexpected. Then, with a terrible scream, he ignited, and before the boys could do anything he burnt quickly with a furious white flame. He reached out pathetically towards the boys, who could only stand and stare. Very soon there was nothing of him left.

Meanwhile, the fire was growing hotter and hotter. The temperature of the room was rising mercilessly. The bedding ignited spontaneously. Smoke began to billow around.

Mark bent over, to avoid the smoke, and indicated to Ben to do the same. But Ben had a different idea. The fire was glowing white hot like a furnace, but despite that, he rushed towards it, turned round and sat into it.

Mark was appalled. It seemed madness. However, the reverse was the case. The fire immediately began to subside. Ben could be seen sitting on top of something. He was beckoning Mark vigorously.

Mark got the idea. The fire was the only exit from the room. He searched all round while Ben stayed put. The clever boy was sitting on top of the pipes that had been pouring gas into the room, cutting off the supply with his own body. The fires in the bedroom furnishings were gradually going out for lack of fuel. How it was that Ben had not been horribly burned Mark could not tell.

He peered up. It seemed clear that they had to climb up a few feet of what seemed to be the start of a chimney, but which ended abruptly. Then there was a place where you could slither over the top of the wall and climb down behind. However, there was no light, and it was impossible to know what they would find if they went through there. Still, there seemed to be no alternative.

Mark decided to risk it. He pointed, and stepped onto Ben's lap, and then his shoulder, using him as a ladder. It was easy to grasp the top of the wall and then pull himself up and sit astride it. There was more room up there than he had expected.

Now it was Ben's turn. This was threatening, as when Ben stood up, the fire might start again. The suits had protected them well so far, but they would not last indefinitely.

Sure enough, as soon as Ben moved, the fire relit with a roar. Mark hauled his brother up. There was nothing for it; they simply had to drop over the back of the wall down behind the fireplace. Mark went first. Thankfully, he landed on a hard surface. It was as he had hoped; the floor behind the fireplace was on a level with the floor in front of it. He found himself thinking of the illustrations in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. Alice had jumped down through the mirror, and landed safely. Now the boys were doing something similar. Whether the world they

were entering could prove any crazier than the one they were leaving, Mark doubted, but time would tell. Anything might happen down here.

The fire was burning powerfully. Some of the light came up and over to their side, giving them an impression of where they were, but otherwise it was pitch dark. They seemed to be in a rocky chamber. Their best course was to make their way through it. There would probably be a way out at the far side.

Mark nudged Ben and suggested this by sign language. Ben nodded. It did not seem wise to take off their masks as the quality of the air was bound to be suspect with all that burning gas behind them. However, the breathing supply systems were not large. How much oxygen did they have in fact? Ben felt concerned.

The light grew more and more feeble as they went forwards. The rough rocky wall loomed up ahead of them. The chamber seemed to have become high at this point. They entered a passage which snaked and turned a little. All light had disappeared by now; the boys regretted the loss of their helmets with the lamps very much.

Suddenly a piercing beam stabbed the darkness, shining in their eyes, accompanied by a voice.

“Stand still and put your hands in the air.” The command was fierce, the voice was of an adult male.

Both boys obeyed instantly. There was no other sensible course of action open to them, even if they had not been scared witless. Facing them was the barrel of a revolver, with an index finger white on the trigger.

The whiteness was due to lack of circulation, Ben reckoned, because of the pressure being exerted. This man would not hesitate. One false move and they would be gunned down mercilessly.

-oOo-

When Araminta and her three daughters returned from church, there was a phone message from Missing Persons with a number for her to ring. Araminta almost cried with relief. The lady had been as good as her word, and so quick! It was so unusual to find support in this hostile world.

There was just time to see the twins off first. They were meeting friends in London for the afternoon and going on to a show in the evening. Araminta was pleased for them. Life had to carry on post-Bruce.

Araminta had been reflecting on that concept. Her life had been in two sections up to now, ante-Bruce, and then Bruce. Now post-Bruce was beginning. Yes it was painful and ever so lonely, even though she had had practice in this for some years already, but time would bring healing. He would not want her fretting for ever. He would be pleased for her to have a life. She was not yet middle-aged. Indeed, she was younger now than the age Bruce had been when they got engaged.

It was too complicated having David around. They all seemed to be affected by him. It would be best if he took himself off, really. For most of the time, most of Araminta hoped that he would stay away. However, it was difficult to control your feelings when you woke in the night. She did feel drawn to him, she had to admit.

The children would adapt. Louise was growing up fast. She had gone uncharacteristically quiet since her father's death. Araminta was worried about her. It was tough to lose a parent at her age. Still, she would pull through. So would the boys, especially Ben. Where on earth were they? Araminta gave a deep sigh.

The twins would either be back late or they would stay over at a friend's. Their mum had got past worrying about this. They were old enough to take responsibility for themselves. It had been good of them to make time to come to church with her, as they could have chosen to go to town earlier. They were a great pair. They missed their dad, but they would soon be forging ahead again.

Louise was old enough to get the dinner on the table while her mother made the call. The news was not good.

“Mrs. Winter, I'm sorry to say there is no record of a car leaving your property in the hours you specify. All previous journeys are accounted for in the sense that they were two-way, leaving the

property and then returning to it. We have done searches within your area and there are no sky-cars on the ground unaccounted for. I regret that in our experience this suggests foul play. The most likely thing is that a larger vehicle has ingested your car... Yes, I appreciate that you left the alarm switched on, but I'm afraid that there are criminal gangs out there with the technical know-how to overrule... No, the boys could be anywhere. They might have been inside the car, true, but... Mrs. Winter, don't distress yourself..."

This was awful. Araminta had dropped the phone. The car had been stolen and probably the boys kidnapped too, and the much-vaunted tracking systems operated by government were all very well when it came to imposing fines or collecting congestion charges, but they were useless when it really mattered. Great.

Perhaps the criminals had a large sky-truck, which would zoom up and engulf their modest vehicle, as in the opening to the film Star Wars. At least there had finally been a happy outcome in the film.

The phone was ringing again.

It was the bureau. The lady's concern was evident. "Mrs. Winter, I understand this is very upsetting, but we are doing an exhaustive series of checks, rest assured. The fact that one of your boys is a minor has meant that I was able to give the case highest priority. It is too early to lose hope. You need to be strong."

The lady had a point. "I'll do my best. Please keep me informed of any developments. Thank you for your concern."

Now to put a brave face on it over lunch with Louise. If only her own mum was more with it. She would have been a tower of strength in the old days before Dad started going downhill. Was it really only three months since he was diagnosed? It felt like a lifetime. Araminta knew she had not been there for them as she would have liked. Perhaps she could go over and see them despite her own challenges. Yes, give them some help, rather than just longing for support for herself. It is better to give than to receive.

-oOo-

It was hard not to linger near the phone in case it should ring again. Araminta couldn't think about anything else. Lunch had been dismal. Normally, Louise and she got on well, but today Araminta was too preoccupied.

"I'm sorry, Lou, I just can't stop thinking about the boys, wondering where they are."

"That's alright, Mum, I understand. Don't feel you have to talk." Louise did seem not to be put out, thankfully.

When the phone finally did ring, Araminta nearly jumped out of her skin. She made herself walk slowly to pick it up.

"Hello?"

"Is that Mrs. Winter?"

Oh dear, it was a male voice. A stranger. Quite young by the sound of it. How disappointing.

"Yes?"

"I found your number in Hannah's phone. I'm afraid there's been a mishap."

Fear clutched Araminta's heart. Not more bad news, surely?

"Whatever is it?" If only there was less background noise of people laughing and chattering.

"Well, there are several of us here at a café with Hannah and Chloe, sitting at a table in the street having a coffee. There are loads of people milling about. Anyway, about ten minutes ago, Hannah gave the loudest shriek I've ever heard and clutched her sister's arm. Chloe also gave a cry, and to cut a long story short, we are worried they have flipped. The thing is..."

At this point there was the sound of voices raised in anger and exclamations of alarm. It sounded as if a chair was turned over or perhaps more. Then Hannah came on the phone.

"Mum. Take no notice of him. Chloe and me are fine. I tell you, we did see him!"

"See who dear?"

“Mum it was so frightening. They were sitting sideways on to us at another café on the other side of the street. And there was a woman with them.”

“Who? Hannah explain.”

“The boys say we are having hallucinations, but Chloe saw them too, and we couldn’t both have the same hallucination, could we?! I mean you can’t, can you!”

Araminta was feeling exasperated. Hannah did seem to be behaving oddly to say the least.

“Hannah, please. Calm down. Now, who is that you saw?”

“Dad. And his inventor friend. It really was. It was Dad like before he had the accident. And I’m not joking! It was when Dad spoke that I was sure.”

Araminta came over all faint. She was in danger of blacking out, but this was no time for luxuries of that sort. She fought with herself.

“Hannah... Hannah, please, just a moment. Now, tell me again exactly what you saw.”

“Well that’s it. I saw Dad and his inventor friend. Then Chloe saw them too. She fainted and went down. She’ll be fine when she comes round.”

“Are you saying she’s unconscious?”

“She’s stirred a bit. She just needs a few minutes.”

“Hannah, you must call an ambulance. Get her checked out in hospital.”

“Mum relax. There’s really no...”

“Hannah. She may have hit her head or something.”

“Mum honestly! I told the boys not to phone you. I knew you would overreact. Okay she did hit her head a little, but it was only a slight glancing blow and...”

“HANNAH!” Araminta was beside herself. “Call an ambulance now and then try to convince me I’m bananas about bangs to the head later. Please don’t argue.”

This was too much. Thank goodness for the boy who had more sense!

“Alright, Mum.” Hannah sounded fed up. “It’s going to ruin our day. They’ll want to keep her in for hours and hours. Never mind.”

“Where are you? I want to be with my daughter.”

“Covent Garden.”

“Right. The moment the ambulance comes, find out where it’s taking her, ring me, and I’ll come straight to the hospital.”

Hannah agreed reluctantly, and the call ended. This was a nightmare. If there was one thing that Araminta positively could not stand it was fainting and blows to the head. She had tried telling herself that she was paranoid about them and needed to calm down, but it was no use. The thought of Chloe going through, no, it was too terrifying to think of it.

“Louise. Chloe has had an accident and is going to casualty. I need to be with her. You can come or stay here. Your choice.”

“I’ll stay here. You go, Mum. Give her my love. I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

Louise was keen to be a calming influence, but it was not the least bit reassuring to her mum because the girl had no details of what had happened. Araminta had received reassurances of that sort before, from people who did not know what they were talking about, and in the end they did more harm than good. She was not going to be taken in.

Now. Missing Persons. She needed to give them her mobile number.

She dialled through.

“Ah, Mrs. Winter. I’m glad you’ve rung. Abandoned Cars are working hard on your boys. They wanted to know whether you had any connection with the Sahara desert.”

“The Sahara! Well yes, as it happens.” Could the boys have gone back there? It seemed too fantastic. Why hadn’t they told her?

“Well there’s a newly reported scorched car with a UK signature in the middle of the desert. There’s a team on its way to investigate. We’ll get back to you when we have news.”

“What does scorched mean?” Araminta was nearly beside herself with worry.

“Well...” The lady was clearly very concerned. “Sometimes these gangs set light to the vehicles when they have finished with them to cover their tracks. It’s generally possible to make out the chassis number, however. We’ll keep you posted. I repeat, it’s early days.”

“Thank you.” This was dreadful. Araminta put the phone down. Where was it going to end? She looked at Louise. At least there were no problems with her. Not yet, at any rate.

Suddenly a towering rage filled Araminta. It was anger the like of which she had never known. She marched upstairs to her bedroom. It still felt odd not to find Bruce lying there in the bed. She was going to give God a piece of her mind.

However, as she was nearing their bedroom door, the words ‘Job two’ floated into her mind. She knew what that meant. There was a Bible passage to consult.

It was with a huge effort that she refrained from hurling the Bible out of the window. Instead she picked it up and found the place. Instantly she remembered the story.

Job had received four reports of bad news about his family and possessions in one afternoon. He had managed not to rant and rave at God. Instead, he spoke his mind simply. She ran her eye quickly down the page. Here were the words he used.

Araminta did not hesitate. Despite her feelings, she knelt beside the bed and repeated Job’s words.

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away...”

It was no use. She could not finish. She could not add ‘May the name of the Lord be praised.’

“I’m sorry, God; I just can’t manage it. I feel too hurt and angry. But I’m not giving up on you. Please help us now; we need your support.”

She felt so, so tired. The depth of the emotion took everything from her body. Now the anger had gone, temporarily, and the pain was uppermost. Trauma was like an unstable flat iceberg rolling over in the arctic sea, she thought; sometimes the anger surfaced, at other times the pain.

Oh goodness, the phone was ringing. There was no time for anything. The tears would have to wait.

It was Hannah. “Charing Cross hospital, Mum. I’m going with her, and so is Nick.”

“See you there. Bye.”

It was the work of a moment to order a taxi. The boys would have to wait their turn too.

“Lou, can you answer the phone and give them my mobile, or take a number for me to ring and phone me? I’m off to Charing Cross hospital.”

“No problem.” Louise was just starting a film. Shame books had gone out so much, Araminta reflected. Never mind.

-oOo-

The taxi drew up in the road, having come along the ground rather than descending from the air. Fair enough. It must have been in the neighbourhood.

The journey to Charing Cross would only take a few minutes. Araminta settled back into the upholstered seat in the rear. Thank goodness that the driver did not want to talk, and she could just be. Never in her life had she felt so exhausted. Every limb in her body felt heavy. It was a moment for doing the relaxing exercises.

This proved impossible. Her brain was at fever pitch. How could the girls have been convinced that they saw their Dad? Maybe twins could have the same hallucination. They did seem to communicate in a special way. But why did they reckon they saw Jim Pond as well? What did it mean? There had been look-alikes all those years before. Could somebody have unearthed a way of making false bodies again? All that business had died away long ago, but maybe it was being resurrected. Far more likely that the girls made a mistake.

Araminta did not know what to think. It would be no good mentioning all this to them. At least, not yet. Best not to worry them about the boys either. That too could wait until later.

Araminta felt sick at the thought of the car being burnt, if it was their car. Could the boys have gone gallivanting off to the Sahara? Mark wouldn't, but Ben might. Or had the car been dumped far away from the scene of some crime, and that just happened to be the Sahara? It seemed more likely. And why couldn't the security people trace the vehicle that had swallowed up their car, if that was what had happened? What was the use of all these surveillance systems if the criminals could walk all round them?

She could not let her mind rest, and yet she felt so depressed at the same time. She had to be strong for Chloe. Really she could just use a comforting arm herself.

It was already time for the car to descend. Araminta passed her card forward to pay. The man fed it into the dashboard, and then returned it when it had popped out again.

The car came to rest on a veranda on the ninth or tenth floor of the huge block. Araminta stepped out. There was a stiff breeze. The view was fine, but there was no time to admire it. The big glass doors opened for her as the taxi took off, and closed behind. Then the next set opened, and she was in a concourse. Everyone seemed in a hurry, and so busy. There was the desk. Araminta hurried over.

"My daughter..."

"Palm please."

She placed her hand over the window. You never knew what form of identification would be required these days. It was meant to make security all the tighter. However, Araminta was not comfortable about it. It meant that the authorities not only had all your administrative details in File linked to your plastic card; they also had your finger-prints, palm-prints, iris-schemes, DNA profile, saliva sample, the list was endless. There seemed to be no privacy left.

Bruce had felt this very strongly. "Accept no branding!" Araminta could hear him now. In the early days, people had suggested that people should be marked with a bar code, or have a chip inserted under the skin, or something similar. It would be far more secure than carrying an identity card, which could get lost or stolen or forged. A real help in the fight against crime.

Bruce would not hear of it.

"Branding is for sheep and cattle," he would insist, "not humans. Nobody should have it done. It turns you into a commodity, to be bought and sold by somebody else."

At the time, Araminta had felt he was making an unnecessary fuss, but now she was not so sure. True, all the modern measurements had done away with the need for bar-codes or chips, but the principle was the same. You sometimes felt your body was no longer your own. It did not feel right to be reduced to an entry in somebody else's computer. What was particularly galling was that the people who ran the computers were not always honest, and there was a thriving black market involving bribery and corruption. You needed to log on at least every week to make sure that your details were still correct, as there was always the danger that somebody else might alter your profile and then use your identity while carrying out some dreadful deed. Once the police had decided that you were the one they were after, it was no end of trouble to get your name cleared. There had been some really bad cases of people being imprisoned for months before their innocence was established, and all in the name of a system which was said to be fail-safe. Fail-safe indeed!

How much nicer the world must have been in Bruce's Granddad's time.

"I'm sorry?" The lady had been saying something. "Could you repeat that?"

"You are Mrs. Winter, and I take it you are here for somebody. Their details have not yet reached us, so could you please take a seat." The woman's tone was frosty. She had evidently concluded that Araminta was a difficult one.

"I'm sorry to be so vague; I have a lot on my mind. Please call me when you have news. It's my daughter Chloe."

"Will do." The woman softened a bit. Perhaps she had teenage children of her own. She looked about the right age.

Araminta sat down on a plastic seat. There were some magazines on a table. She hoped she would not have long to wait.

There was a woman two seats away with a little boy standing on the floor beside her. Araminta could remember Ben when he was just that age. A real handful. Every stage had its advantages, but if she had to choose, it was when the children were pre-school that she had enjoyed them most. They could be so appealing. This little fellow looked a bundle of fun.

Just then he looked up and their eyes met. Araminta gave him a wink; she couldn't resist it. Rather to her embarrassment, he laughed out loud and came trotting over. He evidently had no fear of strangers.

"No, Patrick, come away. Don't trouble the lady." His mother was concerned.

"It's alright," laughed Araminta. "I'm used to children. I've got five of my own. They're seeing to the eldest right now."

"His older sister has broken her arm," replied the lady. "They are just x-raying it."

"Well at least Patrick's enjoying the outing." The little fellow was. He had already investigated the large buttons on Araminta's coat with great interest.

"He has no fear. I'm quite worried about him. He would go off with you with no hesitation."

"That is concerning I agree. Perhaps you should try having him on reins. It worked wonders for my younger boy when he was this age."

Patrick had discovered the magazines on the low table, and was enjoying pushing them onto the floor one by one.

"Patrick no!" said his mother. The mild reproof was quite useless.

"Leave them down," suggested Araminta. "We can make a game of picking them back up again. He's not much of a gardener I see!" Not just gardening, but DIY and home décor magazines were all tumbling, accompanied by gleeful shrieks. "I reckon he could be quite a home wrecker!"

Before long she was on her hands and knees gathering the magazines up again into a pile on the floor. It was as high as the table. She splayed the pile slightly so that it looked like a flight of stairs. Then she made her fingers look like little legs, and walked her hand up the stairs on to the table. Patrick thought this was marvellous. He couldn't form the shape with his fingers to begin with, but after a little coaching he got it, and the air was soon full of sounds of delight as the pair of them walked their hands up and down the magazines to and from the table.

Araminta was so engrossed that she had forgotten why she was there, so when the lady behind the counter called out, "Mrs. Winter," she was taken aback.

"Oh goodness, my number's come up!" she exclaimed. "Bye bye Patrick. Don't do anything I wouldn't do!" Small chance.

The little fellow was sad to see her go. Too bad. Perhaps they would meet again in a ward somewhere.

Araminta hurried along corridors. All her tension had returned. Here it was. She entered the ward gently from long training, despite her mood. There was Hannah.

"Mum, they reckon she's fine. There's nothing to worry about. She's having a scan."

"Are they admitting her?"

"For a few hours, yes. But only to keep an eye on her. Mum, it was so frightening seeing Dad!"

This was the moment to hear the account.

"Tell me carefully exactly what you saw."

"We were seated at these tables outside the café on the side of the road, laughing and chatting like we do, and suddenly I saw Dad across the road sitting at another café table, when he turned to speak to someone. I knew him instantly. It was like he was when we were little, before the accident. I clutched Chloe's arm and showed her, and she screamed and fainted, falling to the pavement. By the time the commotion was over and I looked back again, they had gone."

"I thought you said Jim Pond was there?"

"I'm not so sure about that now. There was a man there, but I never saw Jim Pond except as that homeless person that used to stay sometimes, you remember, so it may not have been him."

Araminta remembered. The children had grasped more of the strange goings-on at that time than she had realised. They had also remembered. Gary. That was the man's name. It turned out he was Jim Pond all along in disguise.

“Hannah, what makes you so sure it was Dad?”

“Well, you remember when that woman came, and she had a disguise in her handbag which could make her old? I wondered if someone was doing that using Dad’s disguise, because I know they made one.”

So that was it. Half observation, half guess-work.

“Hannah, it’s really far-fetched. Yes, I suppose it’s possible. I hope there’s nothing in it because frankly I’ve had enough of that Pikel woman to last me a lifetime already.” Araminta surprised herself by the strength of her feelings. She had not thought of Pikel for years. Anyone would think the wounds were fresh.

Hannah looked at her mother with pity.

“Hannah, let’s leave it. Suppose somebody has been using Dad’s disguise. It’s of no help to us. They probably want it for criminal purposes. Let’s hope very much that you were mistaken and only accept that there is something funny going on if we get further proof. No conspiracy theories, please! I’ve got enough other things to worry about.”

“Alright, Mum. Thanks for believing me. I knew you would, but none of the boys did.”

“Are any of them here?”

“No, they’ve gone on. We are to meet them later if we can.”

“Well, I’m grateful to Nick, I think it was, who rang, even if you didn’t want him to.”

Araminta would have said more, but at that moment Chloe came through. She looked in the peak of condition.

“Mum, lovely to see you. How are you?”

This was back to front. “I’m alright; it’s you I’m concerned about.”

“Mum, it was the slightest bump. There’s nothing”

“But they said you were unconscious.”

“Not really. Well, I felt a bit faint for a while and preferred to stay down on the ground rather than getting up in a hurry. I more brushed the table in passing than hitting my head on it. And I know that’s bad grammar, in case you deduce I’m losing it! No, I feel for you. It must be ghastly having someone in the family knock their head after what you’ve been through. I told the boys not to trouble you with it.”

“I’m glad they did. I feel better for you being checked out.”

“Come here and give us a hug.”

It was lovely. Araminta had come to give support, and found that her two girls were more concerned about her than themselves. The three way hug was great. How nice it was to be a loving family, not like all those ones you saw on TV in the medical dramas, for whom a visit to casualty brought out the worst in human behaviour.

There was a nurse watching them. Araminta couldn’t resist it.

“Sorry to buck the trend,” she whispered, “but actually we get on well together.”

The nurse nodded. “I’ll put it in the notes under worrying signs of extraordinary behaviour,” she quipped.

Araminta was feeling better than she had done all day. Chloe was fine. The boys would resurface. Assume they are fine too until you actually see their dead bodies. That was the way.

-oOo-

David had made a great effort when he found he was being carried indoors. Somehow he managed to keep his eyes shut when he came to. He was on a stretcher. It was warm. The lights overhead were all on. They were of an old-fashioned type, strips with two fluorescent tubes in, hanging from chains, with a grill below them made up of small squares. He was being hurried through a long corridor with several twists and turns. Three people were carrying the stretcher.

If only he wasn’t so groggy. He must concentrate.

Perhaps he should roll violently to the side, so as to unbalance the stretcher, which might get the men to speak or swear. Yes, good idea. Get ready... Oh dear, it was too late. He had been put down

on the floor, pretty roughly. A door was unlocked with a long metal key which was way out of date. Then he was hurried in to a small room. The stretcher was dumped on a single bed, and the men all shot out as quick as possible and the door was locked.

Their footsteps echoed in the passage as they went back along the corridor in the way they had come.

If the men realised he had woken, they had not shown it. On the whole David reckoned that they did not know he had been conscious. That might give him a slight advantage later on, possibly. As it was he was still terribly sleepy.

When he came to again, some hours later he guessed, he felt very thirsty. It took some minutes before he remembered what had happened.

That was it. The car had suddenly set off on its own. There had been the voice behind his head. Very frightening. Then he had texted Chloe. That was good. She would have raised the alarm. He felt in his pocket. Oh dear, the phone had gone. Hardly surprising. Otherwise his clothes were as they had been.

He sat up. His head swam dreadfully. Take it slowly! He must have been drugged in some way. He was gradually piecing things together.

David looked round the room. There was no window. The dull light came from a single bulb in the middle of the ceiling. There were two doors. Perhaps one was a toilet.

He stood up carefully. The swimming head was no worse, and he reckoned he could get along alright. He made his way slowly to the first door. It was locked. He must have come in that way. The other door opened. An old fashioned doorknob that you had to rotate. What was this place? Yes, it was a washroom.

He sat on the toilet for a long time, trying to clear his head. It was no use. The drug would have to wear off at its own speed. Then he went over to the washbasin and splashed his face. It did help but only a little. There was no soap and no towel.

This room was also lit by a single bulb, but there was a window high up. David did not trust himself to stand on the toilet to look out in his groggy state. He made a mental note to do that later. However, he could see it was dark outside.

He decided to drink from the tap. The water had seemed clear enough, and it tasted fine.

He went back through to the bed and lay down again.

“Name?” came a voice. Somebody had evidently been watching him. David said nothing.

“Name?” said the voice again, louder. David ignored it.

Suddenly the air was filled with a violent piercing whistle. David pressed his hands over his ears as quickly as he could, but try as he might, he could not block out the sound. It was frightful. It went on and on.

Just when he thought he could stand it no longer, the siren stopped.

“Name?” came the voice again, very faintly this time.

“David.” There was nothing to gain by fighting these people. He needed to win by subtlety, not force.

“Occupation?”

He could hardly hear the voice for the ringing in his ears. Then he realised that it was probably speaking as loud as ever. The whistle had damaged his hearing. He hoped it would be only temporary.

“Accounts manager.” It did not sound too high-powered.

“Age?”

The battery of questions went on for quite a while. David answered honestly. There seemed little to lose.

Finally there was an open-ended question.

“Why did you come to the Central Hotel?”

“I’m looking for a man who has gone missing, and I believed he might be there.”

David decided to try a request. “Look, I’m very hungry, and I don’t feel too good. Please can I have some food. I’ve done nothing to upset anybody. It’s time you showed me some respect.”

There was silence. No more questions came.

David was just reflecting that he was observed when the door was unlocked. An unshaven man came in with a breakfast tray. It must be early morning, not the beginning of night as he had supposed.

David studied the man closely. He looked eastern European in origin, about sixty, with dark hair beginning to go grey. He was leaving already.

“Cigarette?” asked David. He didn’t smoke, but it was the only thing he could think of. He wanted to hear the man’s voice.

The grunt was thoroughly indistinct, and might mean either ‘yes’ or ‘maybe’, depending on how you chose to interpret it. David hoped it meant no.

The food was basic. Several slices of black bread, no butter, blackcurrant jam and lukewarm coffee. Now, he thought, this is a continental breakfast, no doubt about that. So either I am in Europe somewhere, or I am anywhere else in the world, and this performance has been put on for my benefit. Great.

All in all, David was not enjoying being an investigator. His ears still hurt from the violent squeal. That had been ruthless. Were they going to kill him when they had finished with him?

He was just starting the second piece of bread when footsteps sounded outside, coming along the corridor from the other direction.

“Open up quickly!” came a voice in English.

There was some fumbling, and then the key turned in the lock once more. To David’s astonishment, a well-dressed man walked briskly in. His grey suit was the summit of good taste. One look at the face was enough. This was Cecil himself!

He spoke earnestly. “I’m so sorry you have been put to all this trouble. I regret that this outfit operates on New Testament principles all too often.”

David looked blank.

“The left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing half the time. Anyway, thank you very much for coming to search me out. Sam must be going spare. The fact is, things are at an extremely delicate stage. I’ve hated being out of touch for all this time, but there has been no choice. All will be made clear shortly.”

David found his voice. “But surely you could have sent a message or something?”

“Please don’t ask questions. As it is, they have agreed to send you home. It will have to be as before, I’m afraid, but the stuff they gave you wears off quickly enough. I’ll see to it that you not so heavily doped this time. The thing is, we can’t afford to let our secret get out yet. You’ll understand soon enough. Whatever happens, make no attempt to trace us.”

“But...” This was ridiculous. What was he going to say to Sam?

Cecil was already leaving. There seemed to be no discussion. The door was locked, leaving David completely mystified.

-oOo-

What’s that tapping sound, David wondered? I do wish they would go away. I’m trying to sleep. It was no use. The tapping, no it was more like banging really... why, they were going to break something hammering like that. This was not right.

David managed to open an eye. Somebody was shouting something... what was it?

“Open the door!”

The door. What door? David’s eyelids felt like lead. Ah, he was sitting in the car at ground level. He watched fascinated as his arm, a hundred miles long and weighing a thousand tons, moved slowly to the door release and pressed it.

The cold air that rushed in was a shock.

“David! Am I relieved to see you! I’ll fetch help.”

It was Sam. What was she doing here? It was too much. David closed his eyes.

“He’s coming round.”

David opened a weary eye. He seemed to be lying on the sofa in Sam’s flat. The room was swimming round and round. Ah, there were Sam and Araminta, waving gently about, like seaweed underwater. Perhaps the room was an illusion and he was scuba diving with Ben.

“David, please. Make an effort.”

David lifted his head. It was a big mistake. The whirlpool drew him down so!

“Give him a drink. Surely there must be something he can take.”

Here was some water. David was glad of it, even if some of it did run onto his shirt. Never mind.

“Hello,” he said chivalrously.

“Give him more time,” said Araminta, looking at her watch. “He’s improving.”

David forced himself up. It was all coming back to him.

“I’ve seen Cecil,” he announced. “He’s alive and well.”

The effect was electric.

“Where? When? Why won’t he contact me?”

The effort was too much. David was going distant again.

“Sam, you must give him space. He will tell you everything as soon as he can. Have you been into the car’s log?”

“It’s been doctored, as I guessed. They seem to have been very thorough in drugging David. Can we trust what he says?”

David was feeling stronger. “Now listen,” he said. This time he kept his eyes closed and made no effort to move to preserve his energy. “I was kidnapped and drugged. I came to in a sort of prison. I was quizzed, and then when breakfast came, Cecil came in. He said sorry, but it was all very hush hush, and they were nearly ready to go, and everything would become clear. He apologised for what they had done to me.”

“But why has he been out of contact?”

“He wouldn’t explain. Said I mustn’t ask questions or try to trace them. Sorry.”

Sam was utterly frustrated. “This is worse than useless. What I am I to make of it? Has he deserted me? What’s this nonsense about things being hush hush? Can’t he trust me? Who has he fallen in with?”

Sam got up and paced up and down in agitation.

Araminta was soothing. “Sam, David will give you all the detail he can, rest assured. For now, he needs to come round in his own time. I know it’s difficult, but we need to be crystal clear about it, and David isn’t in a fit state to remember all the details yet. Please be patient, Sam.”

David felt a surge of anger. Why was Sam taking no notice of him? She seemed only interested in Cecil. Oh well, perhaps that was to be expected.

She came back over to the sofa. “Was he well? Or ill? Are you sure it was him?” It was as if Araminta had not spoken.

“He was wearing a grey suit. He looked fine. Very apologetic. New Testament” David was having great difficulty stringing his words together.

“New Testament? What do you mean?”

“It was about his hands.” David suddenly had an inspiration. “Does he have tattoos on his wrists?”

“Certainly not. It’s an appalling idea.”

“Right, well neither did the man I saw, so that’s okay.” It was meant to be light-hearted, to ease the tension, but it had the opposite effect.

“Oh you are impossible! Do you think this is a time for jokes?”

“There were no distinguishing marks,” David persisted. “Greying hair. Wrinkled face, but not over much. Look, I reckon it was him, but you have to remember I’ve never met him before. All I’ve seen is photos. He was like the picture, certainly.”

“But there is so much I don’t understand.”

David's head was getting clearer by the minute. "Look, this is not working. We need to start again. Can you get me a bowl of cereal and a coffee? Then I'll give you a full account of everything that happened in the two or three days."

"Two days? You've been away for over a week. You might have got in touch, frankly!" Sam was indignant.

Now it was David's turn to feel bemused. How could it have been over a week? He could only account for two nights, or was it three?

Araminta brought the cereal while Sam boiled the kettle. Sitting up made David's head swim, but he was determined. The food helped. They all had a coffee.

"Now." David told them about the journey to Athabasca, the hotel being boarded up, the kidnap in his car, and being drugged the first time. Then he described the imprisonment as thoroughly as he could, including the frightful squealing, which was still making his ears ring now, ending with Cecil's intervention.

Araminta was concerned for David. She expressed horror at the kidnap and the voice behind his head. "It must have been very frightening," she acknowledged. Her response to the loud squeal was, "You need to get your hearing checked out."

Sam brushed all that aside. She only wanted to hear about Cecil, and to be sure it was him.

"The difficulty," David said for the third time, "is that it could have been an impostor, as I had never met him in person." It was hard to feel sympathy for Sam. He had to keep reminding himself that she was under severe strain.

"Now David," said Araminta, "take your time. Try and remember every detail. Our best course is for you to act what Cecil did, right down to facial expressions, and for Sam to decide."

David set to carefully. "There was noise in the passage. I had the impression that there was a disagreement between Cecil and my guards, and that Cecil had authority over them which they recognised. Then he came in. I wish I could remember his actual words, but it was along the lines of 'I'm very sorry about the confusion, and you being kept waiting.' He screwed up his eyes a little like this. Then he mentioned the New Testament..."

"It's not him," Sam broke in. "He would never have said that."

"...how the left hand did not know what the right hand was doing," David persisted. "Does that come in the New Testament?" he asked.

"Yes," Araminta replied. "When you give to charity, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."

"Give to charity!" snorted Sam. "There's nothing generous in this business!"

David felt hurt. "Look, I've really worked hard for you!" he complained. "Can't you see that?"

Araminta spoke again. "Sam, is there any chance that Cecil knew that the phrase comes in the gospels, do you think?"

"None at all." Sam evidently was as sure about it as she had sounded earlier.

"It is a puzzle," David agreed. "But then, if it was someone else trying to impersonate him, why risk it all by referring to the Bible, unless you knew it was something the real Cecil was likely to do? In my opinion, even though it feels out of character, the remark argues in favour of it being truly Cecil rather than otherwise."

"Well I think it's ridiculous." Sam was curt.

David persisted. "If it's not him, we are no further forward and there's something very funny afoot. If it is him, then we had better accept what he has said, which is that all will be made clear in the next few days. Take your pick."

Sam went over to the window and stared out. This action really spoke to David. He had done a lot of that himself. Be kind to the poor girl, he thought; she's really struggling. She clearly loves her husband. Try and be happy about that, for goodness sake.

Araminta was great. "David needs a break. I'll take him home. If anything else comes to mind, I'm sure he'll be in touch."

Sam nodded. There were tears in her eyes. "Thanks for trying!" she said.

David's anger dissolved. "That's okay. If I can do any more, I will."

Araminta accompanied him down to the car. “How are you doing?” David asked as they descended the stairs.

“Chloe bashed her head, but she seems to be okay. Ben and Mark have gone missing, and the car was found abandoned in the Sahara. I’m terribly worried about them.”

“You’re joking!”

“I’m completely serious. At first they said the car was burnt out, but then when someone went to investigate, it was just that it was in a hot spot as they called it, so the satellite said it was burnt out when it was just basking in the sunshine. I ask you!”

“What happened then?”

“Nothing. The authorities reckon the car was stolen by criminals, used and then dumped. Somebody needs to go and look.”

“But why haven’t you got it in hand already?”

“David, I’ve been at casualty all afternoon with the girls. We finally got home about an hour ago. I had just got them settled, and my hand was literally reaching for the phone when it rang, and it was Sam saying you had arrived, so I raced round.”

“But your boys are far more important than me!” This was simply staggering.

“David, you’re practically family. Sam is also Bruce’s daughter, and I sensed it would not be easy for you to handle her in the high she’s in over Cecil, so I thought I’d better come.”

“Right.” David was feeling decisive. “Let’s go and look for the boys now.”

“David, don’t you need a rest first?”

So the idea had been in her mind. He laughed.

“Yes, I need food, a change of clothes, a good night’s sleep, and time to unwind, but this is urgent. If we can just get something for me to eat on the way, that’ll be fine. Perhaps I can snooze as we cruise.”

“And I’ll sigh as we fly.” Araminta was clearly thrilled. “David, if you’re sure?”

“Positive.”

“Right. Hannah and Chloe have been getting provisions together. Hannah wanted to come too, but I said she had to stay to keep an eye on Chloe and Louise, and to woman the phone, and she’s agreed.”

“I like that; woman the phone indeed!”

“Where would you men be without us?”

There was no denying it. Sam was totally beautiful but lacked the character to go with it. Araminta on the other hand, was...

“Oh look, the girls are expecting us.”

The car was nearly at ground level by now. Hannah and Chloe were there armed with a large hamper, torches and two rucksacks. David thought it was a huge joke.

“You’ve got the whole thing planned out,” he laughed.

They landed and loaded up. The girls were delighted to see David back safely, although they were concerned that he looked pale.

“I’ll be fine,” he insisted. “No more head-banging!”

After a quick visit to the bathroom, where David found a change of clothes laid out ready for him, to his amusement, they were ready.

“Take care, Mum!” the three girls called.

“You’re fine ones to talk!” David chuckled. This family really was special. How wonderful that they still wanted him despite all. The Cecil search had been a failure. Perhaps he could turn up trumps with the boys. The abandoned car was the obvious place to start.

-oOo-

“I hope you enjoy Lobster Thermidor,” Araminta remarked, as she unbuckled the hamper. The car was cruising happily along just below the clouds in the late afternoon.

“Never tried it,” confessed David. “Is there a roll and butter to go with it?”

Thankfully there was.

“Now, fill me in,” David asked as they munched.

“There’s not much to say. The boys turned up missing, as it were, and then Missing Persons located our car in the desert. They think that the car will have been dumped there by crooks, but I reckon the boys have gone exploring. I didn’t like to tell Missing Persons. I was always hoping you would return and be willing to go and look. I didn’t want to explain to anyone else unless I had to.”

“How long have they been away?”

“They left some time last night, so about eighteen hours.”

“Hmm.” This did not sound too good. “Well, we can soon tell if they went back underground.”

They ate on in silence. David had been thrilled to be wanted, at first, but as he reflected on their mission, things did not seem at all promising.

“Look, I hope it will turn out better than the Cecil hunt, but it may not do. It could even be dangerous if the boys have been the victims of foul play.”

“Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it. I’m hoping we can establish whether they flew the car to the Sahara or not as a first step.”

“Sounds good to me.”

They ate on in silence. David felt the Lobster Thermidor was wasted on him. After a bit, he plucked up courage.

“Araminta, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you. One of your children once mumbled something about Bruce saving the universe. Whatever were they talking about? I feel intrigued.”

“What’s the problem?” asked Araminta sweetly. This was one to enjoy.

“Well, the phrase makes no sense. I mean, Bruce was a great guy, no doubt about it, but to say he saved the universe is plain ridiculous to my way of thinking.”

“Supposing there was a threat, not just to earth but to all the stars and planets and galaxies, and there was just one person who had the insight to know what to do, because of his daydreams about a spaceship called Mission 12 going to the stars, and he did it, and the threat went away. What would you call that?”

“Well, I suppose saving the universe might cover it. But what are you suggesting?”

“Do you remember a news story about little spots on Neptune? About twenty years ago?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“Pity.”

“Araminta, you’re teasing me!” I love being with her. She brings out the sunshine in me, David thought to himself.

“David, I’m not. I don’t talk about it, because it sounds so crazy, and I reckon it could easily be the quickest way to lose my friends, but the sober truth is that self-replicating machines from elsewhere in the galaxy got out of hand, and Bruce grasped what was happening, borrowed a spaceship and went to the Asteroid belt, boarded one of the machines, hacked into the computer, and reversed the multiplication program, so the machines took to halving in numbers instead of doubling, and the problem righted itself.”

“Just like that.”

“Just like that.”

“Well, I think it’s a delightful notion. I’d love to hear more about it.” David looked quizzically across at the passenger seat. “And you won’t lose me as a friend. Promise.”

“There’s not much more to tell. Except that Will lost his life in the process. That’s Bruce’s Dad. So the children never knew their granddad.”

“I’m sorry.” David did not know how to proceed. “Self-replicating machines. It’s a dreadful concept. I’m not surprised they got out of hand.”

“The intriguing thing is where they came from. Bruce reckoned they were made by mankind in the future, and the future got so full of machines that they started spilling over backwards into the past to find room to multiply.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Yes. Agreed. However, you have to find some way of explaining the presence of the machines, and the fact that there were notices in German, Dutch, Russian and so forth on board as well as English. Bruce reckoned they were man made.”

“It’s a nightmare scenario.”

“Well, thanks to my husband and his dad, we are still here to tell the story.”

“But why have I not heard about it? I mean it ought to have been the biggest news item the world has ever known, surely?”

“There was so much concern not to frighten people with what the spots gradually obliterating Neptune actually were that very few people got to understand what the threat was, let alone how it was defeated.”

“Well, I think that in itself is most remarkable.”

“No, I don’t agree. When something happens which is really worthwhile, it tends to go unnoticed. Saving the universe would not even qualify for page twenty-four of your average newspaper, I reckon. It lacks punch. Now, if there was a threat to us all instead that was allowed to surface, that would be on the front page.”

“But because the threat was kept quiet, so was the solution. Intriguing.”

Araminta looked at David. “You believe me, don’t you David?”

“Yes. I would never doubt anything you told me Araminta.” He returned her gaze.

She was obviously pleased. “Thanks for coming,” she said simply. “Although actually, in later years, Bruce would always deny that it was him that was instrumental; he said it was all down to his dad, otherwise they would never have got inside the alien craft.”

“Interesting. Personally I reckon a pianist could be instrumental. Maybe he was just self-effacing.”

“Well, it was pressing the soft pedal down on the king-size piano that did the trick.”

“Of course.”

There was a pause. It was a joy talking to her, but David was feeling terminally tired.

“Look, I feel the need to close my eyes for a bit. There may not be much chance once we arrive. Do you mind?”

“Good idea,” she murmured, “I’ll do the same.”

David settled back and closed his eyes. Then he had a thought.

“Oh, just one more thing. Whatever happened to the other eleven missions?”

“Come again?”

“Bruce’s daydreams were about Mission 12, you said.”

“Haven’t the foggiest.”

“Right. Thanks.”

Fairly soon her breathing began to come heavy. Now that it came to it, David found he was too excited to sleep. He envied her ability to nod off even in these trying circumstances. He gave a sigh. At least he could keep his eyes shut and try to relax.

-oOo-

The change from horizontal flying to vertical descent woke them both up. All around the desert could just be seen in the gathering dusk, stretching away to the horizon.

“What a place,” said Araminta, as the car sank gently down.

“Saving the desert. Now there’s a good idea!” laughed David.

“That was what Jim Pond the inventor set out to do. Hence the mess we find ourselves in.”

“Great.”

Araminta was remarkable. She had lost her husband only a few weeks before, and her boys had gone missing, and yet she was able to have a twinkle in her eye. David was envious, and he knew it. For him, depression was never far away. His attempts to hide it with humour were successful most of the time, but the mask tended to slip when he was on his own in his flat. Never mind. Life could be a lot worse. Try and be grateful.

“There’s the car.” Araminta pointed down. They were going to land close to it.

The blast of hot air which hit them when they opened the doors was terrific, but they were both prepared. The temperature control in the clothing quickly took charge. David had not used it before. It would have been useful on the Athabasca trip, come to think of it.

It only took a minute to establish that the car was fine. Araminta had brought a spare remote control. It opened up happily, powered up with no problem, and seemed in excellent shape. However, the log of journeys had been wiped. In fact the computer claimed there had never been a log.

“That’s weird,” said David thoughtfully. “It would require a greater level of access to the machine than most people have. Okay, let’s lock up and go and look in the caves.”

“Don’t you investigators take fingerprints?” asked Araminta mischievously.

“We leave all that sort of the thing to the staff. Actually, life’s too short. I feel the need to hurry, I don’t know why.”

They turned on their flying suits. The boys had parked the car a couple of miles from the underground entrance, and it seemed wise to copy their example. David was sure that was where they had been headed. There were no footprints at all, which was strange. There should have been some immediately outside the car doors. He wondered what that might mean.

They swooped over the sand dunes and rocky outcrops. The way underground was down in a trench; there was no way you would stumble on it. You had to know it was there. It was almost dark down here.

Ah, this was where the car had first landed. There were plenty of footprints. They must have moved it off to cover their traces. No wonder that Missing Persons had reckoned the car was abandoned. It was good to have come.

The door was ajar. David paused. “They landed here, as you can see. I reckon they went in. Shall we summon the car and have it parked here, or shall we leave it where it is?”

“You decide.”

“We’ll leave it then. We can get it later if we need it. We’ve got the torches and provisions.”

The rucksacks were a bit cumbersome, but they would be fine.

It was dark underground. Like the boys before them, they did not switch on the wall lights.

“Here are their footprints,” said David, indicating with his torch beam on the sandy floor. “Like a herd of elephants.”

There did seem to be a lot of footprints.

“Is all this the work of just two boys?” Araminta whispered.

David peered closely at the ground. “I’m not sure. Maybe others have been in here since. Let’s go cautiously.”

It was madness to go wandering forward into the earth, Araminta reckoned, except for the fact that she was desperate to find her boys. Anybody challenging David and her would be sure to understand that.

They padded quietly along, descending staircase after staircase. Araminta found the thought of all that sand and rock above them somewhat oppressive.

They went forward ever further. David resisted the urge to put a protective arm round the boys’ mum. They were here on a delicate mission.

They eventually passed the place where David had turned back. Before long, they reached the door.

“I never got this far,” David said. “It looks highly secure.” Then he started. “Look,” David urged under his breath. “This door has been opened wide. See the marks on the floor?”

“So somebody has managed to open it despite that.” Araminta pointed at the sizeable combination lock.

“The question is, was it the boys or somebody else? And are they still inside?”

“I’ve been looking for footprints pointing back outside, and there hasn’t been one.”

“I agree. I had the same thought. What do we do now? There’s no way we can follow them.”

Araminta didn't hesitate. She advanced to the door and knocked on it loudly. Rat-a-tat-tat! The dull thuds did not produce an echo of any kind, but they must have been audible inside. They both waited breathless. Then she did it again. They waited for a long time. There was no response.

"Well, I reckon they are in there. Either they have gone too far to hear us, or there's some other explanation."

This was the end of their search. They could not get any further. They knew where the boys had gone, and that was that.

"Is there any other way in, do you think?" asked Araminta.

David shook his head. "It would have been found long ago if there was. No, this is it. I don't know what else we can do."

"Can we try the lock?"

"There will be billions of possible combinations. It's a waste of time."

Araminta peered closely. There were seventeen dials. She spun one. It appeared to have several hundred different signs and numbers to choose from. It did seem hopeless.

They stood there a while longer. Perhaps the boys knew they were there and were on their way.

David sensed rather than heard her give a deep sigh. This was the moment.

"Come here," he said. He held her in his arms for half a minute. She did not resist.

"May I call you Ming, short for Araminta?" he asked as they separated.

"Why on earth?" She was puzzled.

"Yours is a lovely name, but I find it rather a mouthful. Ming vases are highly prized for their great beauty and delicate construction from the finest china. They last for hundreds of years, but they need to be treated with respect, as they are fragile. It all seems apt, somehow."

Araminta was silent for a while.

"No," she said at last, "I don't think I should like that. You see, I may look as you describe, but I know I am only made of earthenware really."

She sensed David's puzzlement, and continued. "'In any great house, there are not only utensils of gold and silver but also others of wood and earthenware. The former are valued, the latter held cheap. To be of use to the master of the house, a man must cleanse himself from all those evil things. Then he will be fit for any profitable purpose.' It's from the Bible. I learnt it once in Sunday School, and I've never forgotten it."

"But you're a woman, not a man."

"The principle's the same. But notice, it's not what you are made of or how highly you are valued that counts. It is the being cleansed that matters. So I've always thought that even though I only have the status of earthenware, or sanitary ware if you like, I can still be of use to my Lord. So please don't call me Ming as it will only confuse me."

"Sanitary ware! What a notion. Well, I suppose even Jesus had to go to the loo!" replied David. "I do love your attitude, even if I don't share your beliefs."

There was no reply, for at that moment, there was a faint sound. David's eyes grew round in disbelief, because one of the dials on the door was turning. Then another, and another.

Araminta was decisive. "Ben! Mark!" she cried, at the same time thrusting David back into the shadows, and fumbling for his torch switch. He immediately grasped her meaning, switched off the torch and withdrew into the darkness, his heart beating rapidly. A moment later, with a rasping sound, the door opened. Arms reached forward to seize Araminta and drew her in. Then with a sickening clang, the door shut once more.

Araminta was inside, and David was outside, undetected. He waited breathless to see what would happen.

Minutes passed. The pall of silence was complete. This was dreadful. What was he to do now?

-oOo-

David switched off his torch as he came out of the exit from the underground bunker. Even though it was now night, it seemed the wise thing to do. For one thing, the stars were magnificent.

Secondly, there was a moon giving sufficient light to see by. His own tiny bulb seemed utterly insignificant, somehow. A kind of cosmic insult. How could puny mankind hope to compete with the lights of the firmament?

It was a good thing that he was looking up, because he quickly became aware of a dark shape descending towards him. Why, it was going to land on top of him. With an exclamation he ran to one side as the heavy object sank onto the sand with a bump.

It was a flying car, supported by four parachutes, making an emergency landing. David had heard of such things before, but he had never expected to see one. How extraordinary!

He had better see if the occupants were alright. He hurried across to the driver's side and banged on the window.

"Are you okay?" he asked anxiously.

The door opened a few inches and a voice replied. "Bit shaken, but pretty good, thanks. How about you, Edith?"

"I'll live," came a woman's voice from the passenger seat. The couple must be in their seventies, David reckoned.

"What made you come down here?" David asked. "Did you get a problem?"

"We was just cruising along when suddenly everything went dead and down we come. It was quite a surprise, wa'nt it Edith."

"Certainly was."

The door opened wide, and the man stepped out. "Mike's the name," he said extending a hand. His face was a mass of wrinkles and his hair was almost white. "Pleased to meet you."

"I'm David," came the reply, as they shook hands. "Do you know where you are?"

"Aven't a clue."

"This is the middle of the Sahara desert."

"Fancy that. Edith, did you 'ear that? This is the middle of the Sahara desert where we've come down."

"Fancy that," replied Edith.

David enjoyed a quiet chuckle. These two were a delightful pair. Did she always limit her remarks to two words, he wondered?

"So what do we do now?" asked Mike.

"The car should reset itself automatically. Give it a minute or two."

That was fine in theory, but David did not like what he saw. There was a total absence of any lights coming from the dashboard of the vehicle. It really did look as if it had gone completely dead. It seemed possible that it was not going to restart.

"Where were you travelling from and to?" he asked.

"Been seein' our daughter in Australia. We're on our way back home. Birmingham."

It seemed an odd route to have come via the Sahara. Then David had an inspiration.

"Did you choose the cheapest route option?" he asked.

"Sure did. Mustn't waste the Lord's money."

Oh dear. Religious people, and prepared to let it intrude into conversation. Try not to get drawn. This cheapest route business was getting ridiculous. Yes, there were advantages to spreading the cars through the skies more thinly, to avoid bottlenecks, but surely the joy of travelling by sky-car was that you could go in a straight line. Now all that was beginning to change. Indeed, Mike and Edith would probably have had several twists and turns as they came along.

"I'll hang about and make sure you're okay."

"Thanks a bundle," said Mike, getting back into the car.

David was still thinking about his own situation. How could he best help the Winter family? Should he ring the girls with the news, which would disturb their night and unsettle them? Or wait until morning? Best to wait. What could he do to move the situation forward? Probably nothing. He could sleep in the car and get going when it became light. There might be another entrance to find for example. Yes, that was probably best.

He fished the remote control out of his pocket and summoned the car. For some reason, he glanced at the little screen as he did so, which was out of character. He knew the key presses by heart and never made a mistake. To his horror he saw the words 'Access denied'. Access denied?! What nonsense was this? Oh well, he would have to fly over to the car and see what was up. He had better see Mike and Edith on their way first.

There was still no sign of life from their machine.

"Have you pressed the reset button?" David asked. That was bound to fix it.

"What's that?"

"Let me look."

Yes, it was in the standard place. David pressed it. The car grunted and groaned, and the lights came up. The parachutes were drawn back into their housings. Everything seemed fine.

"Well, it's good to know that the emergency landing gear was in order. Right, just re-enter your home code and you should be on your way."

"Thanks a lot. You've been a great help."

Mike was painfully slow typing in the numbers and letters. David tried not to watch too obviously.

"What does this mean, David?"

David leant in to study the screen. 'Access denied. Ground mode only'.

This was terrible.

"Mike, I'm sorry to say that the fault was not just with your car. It seems the whole system is down. All you can do is travel along the ground, like in the olden days. You can't get airborne. I've never come across this before."

David's mind was racing. His own car refusing to come. This had all the makings of a severe crisis. What was going on? Fear gripped his heart, for some unknown reason.

"We'll just roll along quiet like. We'll be fine. 'Op in; you can come too.'"

Go with them? Well, perhaps it was a good idea. If the system restored, David reckoned, he could always summon the car. Or fly back to it. These two might be useful. But it was best not to explain what he had been up to. You never knew about people. Going a few miles in their car would cover his tracks. Interesting.

"Okay, thank you. I'd be pleased to come. It's a kind offer."

Edith got out and pointed David to the front, but he was too quick for her. "Kind of you, but I'll be fine in the back," he said.

Not to be outdone, she walked round the car to the other side and got in to the back seat beside David. She looked friendly, but she had lost all pretence of figure long ago, David reckoned, although it was hard to be sure under that massive overcoat.

Mike accepted the car's proposed route Northwards, and away they rolled. The pace was remarkably slow, David reflected. These two were in no hurry.

Edith offered him a sandwich. David realised he was terribly hungry, and accepted it gladly, along with some water from a flask.

Before he was half way through it, Edith turned towards him. "David, do you believe in the Lord?"

This was frightful. David went hot and cold all over. In fact he had never felt so uncomfortable in his life.

"Well, no, I can't say I do. Sorry." Edith would be disappointed.

"Would you like to become a Christian now?"

This was too much. You shouldn't go for the jugular with complete strangers, David reckoned, even if you were mighty in the faith or however these two described themselves. David looked forwards at Mike. He was facing the front quietly. There was clearly no support for him there.

Edith was continuing. "We have both followed the Lord for forty years and I wouldn't have missed a day. We were lost, and he found us. He will find you too, if you let him."

David really did not want to be found. He cleared his throat.

"Well, it's very kind of you to be so concerned..."

“It’s the easiest thing in the world. I’ll lead you in a little prayer if you like.”

There were two thoughts competing in David’s mind as he finished the remaining mouthfuls. One was that this couple, who had just crash-landed in the Sahara desert and had their journey plan completely ruined, because of some system malfunction, were so composed that they could switch into an opportunity to knobble a complete stranger without batting an eyelid. How remarkable was that?

The second thought, surprisingly, was what would Araminta do in this position?

He knew what Sam would do. She would speak harshly to the lady and hurt her, which would silence her. But Araminta would behave very differently. Their characters were opposite; David had come to see that. It was Araminta he wanted to copy when it came to behaviour. He needed to let this lady down gently.

“Edith, I appreciate you being so concerned for me, and I’m impressed with the way you and Mike have followed the Lord all these years, as you put it.” It was the most crazy fairy-tale notion, of course, but it had a delightful charm about it too. “I’m afraid I can’t join in your faith. I know too much about science and technology, for one thing. The world of the Bible and the real world have nothing in common, you know. Sorry to be dispiriting.”

“When Jesus walked on the hills of Galilee, were they different hills to now or the same?”

“Well, the same, naturally.”

“Then how can a lot of theories about the way things work change that?”

“Well...” It was so hard to explain things to people who simply did not have the concepts available. “But there’s all that stuff about casting out demons, whereas we know now what causes a lot of these diseases and psychotic states.”

“So what?”

Edith did not seem the least bit flustered by anything he said. She was clearly set for a long session. David had the feeling that nothing he said would be of any use in deflecting her.

“But we just don’t have demons around today. There aren’t any!”

“How would you know? In the Bible, they only ever surfaced in Jesus’ presence. They don’t feature in the other parts, do they? So you would only become aware of demons today if you were in Jesus’ presence, and my guess is you’ve never been there.”

This was crazy. You can’t talk to people whose mindset is so rigid. But David had an idea. Araminta and her children were all Christians. There was an opportunity here to gain some insight into their faith. Also, the quickest way to silence Edith would be to appear to give in. There was no harm in it.

“Alright Edith, you win. You can say a prayer for me. But don’t expect me to swallow everything you believe, will you.”

“Of course I wouldn’t. Father, I pray for this poor benighted soul. Thank you that we found him alone in the desert. Turn his life around so that he can become a worker in your vineyard. Amen.”

“Amen,” echoed David and Mike in unison. That was one thing David did know about, saying Amen when the person had finished. It must mean something, he thought, but I don’t know what.

“Now David.” Edith was continuing. “You must give the Lord complete control of your life, otherwise you will stay lost. You haven’t been doing too well being in charge of your own life, have you?”

This was serious. How did Edith know his own life was so out of control? David’s palms began to sweat. He was about to speak, but she was in full flow.

“Always ask what Jesus would do. That’s the secret.”

Was that it? Was that how Araminta lived? It was a new idea.

“Right. I just need to...”

“Starting from now.” David felt a surge of annoyance. This woman did not listen to anything he said. Surely she should listen to him. That seemed basic.

“Alright then.” David’s irritation showed in his voice. “Give me a moment to reflect.”

What had Jesus done when he had been in the desert? It was an intriguing question. Then David remembered. He had fasted for forty days and nights. Great. No chance of him doing that, although

one sandwich had been far from enough to fill him. But there was more. Jesus had resisted temptation all that time. That was intriguing.

Suddenly, David knew what to say. Hopefully, Edith would understand this.

“Look, I’m sorry. I deceived you just now. I have no intention of following Jesus, but I gave the opposite impression for two reasons. I have friends who are Christians, and I was intrigued as to what you would say if I showed interest. But also, I did not feel like being pressurised, so I thought that if I gave in, it might silence you. I see now that was wrong. I apologise.”

Mike spoke from the front seat. “Well done, David. I di’n’t think you were sincere. Thanks for layin’ it on the line.”

David felt pleased. Mike showed considerable understanding.

“You know,” Mike continued thoughtfully, “you’re closer to the kingdom than you think. You’ll be a Nazirite Shock Trooper yet!”

No way. David was not going in for any weird sect stuff. Don’t even ask what one of those is. It will only encourage them.

“Right. Well, thanks again.” The first streaks of pale light were appearing in the eastern sky. “Look, I need to get out now. You should be fine. It will take you a good thirty-six hours if you have to stay on the surface all the way, but the system may perk up again. You know you can even cross the sea like this if necessary, as if the car was a boat, but a few feet above the waves?”

“Yes. You’ve been so ‘elpful,” Mike said.

Edith spoke up again. “Wasn’t it great that God made us land where we did so we could meet you!”

Once again, David felt completely bewildered. That was the craziest notion. As if God would knock out the sky navigation system causing huge disruption just so that this elderly couple and he should meet.

The car had stopped. Mike was handing him a card. “Keep in touch,” he said.

“Thank you,” murmured David. Not much chance of that! He climbed out. Yes, the sun would be up soon. The night felt to have been very short. He waved them goodbye as the car set off Northwards once more.

He glanced at the card. Their surname was Batts. This was too much! David laughed out loud. But actually, on reflection, they weren’t bats at all. In their own way, they were entirely consistent. In fact, there was much to admire about them. They were completely unfazed by what had happened to them. It would be nice to have a faith like theirs in some ways. Shame it was out of the question. There was so much in the Bible that did not add up. All that killing, for example.

Do what Jesus would do. It was an intriguing idea. David pondered it for a moment. Then he smiled. Why, in owning up to his deception, he had just carried out that very principle. He may have got it wrong first time, but second time, he had resisted temptation in the desert. How funny!

Now. To be practical. Being closeted in the car with Edith in outreach mode may have had its drawbacks, but it had served David’s purpose pretty well. Even if anyone had come after him, which they wouldn’t, because how could they know he was there at all, then they still would not detect anything. There was nothing to link him to the two cars parked a few miles away, except that two people had come from the second of those cars in the first place, perhaps. They might have been able to deduce a second person being around from careful study. But there were no clues of anyone returning there.

Now it was a case of scanning the plateau for another entrance. Dawn was the best time, as the sun being low would make every disturbance in the ground show up clearly. At midday, the task would be much harder.

David skimmed over the dunes and was soon there. He floated this way and that over the area. Even after all this time, there was still debris lying there, casting long shadows. None of the special glass, and nothing of value. Mostly it was the rocks that had been used in the golf terrain. To David’s surprise, there was a door lying on the ground, with the words ‘Control Room’ on it. Now why had nobody made off with that? It seemed most odd. Normally, anything in Africa that had the slightest potential was gathered up. The people had a wonderful attitude to recycling.

David glided carefully to and fro, sometimes high up and sometimes low. Really there was nothing to be seen! It was surprising how much sand there was up here, considering it had all been brought specially, according to Bruce. Perhaps that was suspicious. If there was an entrance, it would be possible to bury it easily enough. However, if you were going down into the earth through it, then you would inevitably leave some signs of your passage.

David's brain was slowly getting into gear. Suppose there was an entrance, and you wanted it covered over from prying eyes when you were inside, but easily accessible to get out from again. After using it, you would arrange for a thin layer of sand to be deposited on it from a sky car or something similar. That would leave no trace of the entrance. So, was there any way he could investigate the vehicles that had flown over this part of the desert at low altitude?

It seemed a tall order. Wait a minute - what was that shimmering over there?

David flew cautiously across the hilltop to investigate. When he was still a hundred metres off, he paused. There was no doubt about it. A thin rain of sand was falling from about thirty feet, apparently from nowhere, onto an area ten metres square. It must be a sky vehicle, on full invisibility, doing just what he had imagined!

This was utterly extraordinary. Somebody must have just entered. But no; he had not seen anyone. Perhaps sand was scattered like this every day, or maybe only occasionally when there had been enough wind to disturb the surface. Probably at first light, when nobody would be about, but there would be enough light for the on-board cameras to operate happily. Yes that would be it.

It was astonishing that he should have been around to witness it. "Thank you God," David breathed under his breath.

Then immediately he checked himself. What had he just said? Oh no, the Edith business was getting to him. Take a grip! God had nothing to do with it, or at least, there was no way he could tell whether he did or not. Maybe there was a God and he was looking out for Araminta and her boys. Anyway, whatever the reason, the fact was that he now knew that there was another way in, probably a manhole, in the middle of the sanded area, shielded from view. It was a great discovery.

Hang on a minute. That vehicle, whatever it was, was suspended in the air. David glided off a few hundred paces, whipped out his remote control and tried to summon his vehicle. No, the system was still down. Whatever was going on? It meant that the people operating here had a way of flying independent of the satellites. That could be important.

Now what was happening? There were ructions in the sand where the manhole must be. Oh gracious, it was opening. Some of the sand was blown aside, and the rest of it slithered into the gradually widening hole. This was ridiculous - covering up the entrance one moment and then opening it the next. The enemy or enemies, or whoever it was down there were not well organised. Clearly the left hand did not know what the right hand was doing. That seemed cause for hope.

Oh dear. A column of black smoke was beginning to rise from the hole. As David stared at it, it gradually grew thicker and thicker. That did not look right. Did it mean there was a serious fire below ground? What about Araminta and the boys?

David was completely unsure of what to do. Should he charge forward and attempt to rescue them? If he did, would he only get caught in the blaze himself? But if he stood back, they might be dying at this very moment.

In his agony of indecision, he suddenly had an inspiration. The New Testament principle again! That was where he had heard the phrase about left and right hands being out of sync recently. How odd that the words should come to his mind here and now. But wait... Were the ones who had kidnapped him and the people under his feet one and the same group? Were the current car problems their work, maybe, since they had said they were about to swing into action and everybody would soon know?

David froze. He had stumbled on something big here. The awful weight of responsibility bore down on him. Unwittingly and unwillingly, he was in the front line. A great deal might hinge on what he did in the next few moments. It was a horrible feeling.

As he dithered, the smoke grew ever thicker, and the column of it grew wider. The way down into the earth was evidently larger than he had expected. He watched, horrified. Then he shrank

back in terror. Something was coming up out of the pit. He gazed in fascination. No, not just one. Why, there were hundreds, even thousands of them...

Suddenly he knew what to do. The coincidences were too frequent and too many. The answer was staring him in the face.

He shot away from the terrible opening as quick as he could, his arm stretched out, and flew away from the hilltop. The question was, would he be in time?

-oOo-

“Louise, the only safe thing to do is to stay in. There will be people rampaging about out there. You could get hurt.” Chloe was adamant.

“But we’re going to need more food.”

“That’s what everybody will say. Suppose we do make it as far as the supermarket. There will be fighting and looting. What chance have three defenceless girls got when law and order is breaking down?”

Hannah joined in. “You really think it’ll be as bad as that?”

“Yes I do. Alien invasion announced, then total shutdown of everything for hour after hour. No communications. Sky cars won’t fly. Why ever did they lock all the cars into the wretched satellite system? People warned at the time that in an emergency, every vehicle could be grounded.”

“I just wish we could get some news as to what’s really happening.” Louise was worried.

“I reckon our best course is to bar the door and watch for the TV to come back on again,” Chloe said. “You can bet that they will be working on it.”

Chloe was born for emergencies, Hannah reckoned. She was in her element taking charge and telling them what to do.

“Okay Louise,” Chloe continued, “tell us again what the bulletin was saying. Try and get every detail.”

“‘We’re just getting reports of a suspected invasion from outer space.’ I’m pretty certain those were the words. Oh yes. There was a blurred photo ‘from beyond...’ That was the last phrase before it all went down.”

Hannah spoke again. “I think what I find so frightening is that it should have been going on for fourteen hours. Generally any glitches are handled more or less instantaneously. It’s obviously really serious.”

“Yes,” said Chloe simply. “We’re just going to have to sit it out.”

There was silence for some moments. Then “No!” said Hannah decisively. “This won’t do. I’m going next door to see if Mrs. Phillips is alright. If we’re scared, you can bet that she is feeling even worse. Dad’s first thought would have been for the homeless, wouldn’t it, when he was well, I mean? So I say we keep on doing what’s right even when the alien ships are filling the sky from end to end raining down fire and brimstone on us. Agreed?”

Chloe laughed. “Good for you, Hen. Louise and I will guard the fort while you go and see to Mrs. Phillips. Only if she offers you a cup of tea, make sure you clean the mug out first!”

“I hope it doesn’t really come to guarding the fort,” Louise added thoughtfully as Hannah fetched her coat.

Mrs. Phillips lived two doors away. She was not quite a recluse, but she seldom came out. Bruce had got to know her in his own way. He had gained her confidence, so whenever there was a little job like a light bulb to change, she would ring him and he would go round. Latterly this task had fallen to the twins.

Everything looked normal in their road at least, Hannah thought as she walked along. She knocked firmly on Mrs. Phillips’ door. Her hearing was none too good.

“Who’s there?” asked a quivery voice from behind the door after half a minute.

“It’s Hannah Winter from two doors up, Mrs. Phillips.”

There was a pause while bolts were drawn back, and then the door opened.

“Come in,” said Mrs. Phillips, wreathed in smiles. “I’m so glad you’ve come.”

Hannah thrust down her first thought, which was that the drab green dress really could use a wash. At least there was some colour in the old lady's gaunt cheeks. She was good for a year or two yet, provided she didn't catch something from one of her own teacups.

"How are you keeping, Mrs. Phillips?" Hannah enquired.

"Mustn't grumble at my age. Eighty-nine in a few weeks, you know."

"Terrific. I can't compete at all." Mrs. Phillips loved to mention her age in passing

"Never mind, dear. You won't have to be young for ever, you know." There was a twinkle in her eye. Hannah laughed.

"Are you alright?"

"Never better. Why do you ask?"

Ah. She hadn't discovered about the shutdown yet.

"There are problems. There's nothing on TV, and there are rumours of aliens."

"Really?" Mrs. Phillips switched on her set. To Hannah's astonishment, the picture came up. Service must have been restored in the last few minutes. There was a news bulletin under way.

"...are still sketchy, but it seems as if the outer reaches of the solar system may be under threat. These images clearly show a man who has been killed. We will of course keep you posted. It may be that there will be more shut-downs. The advice is..."

At that moment the signal died away, and the screen went blank. The service was off again!

"Well!" Mrs. Phillips was most surprised. "I haven't seen a fault like that in ever so long. It used to happen sometimes when I was a girl."

Hannah had become very excited. She could hardly contain herself.

"Mrs. Phillips, I need to return home, but what I want to say is this. Don't go out unless you need to. Keep yourself warm and fed. One of us will look in later on. Don't worry; we will take care of you."

Mrs. Phillips was looking most puzzled. "You make it sound as if there is a crisis, my dear."

"There is, but not the one I thought there was a few minutes ago. Keep the chain on the door. See you later. Sorry to have to rush."

Hannah was already going through the front door as she finished saying these words. There was no time to be lost. Mrs. Phillips would be fine.

Hannah burst into their home all breathless. "Did you see it?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Chloe. "What do you reckon?" They could see that Hannah was excited.

"That body was Arthur!" Hannah exclaimed. The others looked puzzled.

"Glow, don't you remember when we were little? Jim Pond the Inventor took us on a long journey to his space station. You remember, surely? Ben loved working the zoom on the telescope."

"Yes. What of it?"

"Well, do you remember that later on, after the island went down, Dad ended up taking the homeless men to the space station by mistake, and one of them committed suicide by jumping out of the big doors into empty space? It was after they got back that the homeless houses closed, following the crowbar incident, and Dad sold them all. He was really upset about it."

"Yes, I remember all that."

"Well, I reckon that clip they just broadcast was of Arthur, the one that died."

Chloe thought for a moment. There was no way she was going to be swept along by her sister's enthusiasm.

"But I thought his body went into orbit round Saturn," she said after moment.

"That was only Dad's guess. Maybe he did. That was years ago. Perhaps he's come back round and reached the space station again. Or maybe his leap never reached escape velocity, and he has been going round and round the space station ever since. I don't know. What does it matter? The point is, I reckon that grey shape in the background was not an alien spaceship at all, but Jim Pond's place, with Arthur floating around in front of it."

Hannah was breathless. It was vital that her sisters believe her. She looked from one to the other.

Louise was dubious. "I don't think you know what you are talking about."

Chloe was uncertain. "Well, you may be right, but I wouldn't bank on it."

Hannah felt impatient, but despite her sense of urgency, she knew it was important to have her sisters on board, so she controlled herself with a great effort.

“Alright. Let’s just say it’s possible I’m right. We need to get word to the authorities. You see why don’t you?” Both the other girls looked blank. “Because if I am right, then there is no alien invasion. It’s all a misunderstanding.”

“But in that case,” Chloe objected thoughtfully, “why the blackouts?”

“Exactly!” said Hannah triumphantly. “I reckon it’s got nothing to do with outside interference. I reckon it’s the work of people who are up to no good! There’s something really bad happening and humans are responsible.”

-oOo-

Hannah hurried up the road. It was all very well trying to contact the MP, and he had known their Dad, but Hannah was unknown to him, and he would very likely take no notice. However, his office was literally a few minutes walk, and with there being no communications, it seemed the best idea to go there. Surely those people must have emergency systems for being in touch with the authorities?

Within a minute, she reached the back of the queue of cars. Of course, everyone had to keep to ground level. Her father would have found this a familiar sight, but to Hannah a traffic jam on the road was a new experience. How difficult life must have been before the sky-cars came in, she thought to herself.

Hannah was soon at the door of the building, known as Cromwell house, in honour of the great parliamentarian. There was the inevitable speakerphone. Hannah pressed the button. Would there be anyone there?

“Yes?” asked a female voice.

“I have an important message for the MP about what is happening at present, about the threat of alien invasion.”

There was a pause. Then the voice spoke again.

“I am required to caution you against wasting the time of the MP. On entering these premises, you agree to abide by our security procedures. You will be required to identify yourself and your business. There may be a delay while your request is considered. It is unlikely that your business will be concluded on this initial visit. Do I make myself clear?”

“Look, I am genuine. I just want to speak to the man. It won’t take long.”

“I’m sorry, the protocols are in place for a reason.”

“Oh very well. Let’s get on with it.” All this security. At times it could be maddening.

The lock buzzed and Hannah entered. She found herself in a vestibule.

“Iris scan,” said a mechanical voice. Hannah complied. There was a pause. “Fingerprint,” came the voice again. Hannah inserted her index finger into the machine. When the twins had first encountered all this hardware as twelve year-olds, they had been excited. But the novelty soon palled. Now Hannah found the checks as tiresome as her parents did. The thing to do was to settle your mind to it and not complain.

The light shone out briefly, making her finger glow. Then the lady came back on the line.

“State your name and business.”

“I am Hannah Winter, daughter of Bruce Winter the renowned Piano Teacher, and I have an important message for the MP concerning the current threat of alien invasion.”

Every time Hannah repeated her intention, it sounded a little less convincing. Who was going to take an eighteen-year-old seriously?

There was another delay. Then the lady spoke again.

“I’m sorry, Miss Winter, but the MP is too busy...”

“Look this is really important.”

The lady was not to be hurried. “Even if you did have something important to say, we would need prior medical clearance. You would need to demonstrate to our satisfaction that you are of sound mind and fully cognisant...”

“Sound mind? What do you mean?”

“It seems there is mental instability in the family. This invokes protocol A549 when approaching authority. If you wish to challenge your entry in File, the procedure...”

“Are you talking about my sister, perhaps?” That was probably it. Chloe’s supposed hallucination and visit to casualty could be going to cost them dear. Why did the nurses have to make an entry in File? And why was it accessible to this woman anyway? Also, it wasn’t as if she herself was Chloe. There were endless questions racing through Hannah’s mind.

“The twin relationship is classified...”

Hannah did not listen to the rest. Great. Now she was registered as psychotic or something all because her mum had insisted they go to casualty. This was maddening.

The lady was continuing. “It also appears that your brothers have been reported to Missing Persons, and that a car with your family’s chassis number has been found abandoned overseas. In the circumstances, I will have to detain you pending examination by a security officer. Proceed through the door.” Another buzzing sound came from a door leading further into the building as the lock was disengaged.

Hannah was livid. This was too much.

“No thanks. I’m going,” she announced. However, the outer door would not open. There was no way of letting herself out of the building. She was trapped.

“We would advise full cooperation Miss Winter. When you enter the interview room, you will find a black plastic tray. All the contents of your pockets should be placed in this, and the tray inserted into the opening marked Personal Effects. In most cases, these are returned to you in full at the end of the interview. There is a coffee machine, and magazines on the table. Thank you for your cooperation.”

Hannah groaned. There seemed no choice other than to go through and comply. Maybe the security officer would have a little more sense!

This door also clicked shut behind her. Locked, no doubt. After she had carried out the required pocket clearance and inserted the tray in its slot, she went over to the coffee machine. To her dismay, it was cold. Nobody had seen to it that morning, clearly.

Then the screen on the side wall flickered into life. “The estimated delay is currently twenty-five minutes. Thank you for your patience.”

It had seemed a good idea to come in person, as on the phone, had the system been working, one was apt to be trapped in endless voice mail. Now it seemed that this would be no quicker. It turned out that the magazines were all years out of date. Oh well. Hannah tried to swallow her frustration and settled down to wait.

-oOo-

As the minutes lengthened and Hannah still did not reappear, Chloe found herself growing increasingly restless. She hoped nothing had happened to her sister.

She had also become more and more convinced that Hannah’s notion was right, despite herself. For one thing, Louise was fairly certain that when the TV struggled back to life for those few minutes, it was simply replaying what had been the last item of news to be put out before the shut-down. It was almost as if somebody wanted to make quite sure that everybody had grasped the notion of invasion from space. What better way of doing that than to impose hours of blackout, then to raise it just long enough for the news to get through, only to close it all down again?

She was not normally given to worrying, but despite that, gloomy thoughts filled Chloe’s mind. Suppose the authorities had been over-powered, and there was a megalomaniac in charge now? How did terrible dictators come to power? Wasn’t it through force, and wasn’t a news blackout almost always part of it?

Just then, the doorbell rang. Chloe checked herself. "Who is it?" she enquired, before opening the door.

"Gnilla!" came the reply.

This was excellent. Chloe only hoped that she had not got the obnoxious Sylvia with her. She seemed to manage to pick up the most unsavoury boys. Shame; she and Sylvia had been good friends once.

Gnilla came in, unaccompanied. "Who's home?" she asked. There was a bulging rucksack on her back.

"Only Louise and me, keeping an eye. Mum's gone on a boy hunt with David - sorry, I didn't mean it like that, oh dear it sounds dreadful!"

Chloe was convulsed with fits of laughter. Gnilla had to pat her on the back. All communication was rendered impossible for at least a minute.

While Chloe was still laughing fit to burst and struggling for breath, Louise called out. "TV's back."

Gnilla and Chloe went through.

"We do apologise for our absence over the last fourteen hours. A thorough investigation is being made of the cause of the breakdowns, naturally, but until this is concluded, you are advised to use your car in ground mode, and only to take off in an absolute emergency. Reports are already coming in of instances of cars crashing down out of control when the black-out began."

The voice continued, but Chloe broke in. "So they don't know why it failed. That's not good. I hate the thought of people plunging to their deaths."

"We were always assured that could never happen," Gnilla said sadly. "I don't understand it. They must have modified the cars in some way. Jim Pond would never have marketed a vehicle that could fail in that manner."

"Gnilla," said Chloe, "I'm glad you've come."

Louise interrupted her by pointing out of the window. It was an extraordinary sight. People were disregarding the warning in droves. The whole world seemed to be taking to the sky in their cars at once.

"It's like a flock of crows being disturbed and rising up from a field," Gnilla commented.

Chloe needed to speak.

"Gnilla, please concentrate. We reckon this image they have been showing of proposed alien invasion is really Jim Pond's space station."

"Oh yes," said Gnilla without hesitation. "The moment we saw it, Bill got on to the authorities. He was cut off mid call, but he thought they would have had the gist of it. He will be on the phone again now."

This was heartening. "Hannah's gone to tell the MP."

"Well. She won't get far with him! You've never met him, clearly."

"No, we haven't."

"Oh well, no harm in trying. He may be good at winning elections but his skills don't go any further than that, I'm afraid."

"Right." Perhaps Bill's efforts would be more successful.

"I wanted to find out whether you were all okay."

"I'm fine. The boys are still missing. Mum and David went to look for them, so they will have been in the Sahara while all this has been going on. Louise is keeping her end up."

"Good for Louise. I hope your Mum's okay, and David and that the boys are soon found. Anyway, I've bought you some food. I thought you might not want to venture out with all the uncertainty, so I got Bill to get extra. As a matter of fact, he had no difficulty."

"Oh?"

"Well, in the old days, when something like this happened, there was always the fear that the mob might rise, but the recent security measures really do seem to be working. Once the red lights come on, indicating that the security systems are alerted and will activate at the first sign of trouble,

it seems to concentrate everybody's mind. When Bill went to the supermarket, it was all completely normal."

"That's a relief." Actually, Chloe felt curiously disappointed. This supposed emergency seemed to be becoming less of a crisis by the minute. It had been rather fun while it lasted.

"Look," said Gnilla, "just to be on the safe side, let's put out a press release about the images. How about 'Announcement from the Estate of Bruce Winter' His name should still command respect."

"I doubt it," said Chloe. "Very few people ever knew that he saved the universe. I think it was wrong."

"Alright. What about this. 'Jim Pond's Legacy. Who would have thought that pictures of the great inventor's space station in orbit round Saturn would spark a world-wide panic of alien invasion? This is exactly what has happened. The body in the photos is that of Arthur, a homeless man who committed suicide from the space station some twelve years ago by throwing himself out into space.' Then give our contact details"

"Gnilla, it will do no good at all. Still, we'll send it, and it's possible that somebody may take some notice."

The message was soon composed. Putting it out to the news media was a doddle; the computer took charge of it. However, the only trouble with it being so easy to send out a press release was that the news people now received so many of them that most were only read by machine. Really, you had to construct your message carefully to include certain key words and avoid others to have any chance of success. The girls did not know this.

-oOo-

"Name?" asked the security man. He did not look promising to Hannah. He appeared elderly and set in his ways.

"Hannah Winter. Look, I need to..."

"Occupation?"

It was no good arguing with people who had a form to fill in. Hannah bit her lip. All this information was held in File in any event. Why waste time copying out onto paper? Why did officialdom still use paper at all?

There were a dozen other pointless questions. The answers were all recorded in longhand.

"Now," said the man. "Make your point."

"The news bulletin of supposed invasion from space showed pictures of a dead man floating in front of a space station. My sister and I recognised the setting. It was Jim Pond's space station at Saturn, and the dead man's name is Arthur. He committed suicide by jumping out of the space station about ten years ago. The reason we know is that Jim Pond and his wife Pikel took my parents and my brother and sister and me on a visit there some years earlier. The episode with Arthur happened on a subsequent visit. My father, Mrs. Pond and other homeless men were present on that occasion."

The security man stared at Hannah as if she was mad. After a while he spoke.

"Why isn't your father reporting this?"

Hannah bit her lip. "He died a few weeks ago. You may have seen it in the Lookout, although the obituary was admittedly rather small."

"Mrs. Pond, where is she?"

"I have no idea."

"And the homeless men?"

"They used to live in our houses, but the project came to an end when my father's health failed, and they dispersed long ago. My guess is that they will all be dead by now, at least, the ones who returned to the roads will be. Life expectancy isn't that long for people who lack all shelter, you know."

The security man pondered a minute.

“It’s a fantastic story,” he said at last. “However, I will pass it on to the MP. We have your details. Should he wish to contact you, he will be able to do so. However, to be blunt, I don’t hold out much hope. This failure of communications has really caused a great deal of concern behind the scenes, as I’m sure you can appreciate.”

“That’s just it,” Hannah persisted. “They should stop worrying about aliens, and start asking what humans are behind it. This crisis is home grown, not from an external source. Don’t you see?”

“I will pass it on to the MP as I promised. However, I do have one piece of news which will comfort you.”

Hannah looked at him questioningly.

“Although your story seems far-fetched, I have no doubt that you are of sound mind. I also perceive that you believe your account completely, and that your motive in coming here was to be helpful. That being the case, I can waive all the security checks that we could have pursued with regard to the missing family members and car. However, I do require one thing from you. You are not to mention your concern to anyone other than the appropriate authorities. Should you break this obligation, you can expect the severest penalties. Scare mongering is a criminal offence. Do I make myself clear?”

Hannah nodded. This man was better than she had first surmised. Whoever had employed him knew their business.

“I don’t know your name,” she said simply.

The man looked surprised. “They all know me as Richard here,” he smiled.

“Right, then. Richard, I accept your instruction, on condition that you treat my statement with the seriousness it deserves.”

“Rest assured, I will.” Richard stood up, and stretched out his hand. Hannah shook it warmly. The tray slid out of the wall and the doors opened. She was free to go.

After she had gone, Richard sat quietly for a few moments. Then his hand reached for the telephone, and he dialled a number.

It was only as she was walking back down the road that Hannah recalled that although he had been meticulous in recording answers to her earlier questions, none of her report had been committed to writing. How could he possibly remember all those details? Unless the whole interview had been recorded in some way. But in that case, why bother with the forms?

She shook her head. It didn’t make any sense. She had done her duty in making her statement, true, but she had no sense that anything good would come out of it. And now she had given her word not to mention her opinion to others. So were they any further forward?

-oOo-

David did not know what his top flying speed was, but he was sure of one thing at least; it was quicker than the Batt’s car had been going. They had been crawling along. All the same, unless they had actually stopped for coffee or to admire the view, it was going to be a job to find them. He reckoned he had been about forty minutes at the plateau, so they would have gone at least another twenty miles.

It would have been easier if he could have flown up high, but that was the one thing he could not afford to do. He would just have to trust to his judgement and hope for the best. Edith would have been praying for guidance in his situation, no doubt about it, but things were not as dire as that yet.

Ah. There was a rocky outcrop he recognised from his earlier flight back to the hilltop. He was on the right lines.

David flew on and on at top speed. The sun was rising all the time, and the desert was beginning to shimmer in the heat. He was going to have to attend to his bodily needs soon. Water and food, and a visit to the loo were all becoming increasingly urgent, but there was no time to stop now.

David recalled reading a book once about a man who had broken the speed record for flying an aeroplane across the Atlantic in the early days. Everyone had hailed him as a hero. He did not feel comfortable about it, as the book revealed, because what had made him step on the gas was his

overpowering longing for a drink. His confession had led to him writing the book, which ended with the most powerful denunciation of alcohol that David had ever seen.

Well, he was in a hurry for a very different reason. He flew on.

Fantastic! There was the car, coasting along a foot or two above the sand. It would be capable of going at least double the speed. David was thankful for the Batts' relaxed approach to life.

He glanced behind him as he neared the car. To his horror, the black smoke had spread out like a huge mushroom cloud at a great height. It must be visible for many miles. How extraordinary.

David slackened his speed, drew level with the driver's window and tapped on it. Mike glanced over, smiled and the car pulled up.

David landed abruptly, somewhat breathless, as the door opened.

"Mike, Edith, am I glad to have found you. Now I need your help. What does the Bible have to say about pits?"

"David. It's grand to see you. You must be 'xhausted and 'ungry. Climb in and tell us everything."

"There's no time," David urged, as he made his way into the back seat next to Edith, who was still there. She gave him a welcoming smile. Why hadn't she moved to the front, David wondered? He accepted the proffered sandwich and the flask of water. These two were a godsend. Whoops! Steady on, don't get carried away.

"Pits," David repeated between mouthfuls. "What does the Bible have on pits?"

"Obadiah was the greatest of David's mighty men," Mike intoned grandly. "He went down unarmed into a pit and slew a lion on a snowy day."

Lion. That did not figure, surely?

"There's Daniel and the lions den too, David. That was below ground."

"No Edith, we're on the wrong tack. What other pits are there?"

"When Abraham routed the confederate kings, some of the fugitives from the army fell into bitumen pits as they tried to escape." Mike certainly knew his Bible, David reflected.

"Sodom and Gomorrah," Edith proposed. "The smoke from their burning was like that of a lime kiln."

David's heart began to race.

"No, Edith, there's nowt about pits in that story," Mike interrupted.

"Hang on," said David, who was feeling troubled, "are these stories really in the Bible? I thought it was a book about Jesus."

"That's the New Testament, David."

"That's what I'm talking about, the New Testament."

"We've been quoting the Old Testament."

This was exasperating. Why were they so slow-witted?

"But look, I asked you, what references are there to pits in the Bible. Isn't that clear enough? Why start on about the Old Testament for goodness sake?"

There was a pause. "David," said Mike, "I think there's confusion here. Perhaps you don't know that the Bible is made up of two parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament."

This was news to David. "Oh. I thought the Bible and the New Testament were one and the same thing."

"No," explained Edith. "The first part of what we know as the Bible comprises the old Hebrew Bible. That's the part that the Jews recognise. We refer to it as the Old Testament. But when Jesus came, the New Testament was added, written in Greek. It's much shorter, only about a quarter as long as the Hebrew section. The Jews don't acknowledge that part of it. Christians use the word Bible to refer to both Old and New Testaments taken together."

"I see. So the New Testament is just part of the Bible. Okay, well I need pits in the New Testament. Forget the Old." All these theological niceties were wasting time.

David could see his request was a head-scratcher for them.

"I don't think there are any pits," Edith began, but Mike interrupted her.

"Revelations," he said simply.

“Oh.” Edith was clearly uncomfortable.

“Edith finds the Book of Revelations fright’ning, to the point where she finds it very difficult to look at it. But Edith, I keep telling you, the message of Revelations is that God has everythin’ under control!”

David sensed Mike’s reluctance to go any further. The Book of Revelations was clearly a point of difficulty between them.

David’s jaw dropped open. How could this be? How could Nazirite shock troops or whatever they were be frightened of part of the warrior’s handbook? It made no sense!

“David, Revelations is full of trouble and danger, and all sorts of horrible things happening. You look at it if you like. It’s right at the end.” Edith was thrusting a black leather volume into David’s hands. She was clearly upset.

It was years since he had handled a Bible. He quickly turned to the index. The final entry was Revelation; there was no S at the end of the word. He turned to it and began scanning the pages. Was there a clue somewhere here?

All this time, the car was continuing Northward, but that would be no harm. It might well be a good thing. He would be more use away from the terrible mound than near it.

He ran his eye over the text. The story seemed to be of John’s visions. There was a lot of criticism of some churches in the opening chapters, which seemed in order to David, judging by what he knew of them, and then an extraordinary account of God on his throne. The concept of a sea of glass was quite something nowadays; it must have seemed fabulous to the ancient world.

Next seven seals on a scroll were opened one by one, sparking off conflict and famine, if that was how the armed horsemen riding off were to be interpreted. Then there was a song of praise from 144,000 people who had escaped somehow. Nice for them. Still no mention of pits.

Now, what was this? Seven angels blowing trumpets. This was weird! A third of the trees and grass were scorched, a third of the fish in the sea died, there was blood everywhere. This seemed to be a prediction of severe environmental pollution. But how could angels be responsible for it? David was out of his depth and he knew it.

Hang on, what was this? A star fell to earth, causing the water to go bitter. That would make an enormous pit. In fact a full-blown star falling to earth would destroy it. But a pit would be formed if a nuclear reactor over-heated. A nuclear fission plant is a man-made star in a way, David was aware. The thermo-nuclear processes in both are the same. If a reactor overheats so much that there is a runaway reaction, then yes, it would cause a meltdown, and the hot material would flow downwards into the earth’s crust, vaporising the rock in its path, like a volcano in reverse, and causing huge pollution to the water table. That would make a pit alright.

Was that it? A deliberate meltdown in the Sahara? But whatever for?

What had Jim Pond put under the Golf complex? The word replicator could cover almost anything. Perhaps it was nuclear powered, whatever it was.

“I think I’ve found it,” David said, full of concern. “I’m afraid it’s really bad news. Oh, hang on a minute.”

He had remembered what had come up in the smoke. Also, the word pit had not actually appeared in the text about the falling star. Perhaps there would be more information. He went on down the page carefully.

Oh dear. This was it. It had to be. Angel five’s trumpet sent another star to the earth. This star was given the key to the abyss. That was certainly a pit, and a deep one at that. When ‘he’ opened it (how can you call a star he?), smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. And out of the smoke came locusts... scorpions... power to harm people, torture them... rushing into battle... the troops numbered two hundred million...

No wonder Edith was scared by this stuff. This required careful thought.

“Right. I’ve found the pit I was looking for. Now I want you to help me. Please would you take this message in person to Sam.” David scrawled her address on the top of the paper, and then a quick message below, signing himself ‘The Investigator’ in case the letter should fall into the wrong hands. “Now, whatever you do, don’t send the message electronically or over the phone as...”

He got no further. The car computer was returning to normal.

“Oh look,” said Mike, who was clearly delighted. “The system’s back. Now we can get goin’ again.”

“No!” shouted David, who sensed rather than felt the tiny invader attach itself to the car. “Get out now!”

He was already opening his door and hurling himself out as he spoke. Mike and Edith were slow to react. They looked totally puzzled as well they might.

“Get out!” screamed David, running round to Edith’s side to pull her out by force if needs be.

He was too late. His own door slammed shut with a violent crash and the car lurched upwards, all in one movement; not with the usual controlled vertical ascent, but with a wild chaotic flight as of a cardboard shack whirled aloft by a hurricane. Within seconds it disappeared into the enormous dark pall of smoke which had spread overhead. Even as he stood staring upwards in dismay, the sun was blotted out by the mounting darkness and an unnatural gloom spread over the desert.

He was alone and powerless. What should he do now?

-oOo-

There was no point in staring at the clouds any longer. Mike and Edith were gone, and there was nothing David could do to help them.

He looked down at the ground, in order to help ease his neck as much as anything. There at his feet lay the Bible. How strange. His phone and pack had gone in the car. He had nothing but this book.

He bent down and picked it up. At least there was time now to consider it more carefully, once he had been to the loo.

A friend of his had seen grown men squatting in public to relieve themselves in a remote part of the world. David did not hesitate. There was nobody about. There; that was better! Pretty horrible, but now he could concentrate.

He had no food or water and was miles from civilisation - how many, he had no idea. However, the sandwich and drink would keep him going for some hours, especially now that the light of the sun had been blotted out. The temperature controlled suit seemed to help as regards thirst, thankfully.

The sensible thing would be to get to civilisation, if he could, and alert the world. There might be satellites still on line which would reveal the smoking pit to the media, but David doubted it. These people were thorough. They had probably taken over every piece of hardware up there. There was no doubt in David’s mind; they were responsible. Probably dangerous as well. Even using a phone would be risky, if he still had one. It was a good chance that nobody was aware of the funeral pyre yet, and would remain ignorant. David shuddered. He hoped his friends had not been cremated.

Something deep inside him gave him hope. They were still alright, but imprisoned. It was his job to...

Suddenly David knew. It was his job to rescue them. He had to return to the plateau and make his way down through the smoke into the depths.

How on earth was he going to do that?

His eye fell on the Bible again. It was obviously key to the situation. Who was it Mike had mentioned? Obadiah? Yes, he was the one that went down into the pit and slew the lion unarmed. Okay so the snow was wrong, but never mind. That was the one. But David was armed in one sense. Didn’t these ridiculous Christians sometimes refer to their Bible as their sword?

David flicked the book open. Perhaps Obadiah figured here somewhere?

He nearly missed it. It was the tiniest section imaginable, barely a page long. Only just in the Old Testament; a few pages further on and it would have made it into the New. Too bad. Next after it came Jonah. David remembered about him. He went down alright, to the bottom of the sea. Should have died, really, but a big fish swallowed him and coughed him back up. Fabulous story, but how

could anybody be expected to take it seriously? The Bible was a strange book. David shook his head.

Anyway. Obadiah.

He ran his eye down it. Oh dear. There was nothing about slaying the lion. Maybe Mike had got the name wrong. Still. It seemed to be about a dispute between Jacob and Esau, whoever they were. There was one bit which caught David's attention.

"People from the Negev will occupy the mountains of Esau." That sounded relevant, because it had a mountain in it; never mind that there was more than one. The Negev was a desert, David knew. Too bad it wasn't the Sahara, but probably they didn't travel far in those days and did not know about the Sahara. At least it was a desert. The ending was encouraging too; "Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the kingdom will be the Lord's." That sounded pretty positive.

But wasn't Zion the old name for Jerusalem? The message seemed confused.

So what if it made no sense? David's mind was made up. He was going to pray in his own way. Too bad if the style did not go down too well, but things were desperate. He spoke out loud.

"Right, now listen, God. I seem to be surrounded by these Christians, except for Sam, and I don't think much of her character even if you did do a good job on her looks. So I'm putting you on probation for a week. The deal is, I will do what I think you want me to do, and you give the instructions. I'm starting from Obadiah. Purists would object that there are too many mountains and it's the wrong desert and it's not Mount Zion but there's nobody here but us and we've got to start somewhere. I'm hoping to be the deliverer today. So please do your part. That's it. Amen."

Keep it short and sweet. David remembered that from his childhood; you weren't meant to babble on like the heathen do. Also, it was good to end with Amen.

David found he was smiling. What he had just done was completely out of character. Nevertheless, he was feeling happy about it. Also, was it his imagination, perhaps, but he had an inner notion somewhere deep down that his offer had been accepted. Weird indeed.

David looked at the book again. He turned to Revelation to make sure. Yes, two hundred million. These people hadn't just found their way down to the replicator; they had got it working. They must have been at it for months to have manufactured all those locusts, as David already thought of them. They would have spread out over hundreds of miles already, David reckoned. What else did they do, other than take over cars? David shuddered to think of what had happened to the Batts. They were good people. It was dreadful. Now everyone was looking to him, even if they didn't realise it. There would be nobody else closer to the pit than him.

However, he was not to set off just yet. He simply knew it. There was more to grasp. The key to the situation was in his hands, and he mustn't neglect it.

David read on in Revelation. Hello, what was this? More pollution, on a cosmic scale. A third of the stars of the sky were thrown down. What an astonishing thought. Why, they were hurled down by a dragon. Everything was weird today. David read more. There was worse to come a few pages further on. A hideous beast rose up out of the sea. The sea? The beast had an image which deceived everybody. Where had David heard that business about your image before? The marketing people were everywhere. Nowadays, anybody who was anybody spent all their time working on their image. A lot of it was designed to draw the wool over people's eyes. The Bible got that one right at any rate. Good piece of prediction.

Something drew David back a few pages to the stars and the dragon. What was that about? First the single star causing the meltdown. That was easy; some guy thinking he was a superstar making a complete mess of things. Perhaps the man in charge at the furnace would blow it completely, and the whole thing would implode without the need for him to do anything.

No, that did not feel right. He was going to have to take action.

David pondered the dragon and the mass of stars. A third of the stars of the sky, what did that mean? Why did it seem so important?

Suddenly, David found he was back at his first school, in his mind. His favourite teacher was reading. The story was Jacob's ladder. One end rested on earth, the other went all the way up to

heaven. That too was a prediction, he realised, of the so-called space elevator. One day this would be made from a colossal satellite in the geo-stationary orbit that was fifty-two thousand miles long, so that its foot reached down to the earth and the top stretched out towards the moon. An easy way to get into orbit; simply take the lift up from the surface of the earth. Too far for stairs, really, but then they did not know about lifts when the story of Jacob's ladder was written.

But hadn't the discovery of anti-gravity rendered the orbital tower obsolete before it had even been built? Anyway, it was a pit this time, not a ladder or tower, so why was he thinking about Jacob's ladder?

"Good try, God, but I'm afraid you got that one wrong."

Hang on, what was the teacher saying?

"I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore."

She was reading from the Bible. That would be God talking to the Jews, because this was Old Testament. They were like dust, stars, sand... Hang on, he was surrounded by sand. That many Jews? No, the writer had not seen the Sahara. But then he had seen the Negev. That's a lot of sand.

David felt puzzled. There was something important here. Dust, stars, sand... stars!

In a flash, he got it. The stars are the Jews. This dragon, tearing a third of them down from the sky. It's about the holocaust. Hitler's death camps exterminated a third of all Jews living at the time. David knew that. Thankfully, their numbers had built up again since, not like some nations which had been completely wiped from the face of the earth by invading hordes.

Here it was, predicted in the Book of Revelation. It was symbols. The dragon was Hitler, and a third of the stars were his victims. So the Bible did predict the future! The passage came just past the big number twelve, David noted, so that he could find it again, with the little number four beside it. Was that what they meant by chapter and verse perhaps?

Okay, so Revelation is about tyrants. David was on a roll. Leaders who start out as superstars but turn into dragons, beasts and whatever, with the public deceived by their image. This was powerful stuff. But what was it that Mike had said? God has everything under control. Right is restored in the end.

Hey, but wait a minute. Hitler's machine did an incredible lot of damage before he finally went under. So much so that he was hinted at in this book, hundreds of years before the event. Now, here today was a fulfilment of the star opening the pit and the locusts and scorpions flying out. This was no casual, quick thing. This had serious potential to do a mass of damage. Might the coming days turn out as bad as Hitler's time? Maybe the beast of Revelation was down there holding Araminta and the boys.

Star. It was finally making sense. Somewhere underneath the Sahara was a Jew who reckoned he was a star saving humanity in some way, probably, but who was on the verge of doing incredible harm. Or something like that. Pitted against him was the remains of the Winter family and their boy friend. It hardly bore thinking about.

David looked up. His mind was reeling. The succession of ideas and images that had raced through his consciousness was almost more than he could take in. The Bible was a powerful book, no doubt about it! But this was no time for reflection. He had a job to do.

"Okay God, I'm as ready as I ever will be," he said. Now we'll see who has everything under control.

-oOo-

David was concerned that he might be picked up as he flew over the desert, even though he was staying only six feet above ground, in an attempt to remain unnoticed. When radar was first invented during the second world war, the allied planes took to flying low for this reason. Indeed, David had had a great uncle who had been flying in his fighter plane like this on a mission off Massachusetts and who never returned. It was assumed that he must have dozed off or something

and hit the waves. A war casualty just as much as if he had been in the front lines, if you thought about it. War is a terrible thing.

David pursed his lips. All he could do was try. At least there was no difficulty about the direction. The black smoke was still pouring upwards. Whatever could be causing it, David wondered. As he flew, he made himself breathe long and hard. Then he held his breath for thirty seconds, before letting it out and breathing normally for a minute. He did this several times, in preparation for the coming ordeal.

At last, the dreadful hill loomed up ahead of him. From this angle, it could be considered a mountain. The rising column of smoke dominated everything. The pit must be many metres wide.

Now for the tricky part. David slowed down, and went round the foot of the rocky area until he judged he was as close to the terrible opening as possible.

“Right. No time like the present.”

David swooped up over the brow, took an immense breath and plunged into the smoke. Immediately the up-draught caught him and flung him several hundred feet into the air. Choking and gasping, and buffeted by the locust-scorpions, he fought his way out of the filthy blackness and emerged coughing and gasping into the fresh air.

That was horrible. He would have to try a different technique. At least he had not been hurt by the little invaders pummelling him, even though they were solid and hard.

He flew back down. He felt very scared, but the only thing was to go for it while his adrenalin was still high.

He landed on the lip of the pit, just out of the smoke and turned off his flying suit. Hello, what was that? There was an iron stairway there at the edge of the opening, descending into the murk.

David took another deep breath and plunged in. The smoke hit him with the force of a physical blow, driving the breath out of him. However, the stairs were straightforward, even though he couldn't see. He plunged on down them two at a time. Thankfully the swarm of invaders was concentrated in the middle of the smoke, as David had imagined.

As he ran on, his feet making the fire escape ring, the power of the up-draught lessened. Soon, to his surprise, he found that the smoke thinned out and he could see. The reason was that the chimney that he was descending was cone shaped. The further down he went, the wider it became. The smoke was confined to the central area. All the same, he did not dare to breathe; the air might be thoroughly toxic in here.

Ah, thank goodness. A door. There would be no need to abort, by switching on his flying suit and throwing himself into the smoke, to be hurled aloft like cinders from a bonfire, which had always been a last resort. If he could just hold his breath a bit longer and get through the door...

It proved to be a simple one with no lock. With his last ounce of energy, David grasped the handle and let himself through, closing it behind him, before taking some huge breaths. Thank goodness. It might be pitch dark through here, but at least the air was breathable.

All of a sudden the place was a blaze of light. David fought the brightness, screwing up his eyes. It was no use. There in front of him, if he had only known, was the same revolver that had greeted the boys just twenty-four hours before, the finger white upon the trigger.

“Welcome, David,” said a voice, obviously pleased. “We’ve been expecting you.”

-oOo-

Ben had never imagined how horrible it would be to have a gun pointing at you, with the knowledge that the person holding it would fire at the slightest provocation. He felt awful inside. If only the barrel would turn to point somewhere else.

“What do you want us to do?” he said hoarsely. His voice did not seem to be functioning properly.

There was no reply. However, the gun twitched slightly. It was evident that they were to move forward.

Ben led the way, walking unnaturally slowly. He hoped that Mark would not attempt any heroics. This was not the time to try to escape. The hand holding the gun came last.

The passage did not last long. They soon came to another metal door. Ben pushed it open, as indicated, and stepped over the sill.

It was immediately evident that they had now entered a different part of the complex. Instead of the bare rock walls and uneven floor, there were smooth grey walls, sensitively lit, and quality carpeting. It might only be a corridor, but it had the feel and look of a hotel.

They were ushered into the first room on the right, which turned out to be a bedroom. Ben dimly noted the number 150 on the door as they entered. The room was basic in its furnishings, but not uncomfortable. They walked forward and sat on the nearer of twin beds, turning to face their captor.

Ben was taken aback. It wasn't a man holding the revolver, but a woman wearing an apron and a headscarf. She was clearly the cleaning lady. How extraordinary!

"Now," she said quietly, in a deep voice. "How did you get in through the booby traps?"

Ben was quick off the mark.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he responded. "Is it usual to hold people at gunpoint where you come from? I hope so, because from where I'm standing, it's incredibly offensive. You'd better have a good excuse."

The woman recoiled, looking abashed. "I'm sorry, but when the alarm was triggered, I felt very scared. I had understood that the route you came by was impassable. Anybody might have come in through that door. I can see now that you're only teenagers and unarmed, so I can afford to relax. I'll see if I can get someone to come," she continued. "Make yourselves comfortable. This will be your room. Dinner's at six, along there, preceded by worship at 5.30." She waved further along the corridor.

She went out, closing the door behind her.

"What on earth is this place?" asked Mark in awed tones.

"Now," whispered Ben. "We need to think carefully. I suggest we block their questions, as I've got an idea."

Mark was dubious. "Why not slip out and explore?"

"Well, yes, but later," urged Ben. "We need to be here when her friend arrives or it will look bad."

There was no time for any further discussion as there were already footsteps in the passage.

The door opened. In came a well-built older man with a lined face, followed by the cleaning lady. His hair had been grey for some years, Ben reckoned. He was wearing a monk's habit. The gun was no longer in evidence.

"I'm told you made it through the booby traps. Very interesting." He had a deep voice. "How did you know about us?"

"We didn't. We are simply exploring. We stumbled on the booby traps as you call them by accident. Now, what are you people up to? This looks like a hotel under the desert!"

"You'll discover soon enough." The man looked at them with suspicion. "You have entered private property. We are running a sensitive operation, so your presence is hardly welcome. I will have to consult with my superiors about where we go from here. For the time being, I would be grateful if you would stay in your room. You can wash and brush up in there." He indicated the bathroom. "I will see if there are any clothes we can lend you. Do you require anything to eat or drink?"

This was more like it.

"Yes, please," Ben replied. "Some refreshments would be appreciated. We will tidy ourselves up while you consult."

"I'll get some sandwiches sent up. See you shortly."

"What do you reckon?" asked Mark quietly when they were alone.

Ben walked into the washroom, beckoning Mark to follow, and started the bath running. "The room may be wired for sound," he whispered, hoping that the running water would hide his words. "Write down anything of importance."

Mark nodded. It would have been nice to talk freely, but it was out of the question.

Ben ran a hot bath and was just about to get in when there was a knock on their outer door. Mark answered it. The cleaning lady had brought trousers and jumpers and underwear. This was remarkable. Who keeps clothing for teenagers in a place like this in case they are needed? A few minutes later she was back again with a tray.

Ben ran through everything in his mind while wallowing in the bath. There was clearly another entrance to this underground lair; Mark and he would have realised if the old man and his friends had been traipsing in and out through the entrance they had used. In addition, the door they had discovered had been hidden, whereas this conference centre or whatever it was had been up and running for a long time. On second thoughts, it was possible that Jim Pond had made this place in the early days and the facility had been empty for a long time, and only re-colonised recently.

What was the significance of the testing rooms they had come through? Ben was unhappy with the word booby traps. This was precisely not what they were. They had a meaning, he was sure of it. But why go to all that trouble if there was another way in all the time?

Mark came into the bathroom. "The clothes are fine," he said cheerfully, pressing a folded note into Ben's hand as he did so.

"Thanks," Ben said. He looked at the note carefully. It read, 'Hand-held in rocky passage. Clothes bugged?'

So Mark had somehow managed to deposit his computer in the dark when they were being marched along at gunpoint. That was shrewd. It should remain hidden. And yes, the clothes would be bugged, no doubt. The thing to do was to play along with that. It was too much to hope that they would be able to see the bugging devices. The only way to escape detection would be to remove the clothes when need arose. Ben decided to keep his original underwear on for that eventuality.

Mark took over in the bathroom. Ben flushed the note down the loo. He wondered what to do when he was dressed. There was a TV, showing a multitude of programs from many countries. No help there. Otherwise, the room was plain.

Mark was soon out and dressed. It did feel good to have got rid of their stale clothes.

"I wish we could ring home," Mark said, as they munched their way through a plate of tomato sandwiches. Salt and pepper had been employed in making them, to excellent effect.

"Brilliant! Let's go and ask. It gives us an excuse to wander about."

They finished off their drinks, and went to the door. The corridor was deserted.

They set off along it. The room numbers fell as they passed several doors. Ben reckoned that there must be twenty-five rooms on their floor, with the lift midway along the corridor. There was a stairwell next to the lift, surrounded by the inevitable fireproof glass. Ben motioned towards it.

As they opened the door into it, they heard the repeated clang, clang, clang for the first time. It sounded like industrial machinery, and was coming up from below.

Mark led the way down. Ben was beginning to feel nervous. He did not want to be held at gunpoint again. They descended three flights, the repeated pile-driving sounds becoming ever louder. Ben looked up and noted that the stairs rose above them for a long way. They were deep down in the complex.

The stairwell went down further - Ben could not make out how far. This was an enormous set-up, he reflected.

They opened the door to the noisy floor. The din was almost unbearable. Ben was for turning back, but Mark pressed his hands over his ears, and would have gone forward. However, the large man who had visited them before came into view walking towards them, wearing large earmuffs. He was not at all pleased to discover them. He ushered them back into the stairwell, waited until the self-closer had shut the door, and then took off his ear protection.

"Now, what are you doing prowling around? I told you this is a sensitive operation. You have no business to be snooping."

This man could be very difficult, Ben reckoned, if things got nasty, although the two of them to one of him would give them a chance if it came to a fight.

“We wanted to make a phone call. We heard the phone ringing, so we came to look for it.” Ben indicated in the direction of the noise.

Mark laughed aloud. The idea that the terrible noise had been a phone ringing was very funny. It also disarmed the man, who clearly had a sense of humour. He chuckled. These are only boys, he thought to himself. I don’t need to feel so threatened.

“Right. Come with me.”

The man led them up two flights to the floor below their own, and then took them along the corridor into a common room. There was nobody else about, Ben noted, as they all sat down. Indeed, they had not seen a soul in their wanderings.

“Now,” said their guardian, “I’m afraid I can’t let you make a call. There are a number of reasons, but the only one you need to be told is what I have already explained. We do not want to advertise our presence. But if you give me a written message, I will see that it is phoned through from Alexandria.”

This was awkward, but Ben did not hesitate. He accepted the pen and paper that was offered, and scrawled, ‘Safe and well. Will be in touch in a day or two, Ben and Mark. PS Cuddle the dog from us.’ Then he added their home phone number and handed it over.

The man looked it over. “I’m sure that will be fine,” he said. “We will not detain you longer than we need. We are practically ready to go public, you see.”

The boys were intrigued.

“Your best course is to co-operate fully. If you come to the worship at 5.30, all will be revealed. I will try to arrange for you to be shown the plant. I think you will find it interesting. But I must emphasise, if there is any hint of industrial espionage, then you will be in the severest trouble.”

“We have no interest in spying on behalf of anybody,” Ben said, truthfully. “But we are intrigued as to what is afoot here under the Sahara.”

Ben had an idea forming in his mind. This man seemed reasonable. There might not be another chance to ask.

“You speak of worship,” he continued. “Can you tell me where in the Bible fishing nets are referred to, that are specifically said to catch fish of every kind?”

“What an extraordinary question,” answered the man. “However, I think I remember. It is either Haggai or Habakkuk, I always get those two muddled up, you know. Of course, the notion surfaces in the Gospels, by implication, when Jesus told his disciples that they would become fishers of men. That would be to catch fish of every kind in their nets. A Jew well-versed in his ancient scriptures would recognise Jesus’ allusion, no doubt.”

This was a remarkable boy. “Now,” the man continued, “on reflection, I will show you round myself. I think I can spare the time. I will collect you at five. Then we can go straight on to worship and dinner. But I must insist that you stay in your room between now and then. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly,” Ben replied. Mark was consistently dumb, which might serve them well in the end.

When they had been escorted back to their room and the door closed upon them, Mark reached for the pad. ‘What was that about fishing nets for? We still don’t know his name,’ he wrote. Ben shook his head without speaking. He was not too pleased. They should not over-use this written messages lark. If they flushed too many notes down the loo, it might be noticed. These people could be capable of salvaging the epistles from the sewage and reading them.

-oOo-

Ben may have appeared to be watching TV, but his mind was elsewhere. It seemed crucial to him to interpret this place and its occupants.

There was no sign of the replicator yet. Perhaps the banging was something to do with it. But this huge conference centre, or whatever it was! It was so big. And who would want to gather down here, unless it was for some secret purpose? It all felt very hush hush. On the whole, Ben was surprised that he and Mark had not been locked up.

Then Ben had a thought. Mark should be told. He nudged his brother in the ribs.

“Can you put the volume up please?”

Mark did so, understanding that Ben wanted the TV to drown his words.

Ben cupped his hands round his mouth and put his head next to Mark’s ears. “I think I’m getting somewhere,” he said quietly. “You remember that the replicator had been spewing out water inside Sahara golf for some years before the whole thing went pear-shaped?”

Mark nodded.

“Well, that water was made from other matter; it stands to reason. I reckon the area we are in began life as an underground cavern created from the earth being used up to make the water.”

“So? What of it?”

“I’m trying to understand what’s going on here. We thought we might find abandoned workings if we were lucky, but instead, we find this hotel. My reckoning is that to begin with, this accommodation block would have been a cave, gradually growing to be the size of a cathedral. The question is, who turned it into what is here now? Was it Jim Pond, or somebody later?”

“Can’t say I care.”

“Mark, please! Our best chance of making progress is to use our brains. Well, here’s my suggestion. I suspect that Jim Pond intended the route we have used to be the only way in to the replicator. So I think the rocky walls of those passages are how he left everything. This conference centre has been built since.”

“How, do you reckon?”

“I don’t know. It was a big construction project, and they managed to keep it secret. That is remarkable in itself. Perhaps all the materials were made by the replicator. There may be advanced robotics here to do the building; that metal fellow we met earlier was very sophisticated. Anyway, somebody got this place up together.”

“Okay, I’m listening. Where is this leading?”

“I don’t know. But I reckon this centre has been in use for some time. We thought we were ahead of those guys in that mini submarine by thinking of the area under Sahara Golf, but actually, they have been here for years.”

“Presuming that the two groups are connected. So what were they doing down in Jim’s workshop?”

“Exactly. They must need something, or more information. I reckon, if we can discover what they lack, we will be in a stronger position. If there’s a weakness here, we may be able to exploit it.”

“If they are criminals, then why haven’t they bumped us off?”

“I’m not sure that they are. That monk’s habit makes me wonder. Maybe pointing the gun at us was out of character. They haven’t locked us up, you notice. I find them hard to read. I reckon there are gaps in their knowledge. We have managed to come through the booby traps as they call them. That makes us pretty remarkable in their eyes. They may think we could be useful to them. We need to be watchful.”

The boys lapsed into silence. These old films were often fun. The train, chugging up a long incline in the Rockies, had just been sabotaged; the end doors of the rear coaches containing the soldiers had been locked stealthily, and then the coupling holding the train together was blown with explosive. The separated coaches ran slower and slower, came to a halt, and then to the alarm of the men on board, began to run backwards down the hill. By the time they had realised that the doors were locked and the guard was not doing anything, and had started to fire into the lock in order to open the door to get out, it was too late; the runaway coaches careered off the track and over the edge of a precipice. The coaches plunged down, and everyone was killed. It was shocking.

“It sometimes worries me about the anti-gravity,” Mark commented. “Gravity is a killer. We’re in danger of losing touch with that these days.”

It was Ben’s turn to nod. His mind was barely on the film. He was still puzzling over the situation they had stumbled into. There was of course no need for the mini-submarine people to be connected

with this group; however, it did seem likely. If they were, then what were they after down there? Computer hard drives was only one possibility. It was a puzzle.

Fairly soon, there was a knock on the door. It was their guide.

“That’s better,” he said, when he saw them in their fresh clothes. “I don’t know what obstructions you went through to get in here, but it must have been very challenging. Come this way.”

He led them back to the stairwell, but this time they took the lift up. Ben noticed that their room was on floor twelve. They rose up to floor three. When the doors opened, the boys saw that they had come out above the top of the stairwell. They were in the middle of a broad platform. Ben was reminded of the so-called first stage of the Eiffel tower in Paris which the family had visited a few years before. There you could climb up an endless spiral stair and be rewarded by a splendid view all round. Here, the platform ran up to rocky walls on three sides, but was open on the fourth.

The rocky ceiling of the huge underground gallery was not far above them. The upper two floors seemed to be built into it, judging from appearances. Ben wondered what was up there.

To his surprise, there was a gentle wind blowing. Was the air here open to the elements, perhaps?

They crossed the large area and came to a handrail, which ran along at chest height on top of a solid partition of some kind.

The view down was splendid. Had the boys known it, the hoppers and silos and pylons below were similar to those that Bruce and Pikel had admired in the underwater workshop all those years before. However, the lighting was low, and it was not easy to get more than a general impression, beyond the fact that it all appeared to be in working order. It was hardly likely that they would have been shown in great detail. The boys noted that the clanging sound they had heard before was not audible here. That could mean anything.

Mark’s first thought was that if one wanted to do some serious exploring, it would be easy to take off from here using their flying suits, which were under their clothes, as always. The boys were never without them; they had become a permanent part of life, like wearing shoes or cleaning your teeth.

“How is it all controlled?” asked Mark, looking at the huge system.

“There is a mass of highly sophisticated interfacing equipment, as you would expect. What would we do without computers, eh?”

“We’d be fine,” said Mark unexpectedly. “We mustn’t let these man-made machines rule our lives. It’s human relationships that count.”

Ben could hardly believe it. This was so unlike Mark! However, he appeared to have scored a complete hit.

“Well, that is remarkable!” said their guide in astonishment. “I couldn’t have put it better myself.”

Mark had evidently picked up something here that Ben had missed. He wondered what it was.

They returned to the lift. This time they went down to floor nine. They walked past the common room, and soon came to the dining room. This was pleasant but not lavish, to Ben’s mind. In fact everywhere was basic rather than luxurious. The whole place suggested a value of living simply. Their own room, which had appeared almost Spartan to Ben, seemed more likely to be the standard fare. There probably weren’t any luxury suites.

“Now, in a few minutes, the brothers will gather for worship. You are invited to join us. Indeed, you can even take part if you wish.”

This was strange.

“We have our own convictions. We would only be comfortable in a Christian environment,” said Ben.

“Capital, capital,” said their guide, or was he their prison warder, rubbing his hands with glee, “I inferred as much. You are very welcome here. I think your presence will arouse great interest. You need have no fears as regards your convictions. Please wait in the common room, and I will fetch you when they have all gathered.”

Now it was beginning to sound like a monastery, or religious order. When the boys were left alone again, they looked at each other. There was no need to speak, as each had the same thought. There was definitely something afoot. Everything was soon going to become clear.

-oOo-

The chapel was on the small side, Ben reckoned, considering how many bedrooms there were in the complex. It was attractively lit by hidden lighting. There were some rather splendid stone carvings of uncertain meaning on the walls which caught the eye. There was no Holy Table or altar or cross or any such thing. It was also the only area they had seen that was not carpeted, with the exception of the observation platform. The floorboards were stained a dark brown. Their Dad would have approved of the simplicity of the room.

More interesting were the souls that gathered. They were older men, almost without exception, all dressed in monks' habits, and everyone seemed to have the prefix Ebed attached to their name.

"Good evening Ebed-Ian," their guide said, as he shook hands with another elderly man with snow white hair. "So glad you could join us. Ebed-Arthur, come and sit next to our two guests. They may have some questions which you will be well-placed to answer." Ebed-Arthur was all smiles. He seemed a genuine sort, Ben decided.

The room quickly filled up. "What does Ebed mean?" asked Mark in a whisper, leaning across Ben towards Ebed-Arthur. The question had to be repeated; Ebed-Arthur was a little hard of hearing, it seemed.

"Servant," he explained when he understood the question. "It's a Hebrew word. Servant of God in this context, of course."

"Of course," agreed Mark tactfully.

They waited patiently while the inmates seated themselves. "All men," Ben whispered to Mark. This was the case. And serious ones at that; there was a solemn atmosphere. These people were not here to play games.

"All stand!" came a commanding voice. Everybody rose, as the last three brothers entered. Ben's eye was caught by the man in the middle, who was wearing an apron emblazoned with a lion rampant. He was somewhat younger than the rest. He had a commanding presence, and strode erect.

"Let there be Koinonia!" he intoned solemnly when the three had come to a halt at the front of the meeting. Bruce could have told the boys that this was Greek for 'fellowship' had he still been with them.

"Koinonia!" replied the brothers in unison. They followed this by sitting down promptly and then drumming with their feet on the wooden floor, which must have been hollow, judging from the sound made. Then Ben realised that the effect was being amplified by hidden loudspeakers, as the noise grew and increased until it sounded as if a hundred thousand people were all drumming with their feet on the floor. The sense of adulation was marvellous.

At the height of the throbbing, the leader held up his hand; the feet came to rest and the sound died away almost instantly.

Ebed-Oregon, who was clearly from the States, announced the opening hymn. To Ben's surprise, it was familiar. It had been a favourite of their father's with its repeated line, 'And the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.' He looked around in vain for the organ; perhaps that too came out of loudspeakers.

When they were seated, the leader spoke again. "A warm welcome to our two friends, who found their way in through the booby traps." There was a stir of admiration at this announcement. "This seems a good moment to remind ourselves, and to inform them, that the servant role we espouse here is one of supreme humility. Never forget that the deacon, that humblest member of Christ's true order, to which we all aspire, is in Greek rendered *Diakonos*, which is compounded of *Dia* meaning 'through' and *konos* meaning 'dust'. Unlike the commanding officer, who rides in pomp and glory on horseback, the servant deacon leading the horse abases himself and walks through the dust, and so it is no shame my brothers to have our feet washed by our fellows!"

Ben was still trying to get his head round this when Ebed-Yukon was called forward. He seemed to be in charge of the notices, but was at a loss because there were none to give. All he could muster was that dinner would follow the service, which was nothing new. Then he explained that there would be the chance to share Scripture passages shortly, if anybody felt moved. This too was clearly a regular part of the proceedings, judging from the lack of reaction.

First however, their guardian stepped forward. “Ebed-Inigo,” intoned the leader solemnly, “blow up the trumpet in the new moon!”

Mark gave Ben a terrific nudge in the ribs, but there was no need. Ben was already working hard to control himself. He did not want to laugh!

It was a favourite Bible verse of their father’s, only his version of it had become ‘Detonate the trombone in the crescent of water.’ The boys had understood that detonate and blow up were related, but they missed the rest of the plays on words.

These were an interlocking set. Firstly, *tromba* in Latin means trumpet, not trombone. This curious linguistic fact suggested kinship between the two instruments to Bruce. Next, you needed to know that the designers of instruments had increased the volume of the modern trombone to such an extent that there was talk of damage to ears among orchestral players condemned to sit in front of the trombone section, especially when the trombonists were playing a *crescendo*. This Italian term, when rendered in French, sounded like *crescent d’eau*. Bruce had missed the word *crescendo* in a French dictation at school, and written ‘crescent of water’. The teacher had been amused, commenting that he of all people might have been expected to get it. This rankled with Bruce, so he never forgot the similarity. Crescent was another word for new moon, of course. Finally, a full crescendo on a trombone was not only very noisy; the instrument could go out of tune in the hands of a novice, until he learned how to control his lip better, hence it could ‘de-tone’ which was similar to detonate.

The subtleties in their father’s most involved pun ever had been too much for Ben. Also, it was not the moment to whisper to Mark that currently the moon was not new at all, but close to full. He wondered what the monks were thinking.

There was a Bible in a small rack at the back of the seat in front. Ben soon found the place he was looking for.

The blare of the ram’s horn did sound similar to a trumpet or trombone. After it had fallen silent, and two brothers had shared earnestly from the Psalms, Ben summoned up his courage and stuck his hand in the air.

“Yes?” Ebed-Yukon inquired.

“John Chapter Ten.” Ben spoke clearly. He was used to this kind of exercise from their church at home. “The Good shepherd. ‘I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.’”

A murmur of conversation ran round the room. This had sparked off a train of thought, it seemed. The boys just caught the brief spasm of anger which crossed the face of the Lion King, as Mark thought of the leader of the assembly. It only lasted a fraction of a second. Then, the man opened his mouth.

“Well done, young friend. There is nothing more in keeping with the true spirit than to confess sins publicly. We applaud your humility. Stating that you and your friend have erred by intruding on our heritage inappropriately is a worthy gesture, for which we thank you. Know that we hold no grudge against you; it would be against our creed. Consider your two selves forgiven!”

Mark felt Ben stiffen next to him. He knew what Ben had meant, and it was not that he and his brother were the intruders.

The service was moving on. To the boys’ surprise, a TV screen appeared on the wall. It was showing the evening news, the bulletin that they sometimes watched at home. But what was this? The leader was being handed a flat piece of wood, which he placed across his knees. On top of it, there was a red button.

“Full initiation confirmed,” said a voice from the back of the room. Ben did not like to turn round.

Hello, what was this story... Alien invasion? How extraordinary. It seemed most concerning. But before it was half over, the leader raised his hand.

“In the name of all that’s holy!” he declared, and brought his hand down sharply on the red button. Instantly the TV picture was cut off and the screen turned to snow. The extraordinary thing was that nobody in the chapel seemed the least bit surprised. How bizarre was that?

There was another song. This had not been announced; it just started spontaneously. The boys joined in the swelling refrain, as it was one they knew well.

“He’s got the whole world, in his hands,  
He’s got the whole world, in his hands,  
He’s got the whole world, in his hands,  
He’s got the whole world in his hands.  
He’s got you and me brother, in his hands,  
He’s got you and me brother, in his hands...”

Ben stopped singing, appalled. He had seen what was going on. The leader with his lion outfit was not singing. He was receiving this song as being addressed to him. The brothers were not worshipping God at this point; they were praising their leader.

“He’s got you and me brother, in his hands,  
He’s got the whole world in his hands.” They were singing with conviction.  
Seconds later, it got worse, much worse.

“He’s got the universe, in his hands,  
He’s got the universe, in his hands,  
He’s got the universe, in his hands,  
He’s got everything in his hands.”

Mark had failed to realise what was happening, and was singing with gusto. Perhaps it was just as well. Ben made an effort to control his face, but inside he was shaking. This was not just any old group of weirdoes. They were sold out to the leader. There was something truly sinister going on here.

What had that business with the news and the screen going blank been about, he wondered? An awful thought began to form itself inside his head. Surely not? It wasn’t possible...

People started to stand. The service was breaking up. Ebed-Arthur excused himself and left. Ben and Mark joined their guide, whom they now knew to be Ebed-Inigo from his ram’s horn playing. Ben wondered idly whether his surname had been Jones in earlier life.

Ebed-Inigo led them along to the refectory, as it seemed to be called. Everyone stood behind the seats for grace, which was intoned in Latin by Ebed-Orlando and Ebed-Uzziah in a see-saw duet. Then with much chair-scraping, everyone sat down and the soup of the day was served. Mushroom, Ben reckoned. He made a face.

Mark turned to his brother and spoke quietly. “What happens if your name doesn’t begin with a vowel, do you think? Horace, for example. Do you think the words would join together into something like Ebethorace?”

“Well, Ebed-Doris if there was one might not be very pleased. I thought there were no women, but I heard that lady bringing the food being addressed as Ebed-Iris.”

“It is a bit patriarchal here, isn’t it? They need a few Ebed-Annas and Ebed-Angelas.”

“Ebed-AuntieBang do you think?”

Ben suddenly realised they were being watched. They had better pipe down.

He turned to Ebed-Inigo, and by way of conversation asked, “What was all that with the TV?”

“You’ll know soon enough,” was the terse reply.

The rest of the meal passed more or less in silence. The brothers did not talk to each much, it seemed, except when communication was required. Afterwards, the boys were escorted back to their room, with the instruction that breakfast would be at eight, and they would be called for. To

their dismay, they were locked in for the night. So it was that they did not see their mother being led in by the cleaning lady at gunpoint, and installed in a room on the floor below theirs.

They watched a film from the archive, but when they tried to tune in to the live TV, they could not find anything. Ben was feeling uneasy about this, but it was too early to voice his suspicions to Mark. There was always the chance that they would be overheard. Things would become clearer in the morning.

-oOo-

Mark woke very early. The whole building seemed to be shaking gently. No, throbbing would be a better word to describe it. What on earth was going on?

He lay still for a minute or two, trying to interpret the sensation, and then decided to wake Ben. He shook him.

“What is it?” asked a sleepy voice.

“I don’t know,” said Mark, “but we need to wake up. Can’t you feel the rumbling?”

Ben was as puzzled by the vibrations as Mark was. If the boys had been born in an earlier age, they might have recognised the feeling as like being on board ship when it prepares to leave port. Living in the anti-gravity era, they had no experience of sensing the engines of a cumbersome car ferry while lying in a bunk in a cabin.

“Look, it’s no good just accepting what they impose on us. We need to get going. It’s time to explore this joint.”

“Well, if you can get that door opened without causing an alarm, I’ll be impressed. Anyway, let’s get dressed as a start.”

They were soon kitted out. It felt good to be making their own decisions for a change.

Mark tried the handle gently, and then applied all his strength to it. There was no give of any kind. He studied the door carefully. The hinges were concealed, and there was no indication of any weaknesses.

“I wish I had my hand-held,” he muttered, but as he did so, the boys heard steps outside. To their surprise a key turned in the lock. It was Ebed-Inigo.

“Ah. Dressed already. I thought you might have woken. You have a visitor.”

To the boys’ intense surprise and delight, their mother came in to the room, looking very scared.

“Mum!” they cried, and flung their arms round her.

The relief at finding them well was too much. Araminta burst into tears as she hugged and kissed them.

“I’ve been so worried about you!” she said when the opportunity arose.

“Mum, we’re fine,” Ben declared. “How are you doing?”

Ebed-Inigo was still there. “Look, I’m sorry, but there isn’t time for all this. There have been developments since last night. I feel concerned about you three. It is remarkable that you should have turned up now of all times. I’m worried that you may get hurt or worse. I can’t answer for all my brothers here. We are all dedicated to promoting the kingdom on earth, true, but to be blunt, some are more godly than others. I feel so concerned that we might forfeit the grace of God in what we are doing by making a false step. Your presence could provoke someone. So, I’m letting you go. Here are some provisions,” Ebed-Inigo thrust a large carrier bag into Ben’s hand, “and the metal box at the bottom of the bag will enable your car to escape detection. I take it that one of the two cars a couple of miles away is yours?”

“Yes, it is,” Araminta replied. “But please, what is going on?”

“Don’t ask. Don’t even pause to collect your belongings; just come with me now, and I’ll let you out the way you came in. Please don’t delay!”

Ebed-Inigo was almost begging them. There were tears in his eyes, Ben noticed. He suddenly felt a sense of warmth towards the old man.

“Are you sure you won’t get into trouble?” Ben asked, as the three of them hurried along. Mark had taken charge of the picnic by snatching it out of Ben’s hand.

“Please don’t talk.” Ebed-Inigo was emotional.

They were soon in the rocky tunnel. Ebed-Inigo had a torch. They made their way past the rooms of their trials by a side passage and came to the first door. Ben was just preparing to say goodbye when he felt a punch in the back; it was from Mark, shaking his head violently. In a flash, Ben caught his meaning.

He stopped dead in his tracks. “Ebed-Inigo,” he said earnestly, “we are very touched by your concern for us, but I have no doubt that what you are doing will be seen as not right by the brotherhood. So thanks for your kindness, but we’re not putting you through that. We’re staying here. Lock us back into the room. We’ll be fine.”

Araminta was most unhappy. “Ben!” she said.

“You go if you want to, Mum. Ben and I are staying.” Mark was insistent.

That was no good. With a sigh, Araminta turned back. Ebed-Inigo seemed very undecided. “Alright,” he said, after a pause. “On your own heads be it. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He led them back to their room. He was going to take back the bag of provisions.

“No, leave the picnic. We’ll have it for breakfast. Can you tell us what the throbbing is?”

Ebed-Inigo paused again. “Your best course is to watch the news later on this morning,” he said, and with that he was gone.

“Well,” said Ben when they were on their own again. “What do you make of that?”

“I think he really cares about us,” said Mark, “but I’m ready for breakfast. I hope it’s hand-held, and no bowls and cutlery are required.”

Ben got it straight away. Mark’s computer was now in the bag. Brilliant! And he had told Ben in a way which any eavesdroppers would not grasp. Now, how were they going to keep it hidden?

“Okay, Mum, what’s news?” asked Ben when they were all issued with chokolatines.

“Well,” she said. Where should she begin?

The boys were concerned to hear of Chloe’s fall, and intrigued by the supposed hallucination. When it came to explaining about David having come with her, Araminta lowered her voice. Ben pursed his lips. If only he could have foreseen what she was going to say. As it was, David’s presence in the vicinity would now be known to anybody who was listening in. Too bad. It was no good attempting to silence her, as it was more important not to give away that they were being careful in their conversation.

To Ben’s surprise, Ebed-Inigo returned while they were finishing their breakfast.

“I want you to come with me,” he declared. “I have something to show you.”

All three of them were happy to go. Their room was locked behind them. Ben wondered whether the hand-held was in it or whether Mark had brought it with him. It was big enough to be hard to conceal under clothes, he reckoned. Don’t look at him! He also reflected that the three of them were capable of overcoming Ebed-Inigo if they chose to do so. However, something inside him was strongly against doing this. It felt wrong, somehow, which was strange. Ben caught Mark’s eye as they made their way up two floors in the lift, and could see that he felt the same way. It was good having a brother who knew you so well.

They walked along to room 96. Ben had lost any sense of how the complex was laid out. There must be some plan to the room numbers, but what it was mystified him. Ebed-Inigo showed them in first. There was a curious expression on his face. Ben could not make it out; at any other time, he would have said that Ebed-Inigo was feeling pleased with himself, but also rather embarrassed.

Mark let out an exclamation as he entered the room. “Wow!”

Araminta laughed with pleasure.

Then Ben saw it. The room was filled with a model railway. It was laid out on purpose-built trestle tables at waist height. The maker had taken the utmost care to create a life-like setting, with bridges, viaducts, cuttings, buildings, roads, hills and mountains and lakes. It was fabulous.

“Do they work?” asked Mark in awe. He had always wanted a set like this, Ben reflected.

Ebed-Inigo said nothing. He went over to the side, and threw some switches. To everyone’s delight, little lights came on and the trains all began to move, and the little clicking noises made by their tiny wheels filled the room.

“Look!” said Mark, and well he might. For in addition, the scenery was coming to life. A factory chimney began to smoke. A river started to move - naturally it was only a little stream, but somehow the flow of the water had been restrained, which gave it the right look for a larger river cut down in size. There was birdsong, and Ben noticed that there were tiny twitching movements in some of the trees. It was simply wonderful.

Araminta clapped her hands. “It’s fabulous,” she breathed. “Did you make it?”

Ebed-Inigo was clearly thrilled with his set and appreciated the praise. He nodded sheepishly.

Ben felt moved. He moved across to the old man, and put his arms round him. “I think it’s lovely,” he said, looking into the rugged face of their guardian.

There was no hiding the tears in Ebed-Inigo’s eyes. He really was a remarkable man.

After a few minutes, during which they all moved round the room, admiring the miniatures, he cleared his throat. “I wanted to ask you to look after this for me, please, if anything happens. I would hate for it to be lost.”

What did he mean? However, there was no time to find out. There were exclamations from the passage and the sound of footsteps running past. Something was afoot. Then the door opened hurriedly.

“You’d better come. The director has summoned us to the bridge. Bring them along.” Ben dimly recognised one of the brothers from the evening worship.

“Come.”

They needed no second bidding. They raced along to the stairwell. Other brothers ahead of them were using the stairs. “Hurry,” they said.

Ebed-Inigo needed the lift, Ben realised. He was not as fit as he might be. “Which floor, Ben asked? Mark and Mum can go on, and I’ll stay to help you.”

“The top,” came the reply.

Of course. Why hadn’t Ben thought of it before? That was where the action was.

Mark and Araminta were soon out of sight up the stairwell. Would the lift never come?

At last it arrived, and the door opened at its usual ponderous rate.

“Why the haste?” asked Ben as they entered.

“I don’t know.”

They were soon rising upwards. I must remember my flying suit, Ben reflected. It might be useful. It was easy to forget that you were wearing it. By the same token, it would not be good to switch it on unnecessarily. So far the brothers had treated them well; there was no point in provoking things before it was time.

When the lift doors opened, there was a long tunnel facing them. It had rough rocky walls, like the ones they had been in earlier. The rumbling sound, which had been in the background ever since they had woken, was louder here.

Mark and Araminta were already out of sight. Ebed-Inigo seemed to be short of breath. There’s something funny about all this, Ben thought, as he supported him.

There was not far to go. They came round a corner. Straight on the tunnel ran dead straight for two hundred metres, perhaps, before ending in a solid metal wall. The rumbling was more like grinding now. Was it Ben’s imagination, or was the wall at the end shaking?

There was no chance to find out, as there was a door to their left being held open by a brother. They were ushered through into more tunnel. It was dark in here, and the noise was considerable. Very soon however, the right hand wall turned into the same metal wall that Ben had seen a few moments before. It was hot to the touch, and vibrated strongly. Every now and then there was a small brushing or scraping sound from the other side of the wall, which rose rapidly upwards. Ben guessed that there was an enormous chimney inside, carrying away the strong updraft from some subterranean furnace. In this he was absolutely correct.

In another moment, the area widened out. There was just enough light for Ben to see why the place was called the bridge. It was precisely that. On one side, the walkway was suspended over a huge pit which descended into nothingness. The other side hugged the metal wall of the furnace. To Ben’s surprise, there was a metal door from the bridge into the huge chimney, as he thought of it.

Standing facing it was the cleaning lady, gun in hand. Behind her were all the brothers, staring intently. It seemed they were just in time.

He was about to catch Mark's attention, who was standing a few paces off with their mother, when the door opened and a pitch black man came in. It was the first native African Ben had seen.

Suddenly the place was a blaze of light. The cleaning lady held the intruder at gunpoint in the usual way.

"Welcome, David. We've been expecting you."

David stared round the room, fighting the sudden bright light, and took in the scene. Everyone present was facing him. There was never going to be a better moment than this.

"Now listen here." Something in his tone commanded respect. "You people may think you are operating on New Testament principles, but what you need is the teaching of Obadiah, and it's this; wrong desert, wrong mountain!"

Everyone was thunderstruck. Follow up the opportunity quickly.

David opened the Bible and found the place quickly. How good that the book had a little ribbon so that you could mark a page and turn to it promptly. Thankfully, the Bible was black anyway, and seemed unaffected by its passage through the smoke.

"Listen. 'People from the Negev will occupy the mountains of Esau.' Great, but this is the Sahara not the Negev. You've got it wrong. Then again, 'Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the kingdom will be the Lord's.' But Mount Zion is in Jerusalem, not Africa. It simply won't do. By doing all this here, you people have wrested the sacred scriptures out of context!"

David could hardly believe it. He had not been shot. Indeed, the response to his words, crazy as they sounded even to him, was remarkable. Everyone was looking on in astonishment.

Araminta had recognised David early on, with a surge of delight. Her first wild thought was that he had become an African overnight. She knew that their dark skin was a result of living under the hot sun, but surely such a profound change would take years, rather than a single night, wouldn't it? She quickly realised that he must have been through some blackening process. It looked as if he had taken a bath in tar with his clothes on. There had to be some explanation.

Ben could not believe his ears. It was David alright; he could tell from the voice, but he was behaving completely out of character. Since when had he ever opened a Bible, much less quoted from it with authority, especially from an obscure passage like Obadiah? Mark's reaction was much the same as Ben's.

However, their astonishment was as nothing compared to that of the Lion King, as Mark thought of him, or Ebed-AliBaba as Ben had nicknamed him, in charge of his forty thieves. He could hardly speak at first, but he managed to find his voice.

"Did you say Obadiah?" he asked tremulously.

"Yes," said David, uncertain how to proceed.

The gun clattered to the ground, as the cleaning lady's arm fell limply by her side. Cumbrously, but steadily and with purpose, all the brothers began to kneel. Ben felt Ebed-Inigo's arm strong on his shoulder, forcing him down. He complied without hesitation. Soon everyone was on their knees, facing the astonished David, who found himself looking out over a sea of heads.

"Hail!" intoned their leader.

"Hail!" came the earnest reply from the assembly.

"Welcome to your kingdom. We await your instructions."

David couldn't believe his eyes, but there was something pressing that needed attention. Araminta, entirely overcome by this unexpected change in her confidante and friend, sank to the floor in a faint, with a little gasp. It was all too much.

-oOo-

While Araminta was being seen to by Ebed-Iris and the cleaning lady, and the brothers were rising to their feet once more, Ben seized a quiet word with Ebed-Inigo.

“Whatever’s happening?”

Ebed-Inigo was as excited as all the other brothers were, but he was also generous to a fault. It was important to explain to Ben and his brother what was afoot.

“It’s the prophet,” he said. “You see Moses said, ‘after me a prophet will come. He will guide you...’”

“But surely, that was Jesus!” interrupted Ben in a shocked voice.

“That’s the mistake they all make,” replied Ebed-Inigo. Mark went over to his mother, who was already coming round, but this was too important. Ben had to hear it. “When you two came in we wondered whether one of you was the prophet, but there should only have been one, and despite your heroism in getting through the booby traps, most of us felt...”

Ebed-Inigo fell silent. The Lion King was speaking to David. They were surrounded by the brothers, who were clearly thoroughly aroused. The ones at the back were inclined to push forward to be able to hear. Some were calling for quiet.

“We have followed the revelation with exactitude. The only form of world government that fits humanity is one of Benevolent Dictator in a theocratic setting. This we have established. The program is going well.”

“No!” said David, in shocked tones, pleased that he had given thought to some of these issues. “Just think about it. The phrase ‘Benevolent Dictator’ is a contradiction in terms, no matter how well meaning the individual. Whoever attempts to dictate to others goes against the creator’s gift to humans of freedom under the law, and becomes a thief in the process. As a thief, he forfeits the approval of the Almighty.”

Ben couldn’t believe his ears. Where had David got all this from?

“Agreed,” said the Lion King earnestly, “except in a special case. We realised early on that dictatorship, while necessary, tends also towards evil. It could only work in the hands of a perfect being, which we know is out of the question, and one supremely humble as well. Where could the Lion of the tribe of Judah be found, fit and able to open the seals?”

“It’s the Messiah again!” insisted David, thankful for his brief study of the Book of Revelation. Remember to leave off the S if you mention the book’s title, he thought to himself.

“On the contrary. There is one who is fit. The Prophet coming after Moses, the true Deacon, the worthy Servant, the supreme Ebed of God! Cannot such a man can be a godly dictator?”

David knew that he had to convince these people, but he sensed he was on shaky ground, and that his paper-thin grasp of the Bible text would let him down at any second.

“You come to us, quoting Obadiah!” continued the Lion King in awe, “demonstrating beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are the one, the Ebed-Yah, the servant of God!”

“NO,” asserted David in desperation, “I am not. I have come to show you the error in your thinking. You were wrong to have opened the bottomless pit here!”

“The bottomless pit!” cried Ben in anguish. “With thick smoke and fire and locusts and scorpions. Is that what is behind this wall?”

“Yes and no,” said Ebed-Inigo firmly. He could get as excited as anyone. “A better translation than ‘bottomless’ is ‘fathomless’. The point is that none can grasp the significance of the abyss except the true servants. To the world it is the bottomless pit, but to us it is the fathomless pit. Impenetrable.”

“Exactly,” chimed in the Lion King. “Super-strong encryption. Security systems that could not be broken in a million million years.”

Ben’s head was reeling, but David’s mind was clear.

“No again. You take too much upon yourselves. There is no super-strong encryption, and certainly nobody worthy of the trust.”

“You lie!” said the Lion King. This was getting serious, Ben could see. Several of the brothers were muttering. There were dark glances being cast in David’s direction. Ben had a sense of urgency.

“Can you not see,” Ben called out loudly, “that the Lord’s anointed is bound to be rejected? You doubt David because his words challenge your beliefs. But this was necessary. Every true prophet

has always been rejected by the ones he came to. Your very inclination to thrust off his words testifies that he is indeed the one you await.”

Ben was not entirely sure about what he was saying, but he had a growing sense that the brothers were in a desperate mood. They were on the verge of taking key decisions. It would be wise to get them to pause if possible.

“Ignore the boy!” said the Lion King. “And you!” He turned towards David. “How you come to quote Obadiah I don’t know, but I was wrong. You are not him who was to come. Stand aside. We return to our plan. The time is ripe.”

“What’s he going to do?” Ben asked Ebed-Inigo nervously. He could see that the old man was deeply moved.

“Watch and listen, and do not judge,” said his white-haired friend. “This is a precious moment.”

The Lion King moved to the rail of the bridge, turned and faced them all. “There is a supremely humble servant,” he said, slowly and with great dignity. “He knows all, understands all, and guards all. He cannot be corrupted. He is beyond human influence. He will preserve mankind. His years are without end. He will not spoil or fade or wither. The age of the machine has fully come! I alone know his passwords and hold the key to his systems. They are in my mind, and none other, and so, to preserve them uncorrupted for ever...”

Here, to David’s lasting horror, the leader of the brothers quickly swung his legs up over the rail, balanced for a moment in a sitting position, and then threw himself off into the depths without a sound.

Everyone was struck dumb. They all waited for the sound of the body hitting the bottom, but it never came. Whether this was because of the roaring of the furnace on the other side of the wall, or because the pit was enormously deep, Ben had no idea.

The leader had gone. But there was no time to reflect on it. All the brothers lifted their voice in unison. “Hail to the Lord’s anointed!” they said, and then with one accord they too raced to the terrible edge and tumbled over.

“No!” Ben cried, as he grasped their intention, but it was no use. Their minds were made up. A moment later, the only people still on the bridge were the two boys, their mother, David and Ebed-Inigo.

They all stood in a state of complete shock. Then Ben found his voice.

“Why didn’t you go over?” he asked the elderly monk.

“You need explanations. It falls to you to explain to the world. My final role is to tell you what you need to know. Come.”

Ben was only too glad to get away from that terrible drop. Araminta was still in a weak state; Mark and David helped her, one on each side. There had not even been time to say hello to David yet, let alone find out what was going on in the world outside.

Ebed-Inigo was walking very quickly. The loss of his brothers must be a terrible blow, Ben thought, no matter how much planning had gone into the mass suicide in advance. Ben had heard of such things. Religion could be so powerful, no, was always powerful, whether for good or for bad. The true knowledge of God was a supreme gift to the world, but its distortion, in various forms and guises, had been a cause of enormous problems and pain down the centuries.

I suppose the same is true of all God’s greatest gifts, he thought to himself as he struggled to keep up with Ebed-Inigo, who seemed to have recovered his energy. Human relationships, food, money, such wonderful things in themselves, they were all capable of causing massive pain when they were abused.

Ebed-Inigo led them back towards the lift, but turned aside into a small room dominated by computers with a few upright chairs. It was clearly the nerve centre of the operation. They all sat down.

“You’ll need to explain slowly and clearly,” said Ben. “I’m dazed.”

Ebed-Inigo was clearly under tremendous strain. “There was always the possibility that the prophet was going to show up. We knew of David’s activities. When he approached the pit, we all

assembled. Things were close for a while, as you saw; it could have gone either way. However, he is not the prophet, so the plan continued.”

David wanted to speak, but he managed to restrain himself. It was more important to hear what this man had to say, as otherwise, how could they hope to gain access to the mentality of the group?

“The mini controllers have gone out worldwide. They have been made in vast numbers by the replicator, as you have probably guessed. The furnace and smoke were not strictly necessary, but they have helped.”

“Mini controllers?” Ben asked.

Ebed-Inigo opened a drawer in one of the desks and got out a grey metal object the size and shape of a mouse.

“They fly at will. The ones that have been launched over the last few hours are programmed to lock onto any moving metal object. They then take over its command systems, which brings the machine under the control of our central computer. Should it ever become necessary to ground all the sky cars in the world, for example, there will be full compliance.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Mark objected. “What about the cars that are not yet made?”

“As soon as they move, a mini-controller will attach itself.”

David spoke. “You have no idea of the number of these things, Mark.” He turned to Ebed-Inigo. “I take it that you gained control of every satellite in the same way?”

“Of course. Then the communications black-out was imposed, and naturally, every effort was made to discover the cause. This enabled us infiltrate all the stationary systems as well.”

“But this is crazy!” objected Ben. “You can’t expect to dominate every single computerised system in the world. As soon as they realise what you are up to, all the world’s weapons systems will be lined up on this place, and the bombs will rain down! We need to get out of here fast.”

“Ben, do you still not understand? Not only have we infiltrated all the weapons systems and launching facilities, but we lit the biggest bonfire in history in order to show them where to aim. The middle of the desert. What could be safer, from the point of view of preserving life, if a bomb does get through by any miracle? But you underestimate the technology. No, we wanted to draw all the weapons out of their bunkers. We were successful. Hundreds of missiles have been launched towards us; they have all been taken under control, and at this moment they are pouring into the Pacific ocean, and plunging down to the bottom of the Mariana trench. It’s ten thousand metres deep. Even if people could get equipment down that far, the water pressure will have made the devices unusable. This is a great day, Ben; all the remaining stockpiles of weapons will be gone in a few hours. The ones that the nations try to preserve will be launched by us anyway. We really have thought this thing out, you know!”

Ebed-Inigo had become quite excited. Ben laughed out loud. “You are amazing,” he said. These people had wanted to impose peace on the world. Well, no harm in trying. Or was there?

“So what is our role?” asked Ben.

“Explain to the world, that everything carries on as usual, but that there are certain circumstances where human folly will be prevented. It’s as simple as that. When people get used to the new ways, they will soon adapt.”

“And who decides on the definition of folly?” David asked.

It was a good question, but Ebed-Inigo shrugged it off. “You’re quibbling,” he said. “Anyway, I have to go. Please don’t try to prevent me.”

There was not much chance of that. The old man was pointing the gun at them. None of them had seen him get hold of it.

“I should like to come to the bridge with you,” said Ben simply. Mark grunted.

“Very well. The others should remain here.”

David had one more question. “I imagine that your leader was the only one who knew the access codes and passwords. But what is to stop people from destroying the computer that has everyone in charge, then?”

“Well yes, if you can find it,” came the reply. “Please don’t imagine that it is here. The machine in this room only controls the replicator, which incidentally remains a fabulous tool even though its primary purpose has now been fulfilled. It should be made available to all.”

“No,” said Ben, “you’re wrong.”

He got no further. Ebed-Inigo had set off towards the bridge, with the gun pointing at his head. “If you make any attempt to approach me,” he called out over his shoulder, “I will kill myself here, and then you will have to dispose of the body yourselves. If that does happen, then your best course will be to throw it over, as then it will enter the furnace and be cremated, like the others.”

Ben wondered whether there was a slope near the bottom which would have propelled the falling bodies in through the side of the kiln to shrivel to a cinder in the intense blaze. What could be making all that smoke, he wondered?

“Ebed-Inigo, I love you,” Ben called out after the man. He and Mark kept their distance.

“I love you too, Ben.” It was true. In just a few hours, a deep mutual respect had formed between these two, which was blossoming into something profound. Both found the values and beliefs of the other heart-warming. Ben was deeply moved at the thought of the man’s impending death, but it was hopeless trying to prevent it.

The unlikely trio reached the bridge. Ebed-Inigo did not hesitate. “Farewell,” he cried as he toppled over the edge into the abyss.

“Now!” screamed Ben, switching on his suit and swooping up over and down after the old man as quick as he could. Mark was just behind him. Both had read each other’s minds.

What had been bothering Ben was whether he could accelerate faster than the old man would fall. The story of his parents’ engagement gave him hope. His dad had been having his second flying lesson. He had dropped the diamond ring from treetop height, the story went, and his mother had managed to catch it before it hit the ground. That implied quicker than gravity flight was possible. Indeed, it must be, surely? But then, how deep was this pit? Would he crash into the bottom of it before he managed to get underneath his friend?

Ben was utterly determined, and was not going to shrink back. He hurtled down into the darkness, feeling more terrified than he had ever felt in his life. He had not counted on its being so dark. But within a second or two, he became aware of a red glow coming up from below. Help, it was not as far down as he had hoped. But there was Ebed-Inigo, just a few feet below him. With a tremendous effort, Ben shot below the old man, seized him, and tried to reverse their direction.

The weight of the body might have crushed him if Mark had not hurtled up from nowhere and joined in. Together they managed to halt the headlong fall, and begin to climb back up again. The roar of the fire was audible at close quarters. Ben did not dare look to see how close to ruin they had been. It had evidently been touch and go.

The ascent to the bridge seemed to take for ever. The body was limp in their arms. At least there was one positive fact. Ebed-Inigo had let go of the gun at some stage, and it was no longer an issue.

Eventually they rose up over the edge, to find David and Araminta standing there in shock. Without a word, the boys flew along the passage with their hostage. There was no way he was going to repeat his headlong dive if they could help it.

They made it back to the control room. Ben allowed the old man to tumble onto the chairs; he was utterly exhausted, and could do no more. Ebed-Inigo groaned. At least he was alive; the shock alone could have killed him, Ben considered.

“Water,” gasped Ben, when David and Araminta came into the room, looking terribly concerned. This was easier said than done. Eventually David returned with a glass and a jug from one of the bedrooms a few floors below. The boys’ mother seemed to have gone all to pieces. At any rate, she made no contribution. Mark knelt on the floor beside the chair she was slumped on, and put his arms round her. He had not borne so much of the weight as his brother. Ben wondered whether his arms would ever be able to life anything again. He had also strained some muscles in his back. The thing to do was to relax a bit.

But there was no time. “David, tell us what’s been happening,” Ben whispered urgently. His voice seemed unwilling to work.

“After your mother entered by the door with the combination lock, I made my way back outside to the desert. A flying car did an emergency landing by parachute just in front of me, and I found I could not summon my own car, so I presume that the brothers here snarled up the satellites for some reason of their own. I accepted the offer of a lift along at ground level. The elderly couple seemed somewhat fragile, and it seemed a kind thing to do. Also, it got me away from this complex in a way that I would not be followed, or so I thought.

“However, Mike and Edith Batt tried to convert me, which I resisted. Then when dawn was coming, I left them and came to study the hilltop above us to see if there was another way in. While I was looking, they opened the pit, and smoke began to rise up, plus these friendly creatures here.” David indicated the little grey object.

“The smoking pit had a biblical ring, to my untutored mind, and I remembered that when I was held prisoner before, Cecil had quipped that their organisation operated on New Testament principles. I wondered whether it was more than just a joke; perhaps that it was a coded warning or instruction or something like that, indicating that the two outfits were one. I’m no good at sorting these things out. Still, it seemed best to go back to the Batts, yes that really was their name, and asked them about pits in the New Testament. They pointed me to the book of Revelation. Did you know it has no S on the end?”

Ben nodded.

“While we were talking, the satellite system turned back on, and within seconds an invader attached itself to the vehicle. I had a premonition of what was coming. I tried to get them out, but they were too slow. The car door slammed, locking them in, and their vehicle was whirled away into the gathering cloud. It was horrible. I wonder if that has been happening to cars all over, or whether it was just local to the smoking pit.

“I still had their Bible, and I found the passages which you heard me quoting. I came back to try to rescue you. It was a job getting into the pit, I can tell you, but I hoped I would be able to slip in quietly and look about. You know the rest.”

Ben was gradually feeling stronger, although his arms still ached. Ebed-Inigo seemed utterly dazed, and Araminta was not much better.

“Look, my first need is for food,” David said. “Then we’ll have to make a plan.”

“Great idea,” said Ben, “but oughtn’t we to try to turn off the blow-hole first?”

Ebed-Inigo stirred. He was not as far gone as he looked. He shook his head. He pointed at a bank of switches on the computer. Mark went over. He was good at mind-reading other people’s hardware.

He flicked Display. A screen appeared on the wall. It was a news bulletin. To their surprise, Hannah was talking earnestly to a reporter.

“The photograph you showed was taken at least a dozen years ago. It shows Arthur, a homeless man, who committed suicide by jumping off Jim Pond’s Space Station, which was in orbit around Saturn at that time.”

“So you think human beings are behind the current disturbances and not aliens?”

“No doubt about it. It’s a cover-up.”

The scene switched back to the studio.

“We are just getting pictures which show a large conflagration in the middle of the Sahara.” The satellite image showed a huge pall of black smoke spread all across North Africa. “Further information is scarce, but we will keep you informed.”

David flicked the display off. “Great. Well done Hannah. No doubt Uncle Sam will be here within twenty minutes. I was hoping to put my feet up.”

Mark butted in. “Look, you organise some food. I want to investigate our friend here.” He indicated the computer. “I’d like to know what’s happening. Hopefully the liberating forces won’t be too trigger-happy. Anyone got a white handkerchief?”

The idea that they might be taken for enemies was not a pleasant thought. Ebed-Inigo began to stir. “I think I can help you,” he said.

“David,” said Ben, “you go and look for food in the refectory. I don’t like to leave our friend here.” He gave brief instructions.

Then he turned to Ebed-Inigo. “Do I get thanks for saving your life?” There was a half-hearted grunt in reply. “Because,” Ben persisted, “now that you have thrown yourself over, you have fulfilled your vow. The fact that it did not work is not your fault. I hope your conscience will allow you not to try again. I suspect you have a continuing role here.”

Ebed-Inigo grunted again. Ben reckoned he was pleased to have been rescued.

“Alright, I won’t try it again. I could do with a bite myself. We all fasted this morning, in preparation.”

Mark had tried the other switches. He now had the current operation of the computer up on the screen. There was a number which was growing all the time. Ben watched with fascination as the digits gradually moved from 198,999,743 to 199,000,045.

“That will be the number of airborne mice,” Mark commented.

“Not long to go now,” said Ebed-Inigo. “Two hundred million is the target. Nobody will get near here before that is reached.”

Ben nudged Mark gently and gave a knowing wink, taking care that he was unobserved.

There were other figures relating to the furnace, showing temperature, up-draught, down-draught, smoke density and so forth.

“That toxicity figure is remarkably low,” Mark commented. “Thick smoke like that will be thoroughly polluting.”

“Not at all,” said Ebed-Inigo, somewhat incensed. “The smoke is designed to look impressive, but actually it will clean up the atmosphere if anything. It is oil-based, and has detergent-like qualities. It’s unthinkable that we should have caused any pollution. You can rest assured about that.”

David came back with a tray. He had been remarkably quick. “We can do ourselves a hot meal down there, but I thought we were short on time.”

“Don’t worry,” Ben replied. “The furnace has nearly finished its job. When that figure reaches two hundred million, it will shut down, and only after that can any troops approach. I can’t think how you got in after the smoke started, to be frank.”

“It was pretty unpleasant”, David agreed.

Araminta took some food when it was offered. “Sorry to be so hopeless,” she said in a faint voice. “It’s all been a bit much. I only lost my husband a few weeks back”, she explained to Ebed-Inigo.

He patted her on the arm. “Have a bite to eat and something to drink. Chin up in adversity; that’s the thing.”

This was a lovely expression.

Everybody munched in silence.

“I suppose,” David said after a bit, “we need to decide whether to slip away before anybody arrives, or whether to sit it out and hope we are believed. Frankly I feel so exhausted that I favour the latter.”

Everyone had the same opinion. They finished the food, brewed a coffee, and settled down to wait. It was a shame the chairs weren’t more comfortable, David thought.

-oOo-

“Right, what’s going on here?”

Ben came to with a jerk, as did the others. They had all nodded off. Ben had been dreaming of fine surf on the sea shore, probably put into his mind by the ceaseless background noise from the massive flue. He rubbed his eyes.

It was a news team, not the military. One man was thrusting a mike towards him while the other held the camera.

If Hannah could go on TV, then so could Ben. He put on his best face.

“I’m sorry to report that well-meaning fools have opened the bottomless pit.” It was a good start. “All this smoke that you have seen has hidden the launch of two hundred million computerised devices that can attach themselves to cars and what-not and generally override the world’s systems. You’d be wise to avoid travelling at present. I’m afraid we can’t tell you much more yet, because the religious brothers responsible all committed suicide an hour or so ago, by casting themselves into the fiery furnace, but my brother here is gradually getting the hang of their computer.”

Ben indicated Mark. It was his turn now; it was good to share the honours.

The media man was not impressed. “And who might you be?” he asked suspiciously.

“My brother and I were exploring, but we were taken prisoner by the monks. My mother and our friend David came to look for us. Ebed-Inigo here is the last surviving brother.”

“Edward Vinegar,” parroted the media man. “What an unusual name.”

“Turn that thing off,” said David to the cameraman. “Look, your best course is to let us talk at greater length, and then file a report. This is a complex situation, and it can’t be dealt with in two minutes.”

“Sorry. That’s out of the question. We need instant answers by yesterday. Now, there seem to be an awful lot of brothers in all this.”

Ebed-Inigo stirred. “The world is changed,” he announced gently. “Those who do right will have no difficulties, but those set on mischief and wrong-doing will find themselves thwarted. There will be a time of turbulence while people get used to the new arrangements, no doubt, but all should become clear over the next few weeks. Do not attempt to undermine what has been put in place as you will only be frustrated. And as regards managing the future, begin with Revelation chapter nine. The details may seem wrong, but the principles enshrined there will be fulfilled. Let the world take heed!”

Ben smiled. That should get everybody thinking and asking questions.

Mark interrupted. “Here’s something for you. We are just reaching the two hundred million mark. I predict that the furnace will begin to close down in the next few minutes.”

Even as he was speaking, the sound began to change. The background roar sank to a murmur, and then died away altogether, and with it went the trembling. Everything was still. It seemed strange without the noise and movement.

“Right. We need to explore,” Ben said to Mark. “Come on.” There was no chance that Ebed-Inigo would go back on his word now that the furnace was out.

The media men seemed pleased to tag along. There might be some good footage.

“Follow me,” urged Ben. He led the news team down to the viewing platform. “There. That’s Jim Pond’s replicator. He left it to all mankind. Unfortunately, it got taken over by the brothers, and has been used to make robots to control us all. That must never be allowed again. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we need to look around.”

Ben and Mark switched on their suits and swooped over the edge. The camera followed them until they were out of sight.

“Mark,” asked Ben, “did you get it about the two hundred million?”

“Sure did,” came the reply. “I can just hear Dad saying it now. ‘The trouble with statistics is that they only give half the story. We read that there are four hundred million cars in the world, but does the statistic tell us that they all live near Wayford? No!’”

Ben laughed. Mark’s mimicry of their father’s voice was perfect.

“So there are nowhere near enough of the little beasts.”

“Not for permanent attachment, no.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, suppose they attach, get the car under control, but can then move on. That way you would not need nearly so many. Indeed, two hundred million would seem like overkill.”

This was a new idea to Ben. “Oh dear, I thought they had under-estimated, but I bet it’s like that.”

“Look,” Mark said, “let’s cut and run. There’s going to be no peace here. I suggest we get the other three and make our way into the passage which only we know about, and then slip away quietly in the confusion. I’m feeling stronger now than I was.”

“Good thinking. I agree. I take it that there’s nothing more to be learnt from the computer upstairs?”

“Ebed-Inigo was right. It only runs this place. The brain behind the takeover is elsewhere.”

“Okay. We’ll gather them up. I say, Mum’s in a bad way. I feel worried about her.”

“She’ll be fine. Let’s get her home. I’ll go and get our stuff and start work on the exit. You bring them along. Look, here’s a way out to the rooms. You can slip up the stairwell from here and avoid the media people. I wouldn’t use the lift.”

The boys turned off their switches as they landed. Mark went off to their room. Ben met the other three walking down the stairwell. They had had the same thought.

David was insistent. “Come quickly before the news people gather what’s up. They still think the chimney is the only way in. We can talk as we go.”

Even Ebed-Inigo was willing. He had grasped that life could be difficult for him as sole survivor of the order. It would be better to go with the boys and their mother. He still could not quite make David out.

Within a few minutes they were all making their way into the rocky tunnel. It seemed strange to be leaving the complex behind. It was all surprisingly quiet now that the fires had been extinguished. Let the world’s media make of it what they wanted.

As before, they bypassed the testing rooms that Mark and Ben had endured. It was the easiest thing to slip out of the high security door. Mark held it open while they made their way to the outer door, but it was as they had suspected; that too stood open. The exit had been designed to be simple.

“That means they can come after us,” David pointed out.

They were now in total darkness. “Let’s feel our way,” Mark suggested. “I don’t like to turn on the lights. It will trigger some alarm back there.”

Ebed-Inigo had gathered up a torch on the way through, which was a help. He had never been along the passage. The boys helped him and their mother. Climbing the sets of stairs in the semi-dark was easier than descending them had been on their first visit.

It took about fifteen minutes to reach the exit. There was nobody there.

“Now,” said David, “I want to try something.” He phoned the Batts. There was a dialling tone; everything seemed to be working. After an anxious wait, Mike answered.

“Mike! It’s David here from the Sahara, I’ve been worried about you.”

“Relax. Take-off were a little rough, and we were swept off route towards Latvia for a while, but we’re fine. We’ll be ‘ome soon. ‘Ere’s Edith; she wants a word.”

There was a crackling as the phone was passed across.

“Now David, are you obeying Jesus in everything?”

“Well, yes actually...”

“Because if he is not Lord of all he is not Lord at all. Do you understand that?”

“Yes Edith.”

“Total obedience, that’s the thing. I’ll pass you back to Mike.”

Really she was hopeless. David had to laugh.

Mike came on again. “So glad to get your call. We’ve been that worried about you. All that smoke seems wrong some’ow.”

“Well yes, you could say that.”

“We will send the message when we land.”

“Thank you. Great to speak to you. Bye.”

David looked up. “I’m so relieved,” he said to them. “I feared they were done for when their car went wild, but I guess it was just the bunker protecting itself. Get rid of anything flying close, and do it as quick as possible. Thankfully, they seem to be in splendid form.”

“Good, so can we summon our cars?” Ben asked.

“Let’s all go in Araminta’s and leave the other where it is,” David suggested. “It will arouse less suspicion.”

In the end, they skimmed low over the sand to the car, with David and the boys carrying Ebed-Inigo in a fireman’s lift. They stayed in ground mode for twenty-five miles, and then risked going airborne. There was no problem, and in a couple of hours, they touched down on the Winters’ lawn.

It was a relief to get home. Araminta was pleased to discover that the girls were fine. All the same, it was her chance for some space. The boys could sort themselves out. As soon as she decently could, she went upstairs to the bedroom, scene of so much former happiness, cast herself down on the bed and cried and cried.

-oOo-

“Have you tried using your car this evening, David?”

Ben was on the phone to his friend and mentor.

“No.”

“Well, give it a go, and then get round here.”

Ben put the phone down. David could make the discovery for himself.

Twenty minutes later, the doorbell rang. Ben let David in.

“Fancy seeing you, of all people. We were just having a bite to eat. Care to join us?”

David made his way through. Everyone was gathered at the large dining table, including Ebed-Inigo, looking rather out of place, and self-conscious.

“Did you know about this?” David asked him, taking the seat that was offered. He nodded.

“And is it to be every Sabbath that cars are restricted to ground mode only, or is it just this weekend?”

Ebed-Inigo cleared his throat. “The new arrangements will take some getting used to, I grant you, but think of the benefits. Everyone agrees that life is simply too hectic. So one day a week, we all stay put. It applies to everyone all over the world, which is completely fair.”

Araminta went on serving out the stew. The girls passed round the vegetables.

“And when does the Sabbath start and end?”

“Friday six p.m. to Saturday six p.m.” replied Mark. “Didn’t you learn anything at school?”

“This is going to cause mayhem!” David breathed.

Ben laughed. “I think it’s got its funny side.”

“I think it’s brilliant,” said Louise. “If you want to go away for the weekend, you need to have arrived before six on Friday, unless you want to go through an emergency landing. It will calm us all down a bit.”

“But Louise,” Ben remonstrated, “keeping the Sabbath should be a matter of conscience. It shouldn’t be imposed by computerised space junk. Two hundred million little fellows whizzing about in low earth orbit, like electrons, keeping us all under control. It’s monstrous!”

“Ebed-Inigo.” David was speaking. “What other restraints are going to be imposed on society?”

“Now,” replied the old man, “you folk have rescued me from a painful death, and I’m not going to pretend I’m ungrateful. But you need to bear in mind that I should be dead by now, along with all the other brothers. The world is on a process of discovery. Don’t ask me to short circuit it by giving you advance information.”

“So there’s a lot more regulation and restriction to look forward to,” Ben remarked. “Great!”

-oOo-

Mark and Ben had gathered at David’s flat next day. It being Saturday, there were still no cars airborne. The boys had gone in their flying suits.

“It seems to me that we have two options,” David said when they were all seated. “That is, I assume we are agreed that this control by the well-meaning brotherhood has got to be brought to an end.”

“Well,” said Mark, “I’m not so sure. We could wait and see what the restrictions actually are. So far, they have wiped out the world’s nuclear weapons, which no amount of talk and diplomacy was ever going to do, and the weekend travel curfew may prove beneficial in the long term.”

“I think it’s intolerable,” said David. “Religious nutters imposing their will on us all. Also, you can be certain that sooner or later something is going to come up that we don’t like. So why don’t we start now in trying to crack the problem?”

“What are your two options?” asked Ben.

“One, we work on Ebed-Inigo and despite his reluctance to tell us anything, we worm it out of him.”

“Hopeless,” urged Ben. “He will never divulge his secrets. It’s more than his life’s worth.”

The others laughed.

“Two,” David persisted, “we return to the Sahara complex and look around some more. We might find something.”

“That sounds like fun,” said Mark excitedly. “I’m on for a return trip, provided it’s secret. Which entrance shall we use?”

“Now wait a minute,” said Ben. “Why the secrecy? What about involving the authorities? They might give us a free run of the place when we explain our purpose.”

“I doubt it,” objected Mark. “Our best chance is to do it speedily, and contacting officials will just create problems. Also, it will be much more fun doing it in secret. Please can there be a disguise?”

“Look, this isn’t a game,” David objected. “There is one other thing. Don’t forget that Cecil was not among the brothers. That’s Sam’s husband I was sent to look for. I reckon there could be another branch of the brotherhood somewhere. All that stuff about the computer running itself is rubbish. There must be somebody in overall charge.”

“I reckon Ebed-Inigo could tell us if he chose,” muttered Ben.

Just then, the phone rang. “That will be Hannah,” said Mark with a triumphant look in his eye. The others were puzzled. David answered.

“Hello Hannah... Gone? When... Right, thanks. Yes, see you.”

David put the phone down. “Ebed-Inigo has done a bunk,” he said.

“I knew it!” Mark was delighted. “I thought he would.”

“So what are you so pleased about?”

“I put a tiny homing device in his pocket. He’s going to lead us to Cecil’s gang.” Mark chuckled aloud. “Let’s have a look.”

The hand-held soon displayed a screen of the local area. There was a tiny light a few miles distant.

“There he is. Shall we go?”

They flew off. One of David’s windows was ideal for getting airborne. They skimmed along following Mark’s instructions.

The area turned out to be a shopping centre.

“We need to go cautiously,” observed David. They landed and walked quietly down the busy street, glancing at the hand-held from time to time. They were very close now.

“Oh dear,” remarked Ben, fearing the worst. Their destination was a charity shop. Mark went in. Sure enough, the beeping was coming from a clothes rack in the corner. Yes, there was Ebed-Inigo’s top, marked for sale at a ridiculously low price. This was appalling. On a whim, Mark took the top to the counter and bought it, asking for a bag for it.

He went out to rejoin the others, who were talking to a stranger, whose back was towards Mark. As he approached, the man turned round. It was Ebed-Inigo himself! What on earth?

“Mark! What a lovely surprise. Been in the charity shop, I see. Surprising what bargains you can pick up in there. Anything interesting today?” There was an amused expression on Ebed-Inigo’s face, and his eyes were twinkling.

Mark knew when he was beaten. He opened the bag for inspection. “I found this lovely top,” he explained with resignation. “Very homely.”

It would have been hard to devise a more miserable Christmas Day. The lavish catering, piles of presents and splendid decorations were not the problem; it was the assembled gathering. There was too much gloom, and the people did not gel together as a group.

Araminta had tried very hard. The Christmas tree was lit with genuine wax candles, just as Bruce's granddad had liked it, despite the danger of a blaze. The role of fire extinguisher, which Bruce had still nominally fulfilled as recently as the year before, now fell to Ben. Occasionally a branch would be inclined to smoulder; Ben enjoyed appearing not to notice at first, so as to cause his sisters alarm. Then he would casually employ the snuffer. A water spray was on hand in case it should be needed.

The three girls in their frilly dresses and aprons had made a fine job of the lunch, which was turkey and all the trimmings. They also looked a treat bustling about in the brightly lit, well-appointed kitchen. It was a job to keep the rest of the party out of their way; they would drift in so.

David tried his best to make the day go well. He had not been round much during the autumn, as he had needed to catch up with work after all his time off. He had been looking forward to the Christmas break. Having Christmas Day on a Friday suited him because there would be no work until Monday, which was nice.

He was currently in charge of entertaining in the sitting room while the tea things were being cleared away. Sam was there, which was difficult for him; she was looking radiant, which he found a great pull, but her cheerfulness felt forced. There had been no sign of Cecil. He seemed to have vanished for good. Who knew how she was really getting on inside? It was impossible to gain access to her real feelings. No doubt she was very lonely, as well as being confused and hurting badly. David couldn't afford to get involved; he had glimpsed her selfishness, and he did not want to get drawn in. She would be impossible as a marriage partner. But she was so pretty!

Although it was nice to see Ebed-Inigo again, he was like a fish out of water, sitting stiffly on the edge of his seat in his monk's habit. Three months earlier, he had settled into a retreat house in the country, twenty miles to the south west. Today, he seemed to have lost all ability at small talk, which was a disappointment. Maybe it was a delayed knock-on effect from the mass suicide of the brothers in the Sahara, David reflected. That must have been highly traumatic. There was something funny with his voice; perhaps he had a cold coming on.

Mark was worse than hopeless. He had kindly consented to be with the family during lunch, but since then, he had been using his implant to play computer games in his head. He had brusquely waved aside all objections to it being fitted, which had taken place some seven weeks earlier.

He was currently slumped in an armchair. Ben had been requisitioned to watch over him. It seemed that when you entered the world of virtual reality, you could set the level of consciousness of your surroundings. Beginners used 70/30, meaning that while seventy percent of their mind was taken up with gunning down enemies in underground corridors, or whatever the current game consisted of, the remaining thirty percent of the mind was aware of the real world. However, as one advanced, it was possible to slew the position to 80/20, even 90/10.

Mark never did things by halves. He was currently on 95/5. His eyes were permanently glazed, and there was no expression in his face. David had expected him to twitch in time with the mental stresses required for dodging bullets, but his body remained unnaturally still.

"It's all mental. If I were to hold a lighted match under his finger, he would probably move it after a few seconds," Ben explained to Ebed-Inigo. "He is hardly aware of anything. He can't hear us talking. When playing, he needs someone to sit with him so that if there is an emergency, they can wake him up. It requires a good deal of shaking to get his attention, I can tell you, as we had a trial run. I feel uncomfortable about him getting in so deep, but he keeps telling me to relax. He has no worries so why should I have?"

Ben was the best adjusted of them all, David reckoned. He was perky and full of life, and making an increasing success of school, where he tended to stand out. His father would have been proud of

him. Louise had got over her crush on David, thankfully. She was growing up fast. She was going to be strikingly beautiful; no she was already beautiful. Her blonde hair suited her perfectly. There would be no shortage of boys swarming round. She had kept a respectful distance from David all Autumn, to his relief. Indeed, she gave the impression that she hardly noticed him.

No, the one he was worried about was Araminta. She seemed very low, although she tried to hide it. The first Christmas after losing your husband must be a very trying time. Although it had been a kindness to invite Sam, who would otherwise have been on her own, the presence of two bereaved women was a bit much for any group. No wonder everybody felt weighed down.

John and Banjo completed the party. They too seemed rather sombre. Shame they had never had children of their own, David reflected. He could never understand couples who chose to be childless. Maybe there were reasons for it. It was none of his business. They had only stayed for lunch before leaving, which was maybe just as well.

The girls and their mother came back through to the sitting room. Hannah and Chloe are great, David thought. Everyone was soon seated with a glass.

“Ebed-Inigo,” Hannah began, “did you know that the restriction on using sky-cars on the Sabbath was going to be lifted?”

From his reaction, this was clearly a difficult subject. “When you say restriction lifted, you mean that the actual physical turning off of the system is no longer enforced. But that does not mean that Sabbath travel is acceptable. The intention was and is that the world will have grown accustomed to staying put one day a week, in honour of the creator who rested on the seventh day when he made the earth.”

“Yes, I understand the thinking,” Hannah replied. “But was it always planned that the Saturday shutdown, if I may call it that, would only last for three months?”

Ebed-Inigo shrugged his shoulders and flapped his hands dismissively. He clearly felt uncomfortable about the whole subject.

“Actually it was four and a half months,” Ben remarked. “What interests me is why the travel restriction was raised, but the no finance provision is still in place. I tried it; you still can’t send or receive money from Friday six p.m. to Saturday six p.m. I began an internet transaction at five fifty-eight last Friday to see what would happen, and sure enough, at bang on six, I started getting error messages like ‘site not available’ and ‘transaction terminated’.”

“Well, I suppose it had its advantages in making us all slow down,” Chloe remarked, “but I’m glad it’s over. It means we can get over to see Nick and the others after all. We’ll be going shortly.”

For the first time that day, Ebed-Inigo started to show signs of life.

“No, Chloe, don’t travel today. Observe God’s laws.” He seemed rather agitated.

“No, I’m sorry.” Chloe was worked up. “This is what is so unacceptable about this whole business. Who are you or anybody else for that matter to tell me what is or is not God’s law? I’m just as much a believer in God as you are, and I admire and follow the Bible, which I know is important to you too, but in my view there is not a shred of evidence that God does not want us to travel on the Sabbath. There’s nothing about it in the Bible. It’s simply a man-made tradition.”

“Chloe, it’s not a fit activity for godly people...”

“There you go again. Ebed-Inigo, it is completely wrong for religious leaders to add rules and regulations to what God has laid down. Look, it’s quite clear, for example, that we are to love our enemies. Dad was very committed to that. It’s in Matthew’s Gospel, on the lips of Jesus. Nobody doubts that he taught it. So if you want to be a follower of his, there is no choice about it. Love the people who attack and hurt you! But he never mentioned Sabbath travel, so there is no restriction. You can be a perfectly good Christian and travel round and round the world for weeks at a time without stopping if you want to!”

“Chloe, I beg of you, please don’t go!”

The monk seemed very worked up. David couldn’t understand it.

“Ebed-Inigo,” he said, “It appears that this restriction was imposed by your leader for a few months, probably as a strong hint that the world had forgotten to honour the creator, and it has certainly focussed all our minds. However, I think he was wise to make the restraint temporary,

because if you think about it, unless obedience is voluntary, it isn't obedience at all. It is compulsion."

Ebed-Inigo breathed in and out several times, in obvious distress. It was most strange.

Suddenly, Sam gave a peal of laughter. "You religious people!" she said, her eyes sparkling. "I think you're completely nuts. Look at you arguing! What did religion ever do for anybody? All it does is to weigh you down with rules and regulations and generally make your life a misery. If I was you, I would throw the whole lot to the winds and get on and enjoy yourselves."

She was looking at David as she said this. It was clearly intended as a challenge.

He cleared his throat. "Six months ago, I believed as you do. However, a chance encounter with some desert nomads changed all that." He wondered briefly how the Batts would feel being called desert nomads; they had been stranded in the Sahara and wandering off their chosen path, true, but although it sounded good, it was a trifle misleading. "At first I felt very uncomfortable, but I gave God a week to prove himself, and he did, and I've been staying with it ever since. Don't get me wrong," he added hurriedly. "There's a lot about religion as you put it that I heartily dislike, but to me, it's about doing God's will, not obeying rules, which is something very different."

Sam was silent, which was a surprise.

David decided to press on. "Actually, I've felt really bad about it."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Well, I told God he had a week's probation. That is so rude. I'm surprised he didn't strike me down there and then. I've told him I'm sorry since."

"Well, you can stuff it up your jumper as far as I'm concerned," Sam replied. This conversation was getting heavier than she liked. "Anyway, I think this outlawing travel on the Sabbath stuff is barmy."

"So do I," asserted Hannah, standing up. "Come on Glow, time to be off."

Ebed-Inigo was clearly very unhappy, but there was nothing he could do. He made as if to follow them out, but then changed his mind and sat down again. He actually put his head in his hands.

"Are you alright?" asked Araminta, most concerned.

Sam had had enough by this time. "I think I'll make my way too," she announced.

Everyone stood up, except the virtual warrior. It took Sam a long time to make the round of farewell hugs and kisses. David found he was bracing himself. "I do hope Cecil will turn up again before long," he said when the moment came. It must be agony for her, he thought.

"Oh I don't know," she said casually, still holding him close. "I'm past caring. I'll get over him. I think he might have been going to go religious anyway!"

A few months previously, David would have been thrilled at being held like this, but not any more.

Eventually she made her way out to the hall. Then she remembered she had left something behind and returned to the sitting room. David heard the girls getting in the car and setting off. They weren't going far; there really wasn't any reason for Ebed-Inigo to be so upset. David felt bewildered by his reaction.

Sam went off on foot. It was not too far to walk. She was more than happy to go on her own even though it was dark. Six o' clock was just striking.

The moment she was out of the door, Ebed-Inigo stood up. "Now," he said, "this is serious. There isn't much time. Those girls must on no account be in the air after six."

Everybody was intrigued. "What do you mean?" queried Araminta.

"What I say," said Ebed-Inigo crossly. Everybody stared. His voice sounded strange. He was definitely acting out of character.

"Oh, it's no use!" he said. Then to everyone's astonishment, a transformation gradually came over his features. The wrinkles on his forehead disappeared. His eyebrows changed from grey to brown. A younger man gradually emerged.

"Cecil!" gasped David. This was extraordinary.

Araminta was less surprised than the others because she had seen this kind of thing before.

“So you people have rediscovered Jim Pond’s disguises,” she observed. “I thought that must have been what Chloe saw.”

“There’s no time,” urged Cecil. “Those young people must get out of their car before six. Please get on the phone. It is crucial.”

David felt an icy cold chill deep inside himself.

“What do you mean, before six? What time do you think it is?” he asked.

“About five fifteen,” Cecil replied, looking round for a clock. There wasn’t one in the room.

“You are an hour out,” said David firmly. “It is now six fifteen.”

Cecil gave a shriek, clutched at his head, staggered and fell to the floor with a crash. He was out cold.

-oOo-

“Hen, the car’s behaving very oddly. We ought to be there by now.”

“Yes. I was thinking the journey was taking a bit long. It’s normally only a few minutes.”

“I think we are off route. We seem to be going westwards judging from the lights down there. I’ll tap in the code again, Glow.”

Hannah re-entered their destination. To her alarm, the message came up, ‘request denied’.

“This is worrying. Where are we going?”

The girls looked at each other in consternation. They entered their home address, but with the same result.

“It’s not responding. We are also higher up than we usually fly, and going much faster.”

The lights on the ground below looked very distant, and were shooting past. The girls were really frightened now.

“I don’t know what else we can do!” said Hannah, despairingly. “Even if we could open the doors, it would be madness at this speed. But you can’t open them when you are in flight.”

“Oh well, at least we are dry warm and safe,” observed Chloe. “There must be a system malfunction or something. Maybe it will sort itself out. Let’s ring home.”

Hannah began to make the call, but got no further. A male voice spoke to them from the console in even tones. If the girls thought they were frightened before, they were absolutely terrified now.

“Telephone access is denied. Your life on earth is drawing to a close,” came the dreadful words. “You don’t have long. Resistance is useless. Prepare to meet your God. Confess your sins, and put your faith in Jesus of Nazareth as a matter of urgency.”

The car sped on into the night.

-oOo-

“Now.” David spoke decisively. It was the moment to take charge. “This is extremely serious. We need to get some sense out of Cecil. Araminta, will you do all you can to revive him please? Ben, we need Mark; can you bring him round? And Louise, can you turn on the news and see what’s happening?”

The others all responded. Louise had the TV on in seconds. They were just in time to see the news reader say, “Now, we are just getting reports...” before the screen went blank for a moment, before turning to snow.

“Same as in the summer!” said Louise. “David, what’s happening? And who is this man lying here?”

“I don’t know yet,” he replied. “Try the web.” Louise went out obediently.

Ben’s shaking was having an effect. Mark allowed himself to be dragged back to reality.

“Oh, I was really enjoying that,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“There’s no time,” said Ben. “Cecil’s turned up.” Then, speaking to David, he added, “so has Ebed-Inigo been Cecil all along, or is it a recent swap-over do you think?”

“I would guess recent. In fact, just today. But there’s no time to speculate. Chloe and Hannah are clearly in great danger, and the only chance of our doing something about it is to bring him round.”

“What do you mean, danger?” asked Mark, looking scared.

“There’s no fresh news on the web,” Louise announced as she came back into the room.

“Normally they update the page every minute, but the page is now eight minutes old.”

“Right. Listen,” said David. It was worrying that Araminta’s efforts were having no effect on Cecil.

“I reckon that the no travel on the Sabbath business was only paused for a few weekends, not stopped. This time it’s worse. I’m very frightened for Hannah and Chloe, and for anybody else using a sky-car since six p.m. I can’t get my head round it at present.”

Ben took the lead. “We need to think back over everything that’s happened. Maybe there’s a clue somewhere.”

“Good notion,” replied David. “Mention everything, however trivial.”

“Do you remember something Dad said at the meal table?” Ben said excitedly. “He was encouraging us to search for the underwater workshop. His words were something like, ‘somebody ought to go down and look. I can’t understand people’s reluctance. Too bad I can’t do it myself.’”

“Yes. What of it?”

“It’s the phrase ‘I can’t understand people’s reluctance’. I think he’s been encouraging people to go down and look for years. He thought nobody took him up, but someone did. I reckon this whole thing began through one of Dad’s friends.”

“All the more reason to get Cecil conscious. I bet it was him.”

“The break-in,” said Araminta. “Do you remember? Bruce was sure someone had been in his filing cabinet. It all fits.”

“But Dad would never have condoned all this religion-forcing,” Mark objected. “I reckon other people have muscled in and taken over.”

“I agree,” said Ben.

“I wonder if Sam had wind of it,” Araminta suggested. “She came one night to look for something in his study you remember.”

“We may need to get hold of her, but our first course of action is with Cecil. Is there no more you can do? Try cold water on his face, and plenty of it.”

Louise fetched a jug of water. David poured it vigorously over the recumbent Cecil. Too bad if the carpet was ruined.

It was successful. He groaned and began to stir.

“Get him some brandy!” David urged. Araminta wasted no time. The bottle was still on the dining table, where it had been used to ignite the Christmas pudding at lunch time. Heating a spoonful of Brandy with a match and setting light to it before pouring it over the holly adorning the pudding had been a Winter tradition for generations, it seemed. The blue flame never ceased to delight the onlookers.

Cecil almost choked on the brandy, but it had the desired effect.

“How can we save my sisters?” Ben asked him anxiously.

Cecil looked from one to another of them urgently. “I am so sorry,” he said. “I came today to make sure none of you went in a sky-car. I was prepared to reveal myself as Cecil if needs be, but Sam was here, so I couldn’t...”

David let out a roar. “So you knew they were in terrible danger, but you allowed your marital problems to stop you...”

Araminta seized David and dragged him to one side. “David, don’t. Man’s anger can never achieve God’s purposes,” she said simply. “James Chapter One. Keep calm.”

David swallowed several times.

“I understand your feelings,” said Cecil. “I thought we had fifty minutes to get them down. I am most terribly sorry.”

“But there must be something we can do!” urged Ben.

There was an inner tussle going on in Cecil.

“Please!” Mark insisted.

Something snapped inside Cecil. “I can’t keep quiet,” he said. “It may be that Ebed-Joshua can do something, but it might even be out of his control.”

David seized Cecil and lifted him up bodily. “Where is this Ebed-Joshua?”

“At the retreat house. Twenty miles away.”

“Time to go. We’ll carry you.”

Within a minute, David, Araminta and the boys were outside and airborne, holding Cecil firmly between them. Louise was to stay behind and be on call. They shot off at full speed.

“Will twenty minutes be too long?” shouted Mark, as they hurtled through the darkness. Thankfully there was a moon to give them light.

Ben replied. “My guess is that the airborne cars are all being diverted to the Mariana trench, like the missiles were. Whereabouts is it?”

“Midway between Australia and Japan,” David replied. “It’s several hours car journey at standard speeds, but we can’t afford to hang about.”

“Left a bit,” said Cecil. They altered course.

“Look, we need to think and plan as we fly,” said Ben. “We know now that Chloe was not hallucinating when she saw Dad. Even Cecil has been making use of the mask technology.”

“Why have you abandoned Sam?” asked David, in the best voice he could muster.

“She’s totally selfish. When I found the Lord through the brothers, I knew she would have a fit if I told her. The marriage was over.”

David’s reaction was that Cecil was hardly one to talk about selfishness but he bit his lip.

“Now David,” said Ben urgently. “Think. Those testing rooms. I reckon Jim planned them as the only point of entry to his replicator. He deliberately rendered the underwater replicator useless, as we know, but he wanted the world to have the technology he had discovered. He tried to ensure that the right person would find it. You had to be a certain kind of character to make it through the rooms.”

“Bravery when faced by suffocation,” Mark pondered. “Then nearly drowning. Ben saved us from death there when he said he loved me. Then the courage to sit on the fire...”

“That’s the four elements of Aristotle,” said Ben excitedly. “Don’t you see? Air, water and fire, and the whole thing was happening in the depths of the earth. I got that weeks ago. But why did the water go down when I said ‘I love you Mark?’”

David couldn’t see the point of all this but something made him hold his tongue.

Araminta spoke. She had been so silent all day that it was strange to hear her voice. “Didn’t you say that the water turned to blood? That was the first plague in Exodus; you remember, the Nile turned to blood and the fish died.”

“I thought of Noah’s flood myself,” added Mark.

“I’ve got it!” Ben shouted. “It’s both. How did Noah escape the flood?” he asked.

“In the ark,” replied David. Even he knew that.

“And how did baby Moses not die in the Nile?” asked Ben. This was too much for David, but Mark knew.

“In the little basket made from bulrushes.”

“Yes, yes,” said Ben. “I remember Dad telling me once that the same word is used for both things in Hebrew, the ark for Noah and the basket for Moses. He thought that was a deliberate subtlety in the text, connecting the two stories. You know how he loved word-plays. Well suppose Jim Pond wanted to make sure it was Dad who went in to his complex. Dad would have known from the blood and dead fish that the password for the flooding bathroom was the word ‘ark’. Perhaps he had told Jim about the Hebrew word, even.”

“But we never got the password,” objected his brother.

“Yes we did, without realising it,” said Ben in great excitement. “When I said, ‘I love you Mark’, your name sounded like ‘ark’, so the flood was switched off. The computer couldn’t distinguish Mark from ark.”

“Well, I suppose it’s possible,” Mark admitted. It did sound rather far-fetched.

There was no stopping Ben now.

“Jim Pond wanted his invention to fall into the hands of godly people, preferably Dad, which for him meant people who knew their Bible. Hence the testing rooms. You could only get through if you were familiar with Scripture and showed great courage and determination. But his plan misfired. The monks certainly know their Bible, but they have used the replicator to impose their programme on the world instead of putting it to the service of all mankind.”

“But they didn’t enter the way we did.”

“Well, we don’t know that for certain, but you can bet that there were other features of the replicator that would only be solvable by people well versed in the Bible. They would have been able to make sense of those.”

David felt it was time to intervene. “Excuse me, but where is all this leading us?” he asked.

Ben was ready with his reply. “The key to this thing lies in Bible interpretation. In deciding what action to take when we get there, we need to keep that in mind. They may be totally misguided, but the commitment to the Bible by these monks is genuine. That’s how they’ve got so far. If we are going to influence them, we have to present a biblical argument. In fact, and I’ve only just thought of this, do you remember how the gun was handled by a cleaning lady of all people? I bet the monks had a creed of non-violence or something, and so none of them could handle it.”

“I bet it was never even loaded!” said Mark.

Cecil spoke. “You show great wisdom, Ben. I’m beginning to see how foolish and wicked I have been. The retreat house is down there.” He pointed at a building coming into view. “You will find the brothers assembled, I have no doubt. It is a solemn moment. They will not welcome your intrusion. As for me, I would be grateful if you would let go of me now so that I fall to my death. I am not fit to live.”

With that, he gave a sudden squirm, but David was ready for him and gripped him tightly. “No you don’t!” he hissed. “You face up to your responsibilities. You are coming with us, to introduce us to Ebed-Joshua. Don’t try to slip out of that one!”

Cecil wriggled and twisted every way but the others were too much for him. He was evidently terrified of meeting Ebed-Joshua in these circumstances. Ben felt an acute sense of dismay. The task ahead seemed next to impossible. How on earth were they going to achieve anything?

-oOo-

They swooped down and landed on the lawn in front of the large old house in the darkness. It had evidently once been in private hands before becoming a retreat house. It didn’t look as if there would be anything high tech here, but you could never tell by appearances.

The brothers were at worship, judging from the community singing coming through the windows.

“It makes my blood boil!” said David. “How can they sing hymns while there is mayhem and destruction going on?”

Cecil was incredibly reluctant to come with them. “Please!” he begged pathetically. David gripped him all the tighter.

Ah, the hymn was coming to an end. This was the moment to barge in. Ben seized the front door handle and tried to turn it. There was a click but nothing more. It was locked. This was the first hurdle.

No, wait - there was someone coming. David just managed to thrust Cecil to the front of the group.

The door opened. “You’ve been a long time,” said a female voice, but she got no further. Cecil was propelled into the hall by the others who followed behind.

David quickly sized up the situation. The assembly was in the door on the right.

“You can’t go in there!” protested the girl, who was no match for five determined people.

David advanced on the door and turned the old fashioned doorknob. The door opened into the room. If he had wanted to enter quietly, there was no chance of that. The opening door hit the white

screen which was supported by a weedy frame on three legs. The screen crashed forward onto a table and slid to the floor, and David was blinded by the light from an old fashioned projector.

There was a general stir in the room as the five intruders entered. Ben was aware of a gathering about twenty-five strong, seated on stackable chairs with metal frames and canvas seats and backs, laid out in rows, which looked as if they had done sixty years service at least. The brothers were dressed in the same manner as the ones under the Sahara had been. The coffee coloured carpet could hardly have looked anything much when it was first laid down, decades earlier, but with the extensive rip near the door that had been poorly repaired with black tape, it looked hideous. The wallpaper was faded. No money had been spent on the décor for many years.

The leader who had been addressing the meeting from beside the screen was none too pleased at their entrance, understandably.

“Who are you, and what do you think you are playing at?” he asked. He had a commanding presence. Then he spotted Cecil, whom David had finally released on opening the door, cringing in the background. In an instant he divined the situation. Cecil had divulged their plan to outsiders, in order to save somebody from death. This was intolerable interference.

His face contorted with rage. “You have betrayed us,” he said, “you of all people!” Cecil cowered, looking totally miserable.

“You must be Joshua,” said David, boldly seizing the initiative, omitting Ebed on purpose. There was no need to reveal their prior knowledge of this group. The man did not deny it. “There’s no time to delay. You need to reverse whatever you are doing with the sky-cars. It’s against the teaching of the Bible.”

The man laughed and relaxed. He had summed David up instantly. How wonderful that theology was important to him! His opinions could be safely ignored, even if he and his friends might prove troublesome.

“You think you can persuade me?” he asked. “Don’t you imagine that I have spent years studying the scriptures in preparation for this moment? Do you think I haven’t addressed all the arguments? Henry, will you do us proud, please?” he turned and spoke to a man in the front row.

“I suggest you sit down,” said Henry as he rose to his feet, indicating some spare seats.

“There’s no time!” insisted David. “Thousands of people could be in danger at this very moment. Act first, argue afterwards!”

“Not mere thousands,” Henry explained patiently. “We estimate that by the end of the Sabbath, up to one third of the population of the earth will have perished.” David and Araminta staggered back. How could anybody say such a thing and remain calm? It was too shocking to contemplate.

“You need to study the book of Revelation,” Henry continued. He was clearly pleased at the opportunity to enlighten somebody. “The curse of God is descending on humanity in the shape of hideous environmental pollution, because of our refusal to honour Christ. The solution was simple. We gained control of every car in the world, as well as a great many other computerised systems. Then we prevented Sabbath breaking for eighteen weeks. This was irksome, but caused no deaths, in fulfilment of Scripture. However, the sting was in the tail, and at the end of the five months, the lawless will die, again as the Scriptures hold.

“The result is that with the world population reduced, the threat of pollution will be minimised, and we can once again enjoy God’s creation as it was meant to be. In addition, it is those who have no place for God who are being cut away, as the gardener prunes the fruit-bearing tree. The uplift in godliness will usher in a golden age...”

David was listening closely. It was so tempting to interrupt, but Ben was right; to be successful, any argument he made would need to counter their understanding accurately. It was a moment for marksmanship, not grapeshot.

Araminta had picked up a Bible that was lying on the table, and expertly turned to Revelation. If only they had looked at the text more thoroughly! Then they might have foreseen some of this. Yes; there was the time period of five months. The scorpions had stings in their tails. Even the ratio of a third seemed to govern everything in the relevant chapters. A third of the world’s largest city was to

collapse into ruin, for example, which these people would have taken symbolically to stand for the human race. It all fitted.

Cecil had sneaked in to join the meeting. He had found a place to sit at the back.

Ben, however, had been fighting to contain his excitement. The moment he saw the look of rage crossing Joshua's face, when he recognised Cecil, Ben knew. The disguise might be perfect in appearance, but it did not affect character traits. Ben had seen that look of anger before, on the face of the Lion King under the Sahara. This was the same man.

But that was impossible. The Lion King had thrown himself off the bridge and died in the furnace. Or had he? They had never heard the bump. Supposing he was wearing a flying suit? He could have made his way out of the pit by some private route, allowing the rest of the brothers to commit suicide. And the group had the disguise technology, as Cecil had demonstrated.

How unbelievably callous! Unless perhaps these worshippers here had all done the same as their leader, and the whole mass suicide had been an elaborate pantomime for the boys' benefit, to confuse the world and prevent a proper search being made. No, this lot must be a separate group, because why wear disguises when there was nobody present to connect them with the Sahara lot?

Either way, one thing was clear. Their assumption up to now had been that these monks were well-meaning but misguided. Now they appeared in a very different light, or at least, their leader did. He had used deliberate, planned deception. The end justified any means whatever as far as he was concerned. Here was somebody who would stop at nothing. It would be useless arguing with him.

All this time, the leader had been perched on the edge of the table, facing the brothers in the room, enjoying watching Henry trying to convince David. The boys were still near the door where they had entered. Ben was able to see the back of the leader's head. He studied it closely. Surely the man had been fitted with an implant, like Mark's! A plan began to form in Ben's mind.

He unobtrusively took Mark's hand, trying to make it appear as if he was frightened and was looking for his brother's support. He moved the hand slightly so that it pointed at Joshua, and traced three capital letters onto Mark's palm, A, L and I with his finger. The monks could infer from this action what they liked, if they saw it at all; it would only confuse them. Ben prayed that Mark would recognise the letters as the beginning of the name Ali-Baba which had been one of their nicknames for the Lion King.

He could tell from the stiffening in Mark that he had got it. Brilliant. Then he traced out the letters I, M, P, L. Mark needed no more. He too could see the implant.

It was a time for desperate measures. Ben muttered under his breath three, two, one, and on zero they both leapt forwards. Ben pinned the leader's arms to his chest by a mighty bear hug, to that gentleman's infinite surprise. His face contorted with rage, and his eyes bulged. But Ben clung on. How good that he had such well-developed muscles.

Henry moved towards his leader to assist in what looked like the start of a brawl, but David stood in his way. Meanwhile, Mark nimbly perched on the back of the table behind the leader, facing away from him, so that the backs of their heads pointed towards each other, and leant backwards to get as close to the man as possible. As he did so, he turned on his implant and raced to a high intensity. There was no time for a steady warm-up. His aim was to tune into Ali-Baba's implant rather than the web. Now, would it work or not?

As Mark entered the shadowy virtual world, his body relaxed. Unknown to him, his plan was working; instead of linking into the web, his implanted circuits were tuning into Joshua's implant, the closest and strongest source in Mark's vicinity. Everybody in the room could see the effect on the leader. Joshua also sagged as he too was sucked into the virtual world. They watched, breathless.

Mark was in a subterranean passage with a sub-machine gun, and the assassins were coming on in droves. This was like no game he had ever played before; there was no time to think of anything. His defence was a matter of sheer instinct. At the back of his mind, he knew there was something important, but there was no time to consider it now. He would be lucky to escape alive. The assassins were falling dead in droves as he gunned them down, but there were so many of them.

“Don’t touch either of them!” insisted Ben to the gathering. “It could be dangerous. They will come back to us when they are ready.”

The brothers were confused. What had happened to their leader? They had never seen him like this before.

“You’ve killed him!” said a voice.

“Not a bit,” explained Ben urgently. “My brother and he are locked in a mind struggle. They both have universal implants and can access the web mentally. Let nobody interfere. You could damage them.”

The brothers looked at each other. Who were these people? None of them liked to intervene. They were mystified.

Of all the people in the room, Ben had the clearest idea of what was happening. He felt troubled. His hope had been that Mark would quickly be able to storm Joshua’s memory in some way, and retrieve the information they needed, but he sensed that as Mark entered the virtual world, he had dragged Joshua there too. It was not going to be easy. Also, would Mark still remember his purpose in his mental state, or would his gaming instinct gain the upper hand?

He felt helpless. There was nothing he could do about it. Mark had gone in at 95/5. There was no communicating with him.

-oOo-

“Why are we slowing down?” asked Hannah anxiously.

“And what is all that going on down there?” Chloe pointed downwards. Although it was night, there was something like a firework show going on below, spread out as far as the eye could see. Only there were no coloured lights, and the fireworks all seemed to be the same. They burst in the middle, and sent a shower of dim lights all round which quickly faded.

“They look like giant flowers,” said Hannah, intrigued. “There are ever so many of them.”

“We’re going in closer.” They had slowed to a halt, and were now drifting gently downwards.

Hannah gripped her sister’s arm. “Look sideways,” she shouted. “The sky is full of cars!”

It was true. There were thousands and thousands of them, all at their level. They could just make out the dim shapes in the darkness. Every now and then, one would fall from its position in the sky and accelerate violently downwards, to be quickly lost in the darkness.

Chloe suddenly knew. “Oh Hen!” she breathed. She could feel her body going rigid with terror.

The girls clung to each other. Down below was the ocean, and the supposed fireworks were enormous arcs of water, created by cars hurtling into the water at a supersonic speed. They were in the queue. At any moment, it could be their turn.

“I love you Hannah!” said Chloe in desperation. Even as she spoke, the car started to plunge downwards with a sickening lurch. At least the end would be quick.

“Dad, we’re coming home!” mouthed Hannah in a strange small voice.

-oOo-

There was something important... Mark was struggling. This assault by endless killers was not the whole picture. He needed to concentrate.

Suddenly he remembered. He had to find the butterfly. It must be through the archway.

With lightning moves and fantastic body swerves, Mark dodged past an oncoming rush of bearded warriors in combat suits and darted in through the doorway. It was a dead end; there was nothing in here and no way out. Undaunted, Mark raced at the far wall, which dissolved into a mist as he reached it.

Help. Floods of water threatened to engulf him. A huge wave was falling onto a golden beach out of a clear blue sky. It towered up above him. He would be crushed in a moment. He sprinted to the right and dived through a metal grill covering a window which buckled at the impact. The thunder of the wave crashing down reverberated through the gothic cathedral he had entered like the

slamming of a thousand heavy doors. Now, up the tower, quickly; where was the door? Would it be unlocked?

Only a superhero can run up all seven hundred steps of a stone spiral staircase without pausing, but Mark managed it easily. He burst out of the door onto the leads on the roof, where a glorious sight met his eyes. The hundreds of monkeys swarming all around him in the tropical jungle all shrieked at his appearance and scattered in every direction. In just a few seconds, the only remaining sound was the mournful wail of half a dozen peacocks. But what were all those brightly coloured parrots doing over there? There must be something in the undergrowth to have attracted their attention. They certainly did have the most wonderful plumage. Maybe it was a golf ball made of soft cheese...

Mark was deeply immersed in the virtual world, but Joshua was not. He had never ventured further in than 60/40. Despite being drawn into the assassins game and the subsequent chase, he never lost touch with what was happening in reality. 'I must preserve the password at all costs,' he thought to himself. If the intruders were to discover the computer and gain access, everything might be lost.

Mark re-entered reality with a speed that astonished him. Without a word, he leapt to his feet and shot out of the door into the hall.

Joshua let out a cry as he came out of his trance, struggled free from Ben, who had slackened his grip when the leader became immobile, and made to go after Mark, but David was too quick for him. He staggered across towards Joshua, being taken by surprise by this unexpected turn of events, and tripping on the uneven carpet. He collided with the leader as he was nearing the door.

The result was shocking. Instead of making it through the door as he had intended, Joshua smashed into the lintel, giving his head a terrific thump. He collapsed on the ground unconscious. To David's horror, a purple patch began to spread across part of Joshua's skull. It looked like internal bleeding.

The rest of the assembly was far from idle. Ben shot out of the door after his brother, followed by some of the monks. The rest of them tackled David, who struggled furiously as if he was ten men rather than one. They also seized Araminta, forcing her to sit on a chair, where she was closely watched.

"After the boys!" ordered Henry. More brothers surged out of the doorway, stepping over the body of their leader.

Ben had just seen Mark disappearing up the stairs. He reckoned the pursuing brothers had not been in time to observe this. Without pausing, he shot through a swing door which led out of the hall, giving the stairs a wide berth. Excellent; the ones on his trail followed him.

This was the dining room. There was another swing door into the kitchen. Ben just had time to run through it and then swing it violently back into the faces of his pursuers. There were exclamations of rage from behind that seemed totally unsuited for monks, to Ben's untutored ear.

Thank goodness, there was another door out of the kitchen, but it was bolted at top and bottom. He would have to be quick.

Sweeping pots and pans off the shelves onto the floor behind him as he passed them, in order to slow up the monks, Ben raced to the door. Thankfully the bolts were easy to undo, but the pursuit was hot. He was just turning the key in the lock when he felt a hand grab his shoulder. He gave a violent shove back. The monk collapsed back into his fellows, and Ben was out in the night air. That was better. He was younger and fitter by far than any of the monks. They would have a job catching him now.

However, Ben had been aware in all the chaos that he was only being followed by five or six monks. What were the others doing? Also, they had seen him unbolting the door. Any who were thinking would have realised that he was alone, trying to draw them away from Mark, who must have gone elsewhere. They would widen their search.

There was no time for complacency. Mark needed his help. What should he do?

Back in the meeting room, the remaining monks had frozen, appalled at what had happened to their leader.

“You’ve killed him!” gasped Henry in shock.

“The urgent need is for medical help,” announced David firmly. “Araminta? Can you advise? And do you people have anybody medically trained on the premises?”

Henry shook his head, as Araminta knelt down on the floor beside Joshua. “He should not be moved,” she proposed. “Fetch me hot water and towels.” It would be better to be seen doing something rather than nothing; secretly she doubted whether Joshua would recover.

David was shocked at what had happened. Still, the thing to do now was to put his beliefs into practice. Concern for his own skin should take second place. So how could he best love his enemies in this situation?

“Henry,” he said, “One of the brothers needs to go for medical help. Cars are out of the question, and I imagine that all communication systems are down. Is there a pushbike here? As for the rest, I would carry on with the meeting. Can you give out a hymn?”

Henry motioned to a brother nearby to go for help, and announced a hymn. It was a request to God that the singers should live in love and unity, David noted grimly. For the first time, he felt a degree of warmth towards the gathering. Most of them had shown remarkably little concern at the intrusion and probable death of their leader. They are like sheep without a shepherd, he thought to himself, remembering a statement in the gospels. Joshua would have received no opposition from these folk over his population cull. They had quite literally let him get away with murder. They were probably simple, gullible people who were way out of their depth.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of Ben gesticulating wildly outside the windows at the back of the meeting, to catch David’s attention. He was pointing vigorously upwards. David couldn’t interpret what he meant, but he had no difficulty grasping Ben’s sense of urgency. As he did so, he vaguely heard noises from upstairs.

“Excuse me,” he said, and walked out of the meeting to the foot of the stairs. How remarkable that nobody should make any attempt to stop him. They were all too intent on singing the hymn, except for one brother who had just arrived from the kitchen with a cup of cold water for Joshua. It would be better than nothing, but David doubted that anything could be done to help the unconscious man. At least the purple bruise had stopped spreading.

David hurried upstairs. The house had been extended several times, judging from the twists and turns in the passage. David suddenly came on a group of monks. One had a hatchet, and was on the verge of breaking into a door marked Private. The other five monks were ready for him, and they seized him. It was no use struggling. All David could do was to watch helplessly.

The door was open in less than a minute. They all surged in, including David. The room was empty, except for the desk with the computer. The screen was awaiting a password.

David noticed that the window was open, letting in a blast of the cold night air. It was an old-fashioned sash window that slid up and down. Really this place could do with modernising!

He shook himself free of the monks and walked over, opening the window wide, and peered out. There was no sign of Mark.

All of a sudden, David felt himself being seized from behind and given a violent shove. He could not prevent himself from falling out of the window. There was just time to turn on his flying suit and land gracefully. Hoping that the monks could not see, he gave a scream and then lay still on the ground at the foot of the building. If they thought he was badly injured, it might serve his purpose well. Mark had presumably flown off somewhere. David wondered whether he had gained access to the computer. It had been a remarkably simple machine, at least five years out of date. Was it really the nerve centre of the operation?

Ben was suddenly beside him. “Are you alright?” he asked anxiously.

“Never better,” whispered David. “Somebody tried to bump me off. Where’s Mark?”

“Hiding among the trees where the drive opens on to the road. He’s aborted the program.”

This was better than David dared to hope. “Fabulous!” he breathed. “Let’s get Araminta out and then we can be away from here.” He hoped Mark had been in time to save the girls.

“She’s still looking after Joshua,” said Ben. “I don’t think she’ll come.”

Instantly, David knew he was right. Araminta would not desert the man until he was in the hands of properly qualified medics.

“Right. I’ll stay here with her. You and Mark fly back home. No, before you do that, call the police and tell them about this place. They can sort it all out.”

“Okay.” Ben switched on his flying suit and glided down the drive. David picked himself up wearily, and set off round towards the main entrance. Araminta was extraordinary. Here she was tending a man who had made Hitler’s genocide programme look like a Sunday School outing. That insight about Hitler being referred to in Revelation was only partially correct, he now realised. He was merely the forerunner of this diabolical plot. How frightful that the technology now existed for one man to be able to dominate the entire human race. Where would it all lead? David shuddered. Do you really have everything under control, God, he asked himself?

With a sigh he arrived at the front door. It was standing open, so he walked calmly in. Joshua was still lying on the floor just inside the meeting room, and a slender pair of arms with sleeves rolled up to the elbows was ministering to him tenderly with a flannel. The last thought David had ever expected took shape in his mind. He found he was jealous of a man who was severely injured. How crazy was that?

-oOo-

David and Araminta had been locked in the broom cupboard by the monks. There was a light, a single unshielded bulb, but it might have been better if there hadn’t been, as it revealed to David the washed out colour in Araminta’s cheeks. She was trembling violently.

“Come here,” he said gently, and held her in his arms.

There was not much room. Besides brooms and mops and buckets and a plastic box of cleaning materials, there were shelves containing reams of printed notepaper, which looked as if it had been here for a generation. There was also a coat stand which had probably stood in the hall in times past, and a set of golf clubs attached to a rusting trolley. David wondered if Joshua had played with them.

Araminta would tremble so. It could hardly be fear at what was going to happen. Judging from the bangs and bumps from above, the monks had decided on a quick exit and were hastily packing their things.

Gradually the house became quiet. The two of them must have been forgotten. This suited David fine. It would not be difficult to break the door down to get out if they needed to; they even had tools to hand to help them. However, it would be better to call out to be rescued when the police came. As people taken prisoner, they would get a sympathetic treatment.

There was an inner tussle going on in David. It seemed a wretched moment, but then, every moment in the last few months had felt wrong. He decided to try.

“Araminta, you’ve had a tough autumn.”

There was no response, but the trembling was growing slightly less.

“It must have been terrible adjusting to Bruce’s death. I’m so sorry you had all that pain.”

Again there was no response. David sensed that she was happy being held. He took a deep breath.

“Araminta, I don’t know that there will ever be a right time for saying this, but the fact is, I love you. Will you marry me?”

There was a long pause. The trembling did not increase, but neither did it die away altogether. There was no indication that she had heard. Despite himself, he gave out a long slow sigh. It was no good; he was simply hopeless at this relating lark. Would he ever be able to make proper contact with a woman, he wondered, and not for the first time.

He almost missed it.

“Help me,” she said. The words were ever so quiet.

“Of course I will,” he replied. “What can I do?”

There was another long silence. Then she spoke again.

“David, I’m so frightened.” David waited for more.

“I’ve got a lump.” She could hardly get the words out.

David was concerned. “A lump? Where?”

“In my breast.”

This was a moment to proceed cautiously.

“How long have you known?”

“Several months. I’m so terrified!”

David took a moment. He wanted to speak calmly.

“You’ve been too scared to get it checked out. Is that it?”

Araminta nodded. “I’m so sorry!” she said, bursting into tears.

“Of course I’ll help you. You needn’t be afraid any more.”

She sobbed for a while and then seemed to relax just a little. No wonder she had been so withdrawn all autumn. David hoped they would be in time.

-oOo-

The bench in the hospital corridor was slatted and hard and most uncomfortable. Never mind. At least Araminta had now put herself under the medics, even if she had found it very hard to go in when it came to the point.

The thing which was concerning David most was that there was still no news from the girls. With every hour that passed, the silence seemed more threatening. The idea that they had perished with the thousands of others in the Atlantic was too awful to contemplate. It seemed that American and Asian cars had been sent to the Mariana trench, and European cars to the mid-Atlantic.

Mark had done brilliantly. Joshua, in thinking of the need to protect his secrets, had revealed them. It was the old trick. David had learnt it when he was young. When at school they had said to him in the playground, “Now, make a big effort NOT to think of a pink elephant,” then all he could think about was a pink elephant. It was so stupid. Joshua had never had this trick played on him, probably, otherwise he might have fared better in the mental struggle. Monks don’t go in for riddles and puzzles with each other. As it was, Mark had suddenly known where the computer was and the password too.

There had been so little time. David would never have thought of it. Mark simply logged on, changed the date to a hundred years ahead, altered the password, logged out and flown out of the window. It had halted the destructive program. The number of dead was only in the tens of thousands. That was bad enough, but it could have been so much worse.

All this had been revealed by Ben. Mark himself had disappeared.

Whether Joshua and the Lion King were one and the same, as Ben insisted, was unimportant. Either way, Joshua had known the password. Too bad he couldn’t be revived, as they might have learned more about the programming. It was going to be difficult to undo all the damage he had caused, over and above the shocking death toll.

David was lost in his thoughts when the door opened and a nurse came out.

“She wants you to come in.”

David’s heart glowed. She needed him. How good was that? Maybe there would be a future for them. He stood up carefully and tiptoed through the door.

-oOo-

David stepped out of the hearse. At least the crematorium had a covered area for the funeral cars to drive under, so that you did not get wet if the weather was poor, as it was today. Since it was November, he had been hoping for a cold day with a North wind, with the sky completely overcast, which would have suited his mood perfectly. This mild temperature with the constant rain was much harder to bear. How could anybody keep their spirits up on a day like today?

Nobody should ever have to bury their own wife, he felt. It was just so crushingly, awfully dismal. Yes, he believed in the after life, but somehow, it was little help. How could he ever get over the loss?

Oh Araminta! How can I continue without you? How can I find a way forward? David felt awful, and knew it. He was heavy in every limb.

Everybody else had gone on ahead. There was some hold-up. He needed to hang on so as to be last in before the coffin.

David found his mind going back over the events as he stood there, waiting. He shook his head. Could they have avoided it all, somehow?

-oOo-

“Right,” said the interrogator, tapping the excess ash from his cigarette into the ashtray. “Tell me again what happened from when you first saw the smoke rising in the desert.”

He might be young, this brisk man in his smart uniform, seated on one side of the table in the windowless cell with David on the other, but he was in authority.

David needed to tread carefully. He took a deep breath. “I assure you, I did not realise at that stage that there were people plotting to take over the world. I didn’t know what the funny objects flying up in the smoke were, I tell you. I simply wanted to rescue Araminta and her two boys if I could, and the only way to get to them was down the chimney.”

“Perhaps you see yourself as a kind of universal Santa, doling out goodies. You seem to have been free enough with your opinions.”

David sighed. “When I found my way in through the steel door, I was immediately confronted by a band of monks. What more natural than that I should pass on what I had discovered from the Bible just a few minutes before? It was highly relevant. I told them they were barking up the wrong tree. This was the wrong mountain, and the wrong desert.” There was no need to tell him about the errors in his grasp of the Bible text, that it was Benaiah and not Obadiah who had killed the lion in the pit, and that the descendants of Abraham being like the stars of the sky was not actually mentioned in Jacob’s dream about the ladder, even though the simile came several times in nearby chapters. As it was, although his quotations from Scripture had sounded authoritative, they had been somewhat garbled, although nobody grasped that at the time.

“And yet you had no idea that this was a millenarian group.”

David forced his mind back to the present. “I couldn’t have told you what one of those was. Indeed, I hardly can now. Anyway, I soon realised they weren’t Jews, which I thought they would be. Apparently Paul wrote that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, so race doesn’t matter any more, they said. They were talking about the prophet that was to come, however. They had Araminta and her boys captive; I could see them standing there. The thing to do was to humour the group. And yet at the same time, for reasons I can’t explain, I knew it was important to confront the gathering as well. They were clearly doing something momentous, thinking they were fulfilling events in the Book of Revelation by their activities, and I reckoned the breakdown in global communications and the sky-car system was something to do with them.”

“So if all this was so important, why did you let your interest in the monks fade when you got back home?”

“Look, as far as we could tell, the brothers had all committed suicide, with the exception of the one called Ebed-Inigo, and he tried to follow suit but was prevented by the heroism of Ben and Mark. So as far as we knew, there was nobody left to investigate. Then when the restrictions they had been talking about turned out to consist of cars being grounded for twenty-four hours each week, and money transfers the same, in honour of the Sabbath, they seemed in some ways to be beneficial if anything. I tended to share the view that the world was better off with the restrictions than without them. Oh yes, and the destruction of the nuclear weapons. There was no indication of anything sinister afoot at that stage, remember.”

“You took Inigo home with you. Why was that?”

“This man had endured the trauma of seeing his brothers ending their lives. He had been expecting to join them in death. When it didn’t happen, he was suddenly faced with the idea that maybe he was meant to carry on in this life. Don’t forget that he was a highly religious man. He had a great deal of adjusting to do, and what he needed was peace and space in which to do it. In addition, he had nowhere else to go, and it was part of the Winter family tradition to care for homeless people. The flat was large enough to accommodate him, and he seemed happy living with me.”

“Until he disappeared.”

“You’re jumping ahead. First he stayed with Araminta for a few days. Then he came to me for a fortnight. Then he transferred to the retreat house. At that stage we did not know of any connection between that and the former brothers, as we considered them. We had no details. We imagined that it was a place of peace he had discovered and felt at home with.”

“And you never thought to visit him there?”

“It did cross my mind. My own situation was that I had missed a good deal of work over the summer, and my employers were not very happy. The autumn was a time for showing myself committed to them, which I did. I set myself the target of working six days a week in order to catch up, even though they didn’t require that of me. I myself had recently adopted the Christian faith. I actually took to honouring this enforced Sabbath rest, if you must know, so I made myself take Friday six p.m. to Saturday six p.m. off each week. Then I began work again. On Sundays I would work at home. I did not imagine that the Ebed-Inigo would want me visiting him on his Sabbath. How would I get there, for a start? He would come to lunch on Sunday every few weeks, so we kept in touch. There was nothing sinister afoot, to my mind, so there was no actual need to visit him at the retreat house.”

“Hmmm.”

The interrogator’s face was inscrutable. It was hard to tell whether he accepted David’s explanation or not.

“So your visit there on Christmas day was the first time you set eyes on the place?”

“That’s right. After the shock of discovering that the person at our celebration had been Cecil disguised as Ebed-Inigo, there was no time to waste. He was appalled at the idea of the girls being airborne. They were clearly in danger. Hence our mad dash down there. The rest you know.”

“Thank you. One moment please.”

The moment had turned out to be a long one. The man returned and ushered in Ben. He was clearly irritated.

“The other one has gone walkabout,” he said. “He won’t get far.”

That was the last time that David had set eyes on Mark. There had been no contact from him of any kind since. It emerged that he had been left in one upstairs room, and Ben in another, and when the interrogator finally returned to Mark, the window had been found wide open and the room empty. It seemed quite extraordinary to David that they had not imagined that a teenager might be wearing a flying suit under his clothes and might not take too kindly to being quizzed as if he was guilty of some crime. He should have been treated as a hero! Only eighty-seven thousand people died rather than the countless millions that might have perished.

From having started with a smug self-satisfied attitude that Mark wouldn’t get far, the authorities had become gradually more and more alarmed, especially when it emerged that their top men could not break into Joshua’s computer. Mark did not show up at all, in the event.

The final result of all the interrogation was that the authorities knew from David and Ben that the program had not been cancelled, merely put forward one hundred years. Hopefully these two would mean one and the same thing, but there was no certainty. The one person in the world who knew the passwords to Joshua’s machine was not available.

As the weeks turned to months, the authorities calmed down. There were no more Sabbath restrictions of any kind. Money flowed freely again. There was no indication of any interference in the running of the world’s computer systems. The loss of the nuclear arsenal was greeted with a sigh of relief by everybody. True, the bombs were capable of being rescued from the Mariana

Trench - it seemed that the monks had miscalculated about this, but the international community erected a huge sign saying 'No Fishing' as it were, in the form of an aircraft carrier permanently patrolling the ocean, enforcing a no-go area. Life appeared to have returned to normal.

Those early months were overshadowed for David and Araminta by the silence as regards the girls. As the minutes lengthened into hours, then days, and all hope of their safe return gradually drained away, life had been unbearable. Araminta was beside herself. The loss of Mark she could comprehend. He would be alright; it was impossible to imagine him not making a success of the life he chose for himself. Doubtless it involved a new identity and a new life somewhere far away. But her twins, the firstborn! Hannah and Chloe were so lovely. It was tragic to think of them entombed at the bottom of the Atlantic. At least their death had been swift by all accounts.

The lump in the breast had turned out not to be malignant, to their intense relief. Araminta was to return every six months for a check-up. After this news, she had taken a further three weeks, but then gave him his reply; yes. David was thrilled, but his joy was muted. There was so much pain about. The early months of marriage would be difficult. She would need so much support.

In the event, the ceremony was as low-key as possible. Louise was the only bridesmaid, and worked hard on her appearance so as not to outshine the bride. She only just succeeded. Ben was the best man. David had wondered how the young people would take his proposal to their mother, but he need not have worried. Both of them were pleased. It was great to have him in the family, although nobody could ever take Bruce's place, of course.

David knew that. Their father had been very special. He felt deeply moved by the way he was so thoroughly accepted.

There was a brief honeymoon in the Seychelles. This would have seemed wonderful in the days before sky-cars, David reflected, but now it was ordinary. It had been a wise move by these exotic islands to limit the number of visitors. Thankfully honeymooning couples were able to jump the queue, provided they agree to a photo call in their wedding outfits for touristic publicity purposes. This had been no problem.

Araminta had tried terribly hard to be happy and effusive, but they got on better when she broke down and sobbed. David found this far easier to handle. It was real, and genuine.

Life had soon settled down. David's work was going well. Ben did brilliantly in his exams. Louise persevered with her tennis and was soon playing for the county under-sixteens.

Ebed-Inigo was not heard of again, but that was hardly surprising; the monks had all scattered. None of them were ever found. Whether this was because they all had access to high tech disguises or whether it was the failure of the authorities in tracing them David never tried to assess. It was a full time job caring for Araminta and the remaining two children.

Thankfully, his work in finance was both predictable and fulfilling. There was little stress in that department. He became a partner in the end, some years after he had first hoped he would, and came to be increasingly trusted. It was pleasing to find how reluctant the other partners were to take decisions without his active involvement.

There was one awkward duty. After discussion, they all agreed that Sam should be told about Cecil. She did not take it well. For one thing, it exposed the fiction that they had been happy together. The truth had been very different. David was thankful that he had seen through her when he did. He had so nearly fallen for her! It became clear that she knew nothing of the conspiracy to reduce the world's population. Why she had broken into Bruce's study remained a mystery.

Cecil had disappeared along with the rest. The riddle of the share certificates was never solved. Somebody suggested that MAG in the diary had been a reference to an Annual General Meeting, or AGM, encoded to keep it secret, and that this was why David had been lured away to Alaska, but the idea was never proved. It was the same with the share certificates. No companies named Zidokos or anything like it were ever found. As Ben put it, the numbers did not add up.

It really seemed as everything was now well and truly over. However, the cost had been enormous. There were few families in the land that were completely unaffected by the tragedy. Because of Cecil's incompetence, two of their own young people were no more, and a third had gone, seemingly for ever. It was a terrible burden to bear.

Araminta found it impossible not to be bitter and angry with God. Why should she have to go through so much suffering? Surely she had had enough practice in trying to forgive people by now for the terrible wounds they inflicted on her?

David could only watch helplessly. It would have been no good pointing out that it was the journey the girls went on that forced Cecil's hand, which led to Mark stopping the programme of mass slaughter, so in one sense, the girls did not die in vain. A speech of that kind would have been no help at all. There were times when Araminta felt a million miles away from him, but she always came back in the end. After a bit, he learned to live with the emotional ups and downs, but they were never easy. Marriage was not the bed of roses he had hoped for.

-oOo-

What on earth could be taking so long? Coffin, minister, husband, congregation, all were present and correct. Why this ridiculous delay? David was feeling a bit sick already, and this standing about was just what he did not want.

An attendant stepped forward. "I'm sorry, sir, but would you mind going through security clearance once again?"

This was monstrous. Couldn't they find something better to do?

He held his palm over the portable machine. If only his fingers would not tremble so! Really, the temptation to let rip was so strong, but David resisted it. Society seemed to spend all its time checking up on its citizens these days. Yes, it was important that there should never be a recurrence of the Sahara nightmare, so it was perhaps inevitable that there should be an ongoing, in-depth, focussed effort to overcome criminality. But there were serious drawbacks. The atmosphere in society had changed; nowadays, the most important thing was not to blot your copybook. If by any chance you did get a black mark against you, not only did everybody know about it wherever you went, but you found that doors were continually shutting in your face. Even simple pleasures like going to the cinema were barred. The better class of shops refused to serve you. Thankfully there were always market traders and street corner sellers who never asked any questions, so it was possible to get by, but the fear was real.

There were horrible stories about people who had been wrongly maligned. A junior employee at David's work named Philip had fallen foul of the system. He had bought a number of paving stones to create a patio in his garden. As there were some left over, he took them back to the store. He had even cleared this with the staff there in advance, that if there were slabs left over, he could return them and get a refund.

David had wondered when he first heard the story why the young man had not measured out the area carefully and bought exactly the right number of slabs. It would have made life so much easier if he had! But maybe he was uncertain how large to make the patio in advance, or something similar. Perhaps you needed a few extra in case of breakages.

Philip collected the money for the returned slabs. Two days later, he went on holiday to Barcelona with a lady friend. On their eighth day, he presented his card in the restaurant for payment as usual. Not only was it refused, but there seemed to be a serious problem. Within a few minutes, police arrived and bundled the astonished Philip into the back of a car. Not having any Spanish, he was completely mystified on being locked up in a cell overnight.

The girl seemed to have been particularly feeble, to David's mind. Surely the misunderstanding could have been sorted out? It was shocking that Philip had eventually been escorted home and handed to the police here, along with a bill for the cost of the operation payable to the Spanish police, to be deducted from his pay packets over the next four years.

The Lookout only carried a small paragraph about it, which communicated nothing. On this occasion, David had found The Lookback incisive and helpful. This underground pamphlet which served as a goad to The Lookout took its title from the film Look Back In Anger. It was generally scurrilous and malicious in tone, but the article on Philip explained the catalogue of mistakes helpfully, without naming him. It transpired that the problem had arisen from a clerical error,

whereby Philip ended up owing the store double the amount of his refund, according to the store cash register. He himself should not have deleted the first message requesting money that the store had sent to his home. You had to be very careful deleting messages these days, as that information went back to the source of the message. He also failed to register the fact that he was going on holiday, so when the numerous messages sent by the store received no reply, it was assumed that he was ignoring their demands.

Since the Sahara incident, the powers for cracking down on miscreants had been greatly increased. Debt-collecting which used to take months or years was now finished in weeks or even days. The attitude of society had definitely changed; nowadays you were guilty until proved innocent. When the misunderstanding had finally been brought to light, he received no sympathy. The failure to respond to the demands rested on him. He was still expected to repay the Spanish police. It was only because Araminta had taken pity on him, and commissioned David to push an anonymous envelope containing cash through his letterbox one rainy winter's evening, that Philip had been able to free himself from the unpleasant fallout.

David had wondered whether the monks could have foreseen how far society would swing following the Sahara incident. Their idea of making the world more godly by taking out Sabbath breakers had been naïve in the extreme. Their actions had made everybody very jumpy. Until now, the new technology had been broadly welcomed, but now there was a very different attitude. Where was the next threat to everyone going to rise up from? To ensure peace and security, everyone had to submit to irksome regulations. And so on. David hated it.

Ah, at last. They could go in. Take a deep breath. At least the service will be short.

The organ was droning quietly away, filling the air with sound that signified nothing. Typical.

Hello, there was a bigger crowd than David had expected. Normally, the longer you lived, the less people came to your funeral, because the journey was too much for your contemporaries and friends. This seemed not to be true in this case. Perhaps the sky-cars had changed all that. They were certainly so much more convenient for getting about.

There were Ben and Marigold, with all their four children. Their eldest boy had been called Mark in honour of his absent uncle, and the lad's wedding to Frances a few years back had been such a joy. The two great-grandchildren were peaceful at present, being held by their two aunts. They would probably give tongue with their infant voices sooner or later, but who cared? At least they were impeccably turned out in their smart grey waistcoats and trousers.

There was Philip himself, and his girl. Good of him to have come.

It would have been so nice to have Mike and Edith here, but they were long departed from this world. They had become great friends. Edith's tendency not to listen when she first met David had turned out to be a form of nervousness which quickly evaporated. In fact, she had so won his confidence, he was happy to admit, that before long he was consulting her over all his business affairs. Mike had been a tower of strength as well, especially over Louise. The less said about that the better.

Banjo was too infirm to come. She was happy in her nursing home, which was good. David got over there at least once every month.

Gnilla! Her name had not been mentioned for years. How awful to be attacked by an irate customer. Over flowers, of all things! Despite the surgery, she had never really recovered. Bill had come back to nurse her in her final months, which was nice. Araminta had been pleased about that. Now he too was gone. The daughter had not been heard of for many years.

No, Araminta should be feeling happy, lying there, David mused. There was much to be grateful for as you looked back.

It was only during the first hymn that David noticed the middle-aged woman in a cream coloured overcoat with two teenage boys on the other side of the chapel. Now who on earth could they be?

-oOo-

The clergyman cleared his throat. "We do welcome you warmly..."

It was next to impossible to concentrate. David had so many thoughts running through his head. Thirty-one years; had they really been together as long as that? He recalled the day when he had been married to Araminta longer than Bruce had been. Perhaps he shouldn't have worked it out, but the truth was he had always felt inferior to his illustrious husband-in-law or whatever you called a former husband of your wife.

It had helped to discover from Araminta some of the difficulties she and Bruce had been through. It wasn't the sort of thing that you normally heard from people. Given his difficult background, Bruce's tendency to go distant and dreamy was hardly surprising, but that had not made it any easier to deal with. Any girl would have found that hard. They learned how to cope with it, up to a point, but then it was enormously exacerbated by Bruce's terrible accident. Really, the marriage had never recovered from that blow.

It had been like a certain bush in their garden, Araminta had explained, which had shed a lot of its leaves, leaving brittle twigs behind. However, some parts of the bush still looked healthy and green. Not being a gardener, she had not known what to do. A little general fertiliser scattered round the roots seemed a good idea. Some days, it looked as if it might revive, but on others, it seemed more likely that the whole thing would die, and go stiff and leafless like an old-fashioned broom. Week after week it seemed to hover in this uncertain state, with no apparent change.

From a gardening perspective, it was producing nothing, so perhaps that was a reason for putting the bush out of its misery and replacing it with a new young shrub. Is that what life is, Araminta had wondered? For a few years we are young and full of promise, only to be superseded by the next generation coming up. Or are we more like fireworks, the variety that shoot up to a great height and burst into a hundred brilliant stars, only to fall away and be forgotten as the next rocket follows promptly on. The moment of glory is so slight!

David had found this talk utterly dispiriting, and entirely unlike the Araminta he had first known. But then, how could anybody regain their resilience after losing a husband and three children? It had been remarkable that she had been able to love him at all, when you thought about it. At least there had been no doubts on his side. He had loved her, through thick and thin. It had been hard since she broke her hip, he had to admit, but she had never complained.

Ben and Marigold were in good shape. They were a solid comfort to Araminta, and faithful in their visits. The grandchildren were good fun as well, as were the littlies. Wasn't it Joseph in the Old Testament who saw his sons 'even unto the third and fourth generation' before he breathed his last? Described as full of years? David knew what the writer meant.

It was soon time for the awesome moment when the coffin would disappear. David had seen this many times before, but this occasion was different.

The dreadful finality. Araminta! How can I...? David hoped he wasn't going to actually be sick.

At last. It was time for everyone to file out of the chapel. Thankfully it had stopped raining. The undertakers had arranged the floral tributes on the tiled path so that you could walk along and appreciate them. It was helpful to have something to do, and nice to be out in the fresh air. Then into the cars, and off to the hotel. The possibility of having everybody back to the yellow house had been discussed, but David was against it. He couldn't face the thought of the last visitor leaving, and the house feeling so unbearably empty afterwards in contrast to the chattering horde.

They still hadn't decided whether to sell up or not. Maybe Ben and Marigold were going to take the family home on. They were uncertain.

Ah well. The hotel was warm and welcoming. It would make a good venue. There would be no washing up to worry about.

There was that woman with her two boys. It was most strange. She was coming over.

"Hello. I'm Martha, and this is Jack and Matthew. I'm so sad about your loss."

"That's kind of you. I'm sorry, I don't think we've met?"

"Circumstances have made that rather difficult. He was so sorry not to have been here himself."

David reeled as with the force of a physical blow. This must be Mark's wife and children; Mark, from whom there had been no word for years and years!

He as good as fell backwards into an armchair that he had been going to sit in; perhaps staggered was a better word. News of Mark! It was so unexpected. He somehow managed to find his voice.

“Martha, this is...”

“Just let me speak,” she interrupted. “We are not entirely safe, even after all this time. I will keep it short.”

David wanted to call Ben over, but sensed it would be unwise. He could brief him later. The lady and her boys pulled up armchairs for themselves. A cup of tea was thrust into David’s hand. No sugar, he discovered on sipping, but never did that matter less.

“His passion was always in the field of technology. It took him several years to fully penetrate the controlling programme and thoroughly master it.”

David nodded, to show that he understood. Of course! Mark’s implant doubled as a storage device. He would have taken a reading of the hard drive of the PC before locking it up for good, probably only taking a few seconds to do so. Then he could work on it at his leisure. No wonder he needed to escape from the authorities. Why had David never realised this before? But that would mean...

“The programmers had done a good job, but there were weaknesses, and there were always limits to the amount of the system that they had managed to penetrate. Still, their mastery of the weapons had been complete. He decided to detonate one as a test. The slightly-raised readings from off-shore monitoring on the Western Seaboard of South America confirmed that he had been successful.”

David struggled to concentrate. Mark had exploded one of the nuclear bombs in the Marianna trench! The fallout must have been all but absorbed by the ocean; David had heard of such things before, thankfully. How amazing was that?

“His real success was in technological production. His work has enabled the colonisation of the solar system, if we may call it that.”

“How exciting. Naturally, I’ve been intrigued at the speed of it all. I’ve lost count of the number of orbiting space stations round the planets there are now. I’m thrilled that he has been involved.”

Martha’s eyes were shining. The two of them were on the same wave-length. If David had been younger, he reflected, he would have enjoyed the animated conversation with this woman, but there was no doubt about it; he was long past it. Never mind.

She was speaking again. “The outcome is an exploratory mission to the Kuiper Belt. That’s the region beyond Pluto. You can’t follow its progress on the web, but I will send you the emails, although I shouldn’t. They are highly classified. On the first of each month at midday, I will forward them to a temporary box which you will need to create a few minutes before, and then erase afterward. I will give you the address of the next message in the last line of the current message. Do you understand?”

David nodded. Mark was involved in pushing out the boundaries of the human race. His father would have been so proud of him!

“How will I know the first address?”

“Trust me.” Martha was rising to her feet. “We must be going. It’s been lovely to see you. We’ll be in touch.”

David felt a lump in his throat. So little time. Was there really the need of all this hush-hush after so many years?

“Araminta would love to have known,” he said to her. The lady seemed uncertain for the first time since they had met. David had the impression she was on the verge of saying something further, but all she actually said was “So long, then.”

“So long.” It was a young person’s farewell, he thought to himself, not suited to his years.

They shook hands. The boys both grunted something, which was kind. David watched as they made their way out of the front door of the hotel. He would never see them again.

-oOo-

“Excuse me sir,” the undertaker said as they were preparing to leave after everybody had gone. “The collection for bone cancer.”

David took the folded account gratefully. Naturally, this impeccably dressed gentleman would not stoop to the low practice of actually mentioning a cash sum.

“There was also a note.”

The second piece of paper was most odd, comprising letters and numbers, but David knew what it meant. His thanks were profuse.

-oOo-

Mark’s mind was in a complete turmoil, as he swept away from the upstairs window. If only he could have foreseen this? Yes, on the surface it was simply a debriefing by the military, but the reality was that they wanted access to the monks’ program. It was an immensely powerful tool, frighteningly powerful if you thought about it, and he, Mark, was its keeper. If it was going to be shared with anybody, then he would decide who, and nobody else. There was no way that he was going to allow it to be hijacked against his will.

But what on earth was he to do? They would be onto him in no time. He needed a new identity, and fast, and Mark Winter had to disappear. He would need cash. It was the end of his former life; he could not afford to contact his family again. That was going to be tough, but Mark already knew that his was to be a lonely road. Funny, really; he had been certain for months that he was going to travel a lone path through life, but he had not anticipated how quickly he would be thrust upon it.

His school. That was the place to go. Thanks goodness that he had his keys on him. What a good thing he had managed to ‘borrow’ the master and get a key cut.

He flew along at a reasonable pace, over the recreation ground where his father had once been kidnapped before he was born, and landed in a side street close to the school. The place seemed deserted, thankfully, but you couldn’t be sure even though it was the school holidays. The caretaker might be around, but if he was he was probably drinking tea in his hut. The side door was marked staff only. Mark unlocked it, and tapped the staff code into the burglar alarm. Along the passage, up the stairs, and then along to the computer science suite. Mark used a second key to gain access. This was one he had been issued with.

Now, don’t do things by halves. Mark switched on the entire network. It took several minutes to boot up.

All the while his mind was working furiously. The monks’ software would open up all kinds of information, but accessing it for the first time should be saved until later, if at all possible. At present, nobody was aware that he had a copy of it in his head. No, the first challenge was to effect an identity swap in a way that could not be detected or undone using his pre-existing skills.

Quickly he searched the register of deaths. Ah here was one; a John Garratt his own age had died earlier that day it appeared.

There was no hanging about. He entered the system through a back door that he had discovered a few months earlier, quickly found his file and swapped its name and personal details to those of John Garratt, and exited. Simple, but hopefully effective. Anybody searching for Mark Winter by name, address, eye-scan etc. would be unable to find him or call up photographs. It was unlikely that anybody would realise that two different names pointed to the same set of details. And the real John Garratt would not be presenting himself for security checks again. It was enough to be going on with.

Now for his own new name. Mark should be kept; he was too used to answering to Mark to consider changing it. Coulter, that would make a nice surname. Mark created a file, and entered the required fields, copying the individual entries from teenage boys with clean records, selected at random. That would do for the time being. He could personalise it later when he had more time.

The thing to do next was to distract the authorities. Mark hacked into the military, and opened the file on a senior officer who served in the UK. Major General Sparks. How appropriate was the name! He then selected several banks from Western Europe and transferred one percent of their

assets to various charities to do with relief efforts and also to an account for which Major General Sparks was a signatory. He then transferred the same sum from that account into the general's account. That should cause a furore. He was sorry for Sparks, but doubtless it would all be sorted out eventually. The main thing was to get everyone worrying about the breach in security.

Now. Where was he going to hide, and for how long? He would need transport if it was a significant distance. Unless he flew a short distance each day for many days. That was worth considering.

Mark racked his brains. He could not dump himself on any of his friends or relatives. It would be too great a burden.

In the end, he decided to go homeless for a while. But where? And how?

He had no foreign languages, so it had better be this country. It was winter, so South rather than North. What about the South Coast?

Then he got it. One of the members of staff at the school was keen on sailing and kept a boat moored in a marina at Poole. He might be using it, as it was the holidays, but once term started, he wouldn't be there midweek at any rate. It was better than nothing.

There had been an article about it in the school newsletter a term or two back. Mark managed to locate the file easily; the folder named 'newsletter' was the obvious place for it. There was a photograph, which showed the name of the yacht was Lively Bird. That should be easy to trace. Mark did his best to memorise the background of the photo to help locate it.

The thing to do was to carry some identification. Headed notepaper was all very well, but a security pass from a member of staff would be better. Could he look old enough to pass as a caretaker's assistant, or something?

Something drew him to the desk belonging to the assistant technician. The single drawer was unlocked. Brilliant! Here was an old pass which had belonged to a school leaver who had helped here a couple of summers ago. It should have been destroyed; how careless. He and Mark were not unlike. It would be better than nothing. Nobody would miss it.

Mark had been in the computer science suite long enough. He closed down the network, made sure he had left nothing suspicious, and left the building, locking the doors, with the precious pass in his pocket. He walked out of the school without meeting anybody, and was soon in the air. He set off northwards, looking for a barn or a shed to pass the night. His route to Poole would be circuitous. Who cared if it took a week to get there? He was in no hurry.

Yes, that was it. The thing to do was to arrive there with tools and decorating equipment. It would be a reasonable base for a while. The fact was that the boat owners seldom visited their boats, especially in the winter months, so the place would be pretty much deserted.

-oOo-

"How's the job going?"

Mark looked up at the figure addressing him from the floating pontoon that Lively Bird was moored to. Mark had been uncoiling and coiling ropes on deck earlier, as sailors do, and had now sat down in a fold-up chair with a magazine. The glorious sunshine compensated for the fact that it was January.

"Not too bad," Mark replied. This was true, though he had not been involved in any decorating. The man was about thirty, had an engaging face and seemed friendly.

"Are you getting ready to sail?" Mark asked.

"Tomorrow," the man replied. "I'm Alistair, Alistair Griffiths," he continued, holding out a hand.

"Mark Coulter," Mark replied. "Have you got time for a drink?"

"That's very kind," said Alistair. "Alright then." he stepped on board.

"I'll just get another chair." There had been a second one in the cupboard. Mark soon had it set up.

"I'm not that well-stocked, but there is some beer. Any good?"

"Admirable," said Alistair.

They soon had a glass each. Alistair wasted no time.

“You know, Mark, this would be a good place for somebody who was on the run, wouldn’t it? Nobody comes here much. Supposing somebody had gained access to much of the world’s computer network, and was able to transfer money from banks to charities at will, and implicate a Major General in the army, and then needed to get away. A little yacht like this would be an ideal place to hole up, really.”

There was silence, except for the repeated tapping of the rigging against the metal mast, and the cry of seagulls in the distance. Mark had frozen inside at Alistair’s words. However, he had anticipated this situation, and somehow found the reply he wanted.

“Well, I suppose it would, really. Suppose our friend meant no harm, indeed, he wanted to help the world, and was keen to meet a person or people who could help him put his knowledge to good use. This would be a good place to talk, away from prying ears.”

“I suppose it might. It would also be a good place for somebody to bump the guy off. There would be no witnesses to hear the splash as the body hit the water.”

Mark relaxed. He sensed that Alistair was enjoying this, and had no malicious intentions towards him.

“Well, it wouldn’t be a very good idea, because then the information and access to the world’s computer systems would die with him.”

“Not if there had been sophisticated monitoring equipment in a neighbouring yacht that had recorded every key press on our friend’s computer,” objected Alistair.

“That would only be any use if our computer nerd was careless, but supposing he had foreseen this possibility and had already installed software which routinely changed the passwords?”

“That would be very clever. Such a level of skill with technology would make that person very attractive to the right organisation, especially if he had already proved himself to be thoroughly altruistic, by saving millions of people from certain death, for example, myself included.”

There was a moment’s silence. “More beer?” asked Mark with a smile. He had a feeling he and Alistair were going to get on well.

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“I’ve only been here once before, remember” said Mark, as he and Alistair settled themselves in front of the computer in the control room high up in the Sahara underground complex. “On that occasion, the furnace was going full pelt, and the whole place was shaking and vibrating.”

“And the complex was swarming with monks,” Alistair commented.

“Too right. Oh yes, whatever happened to Ebed-Inigo’s model railway? He asked us to look after it for him.”

It turned out that the model railway had not been discovered, so after Mark had attempted to boot up the computer, and found his entrance blocked as they had told him he would, he and Alistair went off to try to find the railway.

“All the rooms seemed the same, so we didn’t bother to investigate. There are only a few of us here,” Alistair explained.

This seemed very slack to Mark. “I think we should have a thorough look round at everything,” he said.

The railway was functioning perfectly. Alistair was delighted by it. The two of them watched the tiny locomotives weaving in and out of trees and rocky outcrops, over bridges and under viaducts, past buildings and factories. Even the weather above the exhibit changed over the course of a few minutes, from gloomy and overcast to sunny. The effect was lovely.

“Come on,” said Mark. “I want to explore properly.”

Alistair led him down a few floors, through several doors and out on to the large paved area from which the huge hoppers and machines rose up majestically.

“We looked down on this from the viewing area up there,” Mark explained waving an arm, “but we never managed to get down here. What have you discovered?”

For the next half an hour, the two of them criss-crossed the vast area, until they had been round every one of the massive structures. While some were merely the girth of a large detached house, but stretching up as high as a tower block, others were three or four times the size. Most had doors at the foot marked Danger High Voltages on them, all of which were locked.

“We have investigated all of these,” Alistair explained. “There is little to see inside. The entrances are for maintenance purposes, but in practice the machines service themselves. There is nothing for a person to do. Everything is controlled from the computer, we imagine.”

“So have you had the thing switched on?” asked Mark.

“No. We’ve been waiting for you to gain access to the computer. There’s a bit more to see.”

Alistair led him on to the far end of the complex, where the paved area ended at the foot of a huge cliff which towered up above them. They walked along to the right, and soon came to a doorway which opened onto a spiral staircase that descended from their level. Alistair switched on the lights, and they made their way down.

Mark gave up counting after a hundred steps. Sooner than he had expected, the staircase ended at another doorway leading onto a similar paved area. This had many fewer structures. The light was less on this level, but it was quite sufficient for them to see as they walked round the bases of the machines. Here too there were doors marked with voltage warnings.

“We reckon most of these are continuations of the machines up there. Some of them were too tall to fit above, so they reach on down here as it were.”

Mark was not surprised. “This reminds me of the replicator under the sea at Madeira that my father was shown,” he commented. “There were lower levels there as well. Is this the bottom?”

“As far as we can tell.”

“What progress have you made in discovering how it all works?”

“Precious little. We’ve been working on it, but we were hoping the computer in the control room would shed some light.”

“Right. Are you sure ours is the only computer here?”

“No. We’ve only been here a short while ourselves. The military only released the facility to us recently.”

“After they had totally failed to come up with anything,” Mark suggested, “with all their massive resources.”

“We really do need access to that computer,” said Alistair.

“Okay, I see that.” There was a need for some careful negotiating; that much was clear. No time like the present. Mark stopped at the foot of a large pipe a metre across that ran vertically upwards into the roof, and turned to face his guide.

“How many people know who I am and that I am here?”

“Three others, all of whom are here with us. You will want to meet them.”

“Yes, certainly, but first you and I need to talk. I like you Alistair. I had a good feeling about you the moment we met. If you can persuade me that you have integrity and good motives in all this, then I’m with you all the way. But I do need things in return.”

“Such as?”

“I have the means to access the monks’ programme, as you know. I do not want that falling into the wrong hands. To prevent that from happening, I need my existence and location to be kept secret except to a few people I can trust. That’s the first thing. But the second is that I would like to see this replicating technology made available to the whole human race, and I want to be personally involved in that process. The monks seized Jim Pond’s invention for their own purposes. If you are out to do the same, then count me out.”

Alistair laughed. “Well put,” he chuckled. “I reckon we see eye to eye. My only concern beyond yours is that I earn some money from my involvement. I should like the means to support a wife and children one day.”

“Right. I’m sure that should be possible.”

Mark did not add that he himself had more than enough money to provide Alistair with what he needed. The funds had been deposited for him at birth. Earning a living was not an issue. That information could come out later, if Alistair did not already know.

“Okay. Let’s meet the others,” Mark declared. The question was, could they be trusted?

-oOo-

The three others were introducing themselves. They were all older than him. Mark’s youth was over; there was no doubt about it. Teenage strops would have to become a thing of the past. He was on his own, and he needed to be careful. Adulthood had been thrust upon him.

“I’m Jack. I’m twenty-six years old, I’m a scientist, and I come from Ohio. My job is to work out how the replicator works. I also enjoy Ping-Pong.”

Mark smiled. “I’ll give you a game,” he said. Jack spoke clearly, and came across as highly articulate.

“I’m Sandra, and I provide food and see to everybody’s personal needs. Jack and I have known each other since school days.” She looked around thirty, Mark reckoned, and she dressed in a way that would not attract attention. She shared Jack’s accent.

“She’s also into Psychology and water-colour painting,” Alistair added. Mark was impressed.

“I’m Pete, the odd-job man.” Mark took to Pete instantly. His laconic, self-effacing style matched his own perfectly.

“I bet you do more than that,” He replied.

“Not if I can help it.” Mark wondered how Alistair, who was clearly from South East England, had met the Americans. Or Pete for that matter, who might have come from anywhere.

“Right. Well, I’m Mark Winter. My father once saved the world from the threat of multiplying machines that were arriving in the solar system, along with his dad, who got killed in the process. More recently, it’s been my turn, and I’ve prevented the deaths of millions of people at the hands of the monks who were in charge here until last summer. I managed to gain access to their software and put it on hold for a hundred years. I am the only person who knows how to enter their system. If anything happens to me before I get it all sorted out, then the world runs the risk of a repeat performance in ninety-nine years time. So if you have any malicious intent towards me, perhaps you would like to pause and reflect, and share it now.”

“Mark, we’re on the same side,” Alistair said. “It’s understandable that you feel jumpy. Why don’t we all live together here for a while, see if we can hack into the computer, and try to discover how the replicator works and whether we might be able to make it a bit smaller one day? Then as you get to know us, maybe you’ll find yourself able to trust us.”

“Small enough to go in my handbag, please,” added Sandra cheekily.

Jack chuckled. “Some hope.”

“Right,” said Mark, “it seems we understand each other. Our aim is to reclaim this place and the great invention all around us, and make it available for everyone. Now I’ve got an idea.”

Mark had everybody’s attention.

“This joint was created by Jim Pond, and our best course is to try to get into his mind if we want to continue his work. When my brother and I first entered this complex, we came in through a long tunnel, which led to a number of rooms with problems in them which we had to overcome.” Mark told them the story. They were fascinated by the robot in particular. “Now,” he continued. “Ben reckoned there was a meaning to the different tests we endured, and that they were designed to allow through only a certain type of person. What I want you to do is to see if you come up with the same theory as he did. Do you have any thoughts?”

The other four were puzzled, as Mark had feared they might be.

“Look,” said Sandra, “I don’t get it. Why should Jim Pond have wanted to restrict access down here in the particular way you suggest? Why not simply pass the facility on to somebody he trusted, along with a full set of instructions, rather than go in for all this cryptic stuff? It seems foolish to me.”

Mark stared at her. "Of course. It seems obvious. My brother and I decided that the tests were all to do with knowing the Bible and with Aristotle's four elements of earth, air, fire and water. But yes, wouldn't it have been better to leave instructions with somebody?"

Jack spoke. "Was Jim Pond a bit of a loner, perhaps? Maybe he had nobody he could trust."

Then Mark remembered. "Hey, there was something a bit like a set of instructions for the underwater replicator. When my father and Pikel discovered the inventor's workshop as he called it, there was a robot who took dad on a guided tour of it. The robot self-destructed at the end of the tour, and the water flooded in. 'My secrets die with me,' the robot said. They were its final words."

"Tell us about the underwater workshop," said Pete.

Mark told them the story as best he could, ending with the account of David and Ben being attacked by a harpoon gun. His father's account of the workshop had been affected by his poor health, Mark had to admit, but he distinctly remembered the guided tour by the robot which then self-destructed.

"I wonder who that was in the other sub," mused Alistair. "It might have been the monkeys, but then it might have been another lot."

Mark laughed. "I like 'monkeys'; they were a bit nuts."

"Might there be a robot guide available here if we came in through the tunnel?" asked Sandra.

"That's what I was thinking," said Mark. "The only trouble is that it was dangerous."

"If your memory about the undersea robot is correct, then there won't be," Alistair pointed out. "My secrets die with me sounds pretty final to me."

In the end, they decided there was nothing to lose. Mark and Pete would enter through the tunnel, armed with oxygen and a fire extinguisher in case things got out of hand. "We'll leave the oxygen outside the bedroom when we get there," explained Mark, conscious that a canister of oxygen is not something to take into a fire with you if at all possible.

Maybe they would locate the robot again, and be able to get him to talk.

-oOo-

Mark had not seen the inside of the kiln before. The stairs wound up the huge chimney in wide sweeps. It would have been quicker to fly up, but the exercise would do them both good, especially Pete who looked rather unfit. The cover to the outside world was controlled by a simple switch on the wall. When they pressed it, a small porthole appeared at the top of the steps. It was also possible to open a much larger area, for use when the furnace was in operation. The set-up reminded Mark of a small gate within a large gate outside an Oxford college that had amused him when he was a child.

"I don't think any of this furnace was Jim Pond's creation," Mark confided as they crossed the sandy plateau. Pete did not speak.

When they finally reached it, they found the entrance to the tunnel was almost buried by sand.

"This needs to be marked in some way," Mark shouted to Pete, as there was a strong wind blowing. "We don't want to lose it."

Pete stored a GPS reading on his wrist device without comment. They went in.

To Mark's dismay, the lights were not working. Still, they had torches. They padded along in silence, making their way down all the staircases. Pete is even quieter than me, Mark thought.

They came to the first door. Mark went through the same routine as before with his hand-held and all its cables, and before long the door was standing open. They went in, heard the door slam, waited until the air was virtually gone, and then heard the inner door open for them. So far so good. They had not needed the oxygen cylinder.

They waited, expecting to hear the robot's voice, but none came.

"Oh dear," said Mark. "Come on." They entered cautiously. "This is the side door into the bathroom," Mark explained, motioning with his torch. "Let's carry on forwards and see what happens."

They made their way quietly forward. The passage meandered round a few curves, only to end at another sealed door.

“I don’t recognise this,” Mark said, “although it’s possible it is the way we came out of the complex with Ebed-Inigo. I wasn’t paying much attention at the time.”

“I think we should go back and into the bathroom,” suggested Pete.

They did so. Mark was feeling uncomfortable. On their previous visit, there had been lights throughout this area, but everything seemed dead this time.

Within another ten minutes, their fears were confirmed. Everything was completely inactive. The taps would not run. Even flushing the toilets had not produced any reaction. There was no sign of any robot.

They returned to the door furthest in which had seemed unfamiliar to Mark. It was firmly shut. There was no keypad or keyhole or other means of entry. Pete knocked on it a few times in case one of the others might hear from beyond, with no result.

“I think we should try and locate this door from the other side,” Mark suggested. “One of us could stay here while the other went round.”

“Waste of time,” said Pete. “I reckon something or someone has switched off all that obstacle course you went through. There’s nothing to be gained from snooping around down here.”

Mark had to admit he was right, but it did feel dismal simply retracing their steps and returning by the way they had come.

-oOo-

Mark had tried everything with the computer. It was no good. Although he could access an enormous amount of the world’s software, this particular machine was opaque to him. But there must be some way into it. It had been working before. Could the military have put some sort of block on it, perhaps?

Alistair was clear about this. “No, quite the reverse. The machine died on them on Christmas Day, when the sky-car operation was launched, and never restarted. That’s why they decided there was nothing here for them in the end.”

Things did not look good.

“Maybe we need to unscrew a panel and gain access to its insides,” Sandra suggested brightly. She knew nothing about computers.

“That would be like dissecting a seed to see why it was refusing to sprout,” Mark explained.

Then he had an idea. “Are there any other terminals?” he asked. “Can we look around? My idea is that something may need to be done elsewhere in the complex to allow this machine to connect.”

“A remote switch. It’s possible,” agreed Alistair.

“Probably not easily recognised as such,” Mark replied.

They searched for several hours, working their way down through the building. Eventually they had exhausted everywhere, except the tunnel into the complex that Mark and Pete had been in earlier. Search as they might along the rocky, uneven walls, they still could not find anything. They had drawn a complete blank.

“Think!” Mark spoke to himself sternly. The four of them were standing outside the lift on the bottom floor.

“Okay,” muttered Mark. “It needs to be a place where the user won’t be interrupted. So as not to endanger security. Either that, or something so obvious that nobody would suspect its significance.”

He paused again.

“Alistair, are we quite certain that we have discovered everywhere there is to discover?”

“No, to be blunt.” Alistair was clueless, and he knew it.

Mark walked towards the lift, and summoned it. The cage doors opened, as it was already on their floor. He walked in and studied the buttons. There was a thought forming in his mind.

“Keep the doors open with your foot,” he remarked to Pete, who was already doing just that. “I wonder if it could be somewhere in this lift?”

Everybody looked. The only features to break up the steel walls were a small grill with a speaker behind it, and the keypad below it, into which you punched the floor number you wanted, along with the usual doors-open and doors-shut symbols. There was nothing out of the ordinary.

“Right. Get in,” said Mark. “Let’s time it going up.” When the doors had closed, he took them up to the floor of the control room. The journey took twenty-five seconds.

“What about doing the other journeys, and timing them. What I’m driving at is, we can’t see out of the lift as we travel, like you can in some lifts. Could there be an extra floor somewhere, where it goes through the rock up here, for example, which needs some subtle key-press to access it?”

“No harm in checking,” said Jack.

“I’ll just try this,” Mark said. The doors had shut again, because nobody had got out. Mark pressed the open-door button, and they opened. Then he put his foot in the beam, and pressed the open-door button again firmly. Instantly, a sound of machinery starting up came from the control room.

“Quick,” said Mark, leading the way at a run in his excitement.

Something had happened. The computer was booting up with a little whining sound. Tiny lights were blinking on and off.

“It’s so simple!” cried Mark. “You just press the open-doors button a second time while the doors are open, with your foot in the beam. Genius. Even if the lift was crowded, people would never make the connection.”

However, as he was speaking, the whining sound suddenly stopped and the lights disappeared, and the machine became dead once more.

“Oh dear. That’s only part of it,” Sandra commented.

Nothing daunted, Mark led them back to the lift. It had to be something here.

It took another twenty minutes for him to get it. The others had got bored and drifted off to the chairs in the control room. This time the machine started up again, and kept on going.

“That’s it,” they called. “What did you do?”

Mark had a grin on his face. “You should have stayed,” he said. “Then you would know!” He was obviously delighted.

“Aren’t you going to tell us?” asked Sandra.

“I might,” said Mark with a chuckle.

It had been the little loudspeaker behind the grill. When Mark stood with the back of his head against it, so that it could read his implant, loaded with the software copied from Ali-Baba’s implant, and did the doors-open routine at the same time, everything went ahead.

Mark was pleased. Nobody else would be able to break into the computer other than him, no matter how hard they tried. There was no need to explain the process to the others.

-oOo-

They kept the computer running. Mark insisted that all four of them should get to know its ways. They spent several days on it, and in the end, they had it sorted out to their satisfaction.

There was an administrative section. This included the names of all the brothers and the staff. Maybe it would be appropriate to publish that information in due course, but they all agreed to keep quiet about it at present. Letting the outside world know that they had accessed the computer would only bring hordes of people. As it was, they had the place to themselves.

Then there were folders of files to do with catering, cleaning, maintenance and the like.

Next there was a section named ‘Thought’ which had its own password. “Interesting,” Alistair commented. “I wonder what that’s about.” Mark left that until later.

Finally, there was a huge folder marked replicator. A quick glance was sufficient to show that all the controls and workings of the replicator were in front of them, waiting to be accessed.

Jack was ecstatic. “This is beyond my wildest dreams,” he breathed. “I’m going to immerse myself in this, and see where it leads. I feel really excited!”

Mark was pleased. They were on the verge of making real progress, or so it felt. The only difficulty now was getting at the computer himself. Jack was there for most of every day, along with Sandra, who was eager to learn, and whose job was to provide endless cups of coffee.

Occasionally Jack would ask Alistair or Mark to go down to one of the stacks, as they had taken to calling them, and look inside for a fuse board and bring back a photo. After the third or fourth time, Pete suggested a video link would be better; then it would be possible to see at a glance if any of the circuits had switched themselves off.

“But surely that information will be in the computer?” asked Mark incredulously. Sure enough, Jack soon found the file.

“Sorry; I’ve been wasting your time,” he confessed.

“You need to poke about yourself and understand the hardware,” Alistair commented, “and then explain it to us.”

Mark was quite happy alone in his room, as he could work away on the monks’ programme, using his hand-held. There was so much of it to absorb. He soon found the nerve centre, from which the orbiting locusts were controlled. They were permanently on standby for fresh instructions. This suggested that Ali-Baba had intended to go on interfering with the world’s activities. Now that would never be.

It also became clear that although the locusts could be controlled with a command, they had a good deal of autonomy. They had powerful observational capacity. Indeed, because each one had its own processor and memory, taken as a whole, they operated as an enormous computer in their own right. Mark felt rather alarmed about this. It would not take much to destabilise them.

“Alistair,” he said at tea one day, “I feel concerned at what I am discovering about the monkey program.”

“I’m listening.”

“So far, all I have done is to observe. I have not altered any of the settings, beyond the date, which I managed to do in those few minutes I had on Christmas Day. Frankly, I was luckier than I knew. It was a good thing I had fixed on that approach in advance, because almost any other would have taken far too long. As it is, I feel nervous of sending any commands.”

“Why?”

“The system has a great deal of autonomy. It would be easy enough to lose control of it, and let it act on its own initiative.”

“That sounds bad. Rather like a rowing boat which is so loosely moored that you feel the current of the river might be enough to pull it away from the bank into deep water.”

“Beautifully put. I suppose it was designed to be independent of human input. It looks as if they really did all mean to commit suicide, or at least, the programmers reckoned on that being the case, and arranged the thing to run on its own.”

“Right. Well, needless to say, don’t do anything risky.”

Mark did not share all his thoughts with Alistair. It was early days. For the time being, the best policy was to leave well alone.

-oOo-

A few mornings later, Jack seemed very pleased. Sure enough, he had an announcement to make at the end of breakfast.

Everybody gathered round.

“I have two pieces of news. First, I feel confident about how to start up Bruno the Bear and begin making something.”

This was exciting. Mark had sensed that this step was imminent. The name had come from all those moments when Jack had seemed at a loss, and there had been tension in the air. Mark had decided early on that there was nothing to be concerned about; Jack was a born worrier, but he would get there in the end. Someone had described what was going on as a series of pauses, hence

sticky paws, hence Bruno the Bear. It was a good name, as it helped everybody feel that the huge beast might be tameable and become a performing bear in time.

“Please may I have a second comb,” Sandra asked. “I keep losing mine.”

It was not a bad idea. The original comb could be easily scanned by the 3D reader, and the item was small, which must be easier for the machine to produce than something big.

“What was the second piece of news?” asked Pete.

“Sandra has agreed to marry me,” came the astonishing reply. “The wedding is to be at Las Vegas, and you are all invited.”

Mark was astounded. He had not picked up any hint of this at all. “My word you two have kept that well-hidden!” he said. Sandra was beaming happily. The secrecy of the romance had clearly been a large part of the fun for her.

“Congratulations!” said Alistair, and hugged them both warmly, as did Pete and Mark. Life was about to change.

“Aren’t you forgetting?” Sandra asked her husband to be.

“Oh yes. Sorry. Third item is, there’s another Pond replicator in existence, according to the computer. It’s on a space station in orbit around Saturn.”

“Oh!” Everybody looked at Mark, who had spoken. “My parents used to speak about their visit to the space station. It never occurred to me that there was a replicator on it, but now you mention it, there must have been. Should we go and look?”

“No doubt about it.” Alistair was decisive. “We’ll close down here, take a well earned break in Las Vegas, and then head off into space from there. Everyone agree?”

There were no dissenters, which was hardly surprising. Mark felt a warm glow. These people were great. They seemed to work very well together. He was also delighted for Jack and Sandra. They would make a good couple.

-oOo-

Las Vegas was just as Mark had anticipated - noisy, hectic and brightly lit.

It turned out that Sandra was a non-flier, so the five of them went about on foot. Their own hotel was so vast that it took twenty minutes to walk from one end of it to the other, Mark discovered, so their decision to look at some of the other ones down the strip sounded like a considerable commitment. Jack was keen to see New York New York, which was three hotels away, and the walk alone took them nearly an hour.

The opulence and wealth was fantastic. The whole thing was designed to get you to part with your money. Mark was having none of it. He did not push a single coin into a slot.

Not so Pete. He had a system, it turned out, which was to play at the fourteenth table for fourteen minutes in each hotel and then walk away.

Mark was intrigued. “But you don’t even know what game it will be!” he exclaimed.

“Adds excitement.”

“But you might not even know how to play.”

“Soon pick it up.”

Jack and Sandra were too taken with each other to be bothered. Alistair looked on with an amused expression. Mark studied the games, which generally turned out to be Blackjack and Poker. Pete had a thing against Roulette, and contrived to count his tables in such a way that the fourteenth was never Roulette.

The wedding was to be held at a chapel on their third day. All sorts of relatives would be flying in. They would not know about the project in the Sahara, and were not to be told. They knew that Jack’s work was secret; that was all.

Mark made the mistake of ordering a large Coke at one of their stops. When it came, it was the size of a champagne bucket, and try as he would, it took him forty minutes to drink it down. The others didn’t seem to mind, however. Jack and Sandra took it in their stride.

The casinos ran continuously without a break. Mark wondered whether there were people who lived there permanently, never venturing out into the sunlight, their minds gradually furring up with the continual chiming and beeping of the fruit machines, and the constantly flashing lights. It would have driven him crazy. Thankfully, it seemed okay to escape to his room when it got to ten p.m. The others could stay up past midnight if they wanted to.

He couldn't settle. He was missing his family. Somehow it was easier to be in touch with his feelings here than at the Sahara complex. The emphasis for the last few months had been on hitting it off with the other four, and taming the computer; all that was going well. Then mixed in with that was the horror of the mass suicide. Mark realised that he had been trying to suppress the memory, but now he was here in Las Vegas, it came on him with great force. He found himself reliving those dreadful moments time after time as he tossed and turned in the huge bed. Oh dear, if only Ben was here! Then they could talk about it. Also Chloe and Hannah; it was unbearable to think that he would never see them again. It was too painful to allow himself to go there.

It was no good. He had better get up and go back to the gaming tables for a bit until he felt more sleepy. This restlessness was hopeless. Perhaps a nightcap would help.

Mark slipped back into his clothes, combed his hair, and made his way to the nearest bar.

"Can you do me a milky drink of some kind, hot chocolate or something like that?"

The barman had never heard of such things, but there was a girl assisting him who advised Mark where he could go to be served. He made his way along an endless corridor, only to find that the doughnut parlour was shut. That was disappointing. He was just wondering what to do next when a voice spoke.

"Do you need any help?"

He looked round. It was a girl in her early twenties. Her tight-fitting costume was spangled with what looked like diamonds flashing and twinkling in the light. At first Mark wondered whether she was a trapeze artiste.

"Well, yes, possibly. I wanted a milky drink to help me get sleepy, but the bars only serve alcohol and this place is shut."

"Follow me." The girl gave him her arm and led him down some steps and back towards the gaming area. Just as they were reaching it, she branched off to the right, and they were soon at a bar which also had an espresso machine.

"There," she said, pulling up two stools at a table, and sitting on one of them. "What would you like? My name's Davina, by the way."

I wonder, thought Mark, but he didn't like to say so. "I'm Mark." Why hide it?

"You strike me as being lonely." Davina ran her fingers lightly up his arm.

Mark gave a deep sigh. "Yes. I am lonely. I lost my two older sisters on Christmas Day."

"I'm so sorry." She did appear to be. The fingers hesitated, uncertain.

"Did you lose anyone?"

Davina paused. "Actually, yes. My boyfriend and his parents."

"Is that why you came here?"

"Yes."

"I guess we are both lonely then," Mark continued. "How have you found it working here?"

Davina had never had a client like this before. She had been trained to give them what they wanted, and if that was to talk, talk it was. Nobody had ever wanted to talk about her before, not in this way at any rate.

"Well. On one level, it's great fun. This place never stops. Everyone's friendly. It's one long party. But on another level, the guests come and go and there's nothing lasting. I'd give it up tomorrow if I could afford to."

"Earn a pile and retire. Sounds easy enough." It wouldn't be really. Their eyes met. She was here for the duration; it was obvious from her expression. But not out of choice. That too was clear. Mark found that he believed her story. There was a genuine tragedy behind the apparently happy face.

"Would you like me to accompany you back to your room?" asked Davina.

“Kind of you, but no, I’d prefer not. Do you have a card so that I can contact you if I want to?” Davina produced a card from the most invisible pocket Mark had ever seen and handed it over. “Are those real diamonds?” he asked, indicating her outfit. Davina looked at him reproachfully. “I may be cheerful,” she replied, “but I’m not cheap!”

-oOo-

Mark slept well, despite himself, but woke early, or at least, what the others would consider early. By the time he had finished dressing, he had formed a plan.

He made his way out of the hotel and took a taxi across town to a different hotel. He made his way in and found a phone. Places like this still had public phones for the use of clients that did not want their calls traced. It would suit him.

He was soon through to his bank. Getting the funds put in his new name had been a delicate matter, but he had been successful; nobody seemed any the wiser.

“I’d like to make an anonymous payment, please, to Miss Davina Smith ref 20104796. Can you trace her?”

It seemed they could. The name had been genuine. Mark named a sum. “And can you give it the reference ‘Your Exit Visa’ please.” Mark had to repeat this several times before the clerk got it. Finally, everything was sorted out to his satisfaction, and Mark hung up. He felt pleased. Now she would be able to get herself a life of her own choosing. Mark hoped it would be a happy one for her.

-oOo-

The wedding was scheduled for two p.m. There would be a light lunch at 12.30 for those guests who had already arrived. Mark decided to skip the meal; never a great socialite, he felt that the wedding and the festivities after it would be quite enough for him. He took the opportunity to do some exploring round Vegas on his own during the morning. He was hardly likely to be missed in all the preparations.

There was a fine view from the top of a tall tower. Apart from that, there were endless opportunities to spend money. A plane ride over the Grand Canyon looked appealing, but there wasn’t enough time.

The wedding itself was a big disappointment to Mark. The couple chose to be decked out as King and Queen. They could have been Prince and Princess or Duke and Duchess, or been Elvis look-alikes (his and hers) if he had really understood that correctly. The chapel was small and garish, and the organ was ghastly. His dad would have hated it.

Still, there was enough room for everyone. Mark cast an eye round. There was a girl his own age. He made his way over after the ceremony finished.

“Hello. I’m Mark. How do you know the bride and groom?” She looked friendly.

“I’m, Lucy, Sandra’s youngest sister. How do you know them?”

“I’m a work colleague of Jack’s.” That was easy and true. “I can’t tell you about it, but I can say that he is good at his job.”

“Yes; I’d already grasped that, and that Sandra works with him.”

“Really?” Mark shouldn’t indicate that he knew the facts in case she was fishing.

“Yes really, Mr Secret, as you well know. Now, are you going to escort me to the reception?”

“Of course.” Mark proffered an arm. He could afford to be friendly with Sandra’s sister.

“Now let me guess... from your accent, I reckon you are from Ohio.”

“Very funny. And you are from England.”

“Maybe. But I like to think of myself as at home anywhere. What sort of things do you like?”

“Theatre. Music drama. I’m training to be an actress.”

“Great idea. You do seem a bit larger than life, if that’s not rude. I know it’s an attribute actors and actresses strive for, and I reckon you’ve got it.”

“Thank you. I’ll take it as a compliment. I want to see a musical while I’m here - Guys and Dolls is on. Fancy coming?”

“Great idea. What about tonight?”

“I’m free.”

“Sounds like a date.”

-oOo-

Mark did his best at the reception. It was a stand-up buffet. He talked with most of the people there. It was the equivalent of a gift to Jack and Sandra to help everyone feel welcome. People like to be talked to.

Lucy was also outgoing, he noticed. For him it was an effort, but for her it seemed natural.

He found he was looking forward to the evening. Lucy was a great find, and he had surprised himself by having the courage to go up to her and open a conversation. It was not a thing he had been any good at before. Still, why hang about? He couldn’t spend the rest of his life in front of a computer screen, even if their current work was important. Even if Lucy and he never saw each other again, the experience would be well worth it. Somehow, he thought they might not lose touch, but it was early days.

Eventually, it was time for the speeches, for which everyone was to be seated. Mark contrived to pull up a chair next to Lucy. “Had we better book our tickets?” he whispered.

“All taken care of. Relax.”

Well, thought Mark, perhaps that is exactly what I need to do. I never expected to enjoy this wedding. How strange.

-oOo-

There was time for a bite before the show. They selected one of the quieter eating places out of the dozens to choose from.

“So what is this hush hush work, then?” asked Lucy when they were seated.

“Oh this and that. It’s to do with a new kind of toilet seat,” Mark explained genially.

“Rubbish!” exclaimed Lucy.

“Well no, we’re coming onto that,” Mark continued. “Reprocessing household waste is next week.”

“Alright. How do you unwind after all this stressful industry, then?”

“I have an implant,” said Mark pointing to his head, as if that explained everything.

“Is it safe?” asked Lucy anxiously.

“I reckon so. I’m pleased with it. It’s been incredibly useful so far.” Hardly an overstatement.

“Right. Well that’s very interesting.” It was patently not at all interesting.

“You don’t intend to have one, then?”

“Not at all. Although it might help with learning my lines I suppose. But I reckon it wouldn’t. You need to be the person you are acting, and you can’t do that if you are reading their lines off a mental screen. I think that learning the part is crucial for acting.”

“I have to say I agree with you. Since the implant was fitted, I find I can get mentally lazy if I allow myself to. I certainly never intend to let this thing take me over.”

“Good. Can it be taken out if you want to?”

“Difficult, but yes, apparently. Not recommended. You are better to leave it in and simply turn it off.”

“Could I turn it off without you knowing, Mark?”

“What an odd idea. I don’t know. Nobody’s ever tried. I would much rather you didn’t.”

“Promise me something.”

“What?”

“That you’ll never go off into your own private world while you and I are together.”

Mark thought for a moment. She was nice, and seemed trustworthy.

“Alright,” he replied. “It’s a deal. I promise.” He did not know that he had inherited his father’s impetuosity.

Lucy smiled at him. “I’m glad. I think you and I are going to get on.”

“I’ve got the same feeling,” said Mark

-oOo-

Lucy was great, there was no denying it. The show would have been good without her, but she was very knowledgeable about the theatre.

“They’ve got a fabulous lighting guy,” she explained in the interval. Mark looked and felt dumb.

“It’s very subtle,” she continued. “With good lighting you are never conscious of the lights going up and down. But this person has a way of supporting the actors that I’ve seldom seen before. I suppose they can afford to hire the best here.”

“What do you think of the direction?” It was a phrase Mark had heard.

“So-so. The sets are good, and imaginative use of revolving stage. But their choreography’s tired.”

“I think I know what you mean. I do rather feel as if I have seen the moves before.”

“Choreography is the hardest area to work, believe me. Making it feel fresh is really challenging. You’d have thought that with the antigravity suits, someone would have come up with some new moves by now.”

It was a very good point.

“I’d love to keep in touch,” Mark confessed.

“Hmm.” A slight frown crossed her features for the first time. “Darren might not be too pleased.”

“Oh dear. Sounds like competition.”

“We’ve been together for three years. I’m not sure where it’s going. How can I contact you?”

“Through Sandra is the best way.”

“Of course. Meanwhile, let’s do something special. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“I was afraid you would be.”

They went on a roller coaster. Her screams were wonderful. She gripped his arm tightly. Mark was thrilled, and totally smitten.

-oOo-

Mark had no idea that the journey to Saturn would be so unspeakably boring. Yes alright, so it was a long way. But surely not weeks in this day and age?

It seemed that Saturn was on the opposite side of the sun from the earth at present, which was highly inconvenient. They could not go in anything like a straight line for fear of shrivelling up in the sun’s heat and radiation. A massive detour was required.

It took long enough just to get to the moon for a gravity assist slingshot. Mark did not need to be told that skimming over the moon’s service would speed them up. His father had told them the story any number of times. He had to admit that the view of the silver grey landscape was good. Curiously, he preferred the dark side, with its occasional winking lights. There were still very few people living and working on the moon. The banks of radio telescopes on the far side from earth needed virtually no maintenance, there being no atmosphere and no weather.

Then after what seemed an age, they had made it to Mars, which was helpfully placed to break the monotony. Since they needed to go in a large triangle, they might as well go via another planet and enjoy the view.

Mars was as red as they had been told. The polar ice caps were visible from a long way out. Their route took them over the huge trench, which was enormously bigger and longer than the Grand Canyon, and they also had a splendid view of Olympus Mons, the largest volcano in the Solar

System. It seemed that there was no dust storm at present; Alistair had warned them that they might see no detail at all. The storms could apparently last for weeks.

Then it was a case of twiddling your thumbs until arrival at Saturn.

Mark decided to go in for art to pass the time. A friend had once challenged him to learn to draw by spending twenty minutes a day at it for five years, with just pencil and paper. Then he might be able to become an artist. Mark had scoffed, but now seemed a good time to start. His first efforts were extremely poor, even by his own standards, and he had to pretend that his drawings of Pete were really imaginary Little Green Men from Venus. More than once he crossly scribbled out a drawing it was so bad. Plenty of furious pencilling was required to obliterate the mistakes. Sandra liked to pretend that these rejects were serious works of art. She cheekily asked him the name of one of them one day, to which he replied "Darren at sunset." She thought it was a huge joke.

If Mark had imagined that he would forget Lucy in a few days, he was mistaken. Each time he woke after sleep, his first thought was that he was upset she was not there. He found himself sending daily messages through Sandra, which was not ideal, although she was not against him, he could tell. He wondered whether he and Lucy would ever meet again. He hoped so.

Eventually Saturn was visible ahead. They were coming in over a pole, so the rings were at the best angle for viewing. Mark was reminded of a Mexican Hat. There was a fairground ride called that, he knew; he wished he was taking Lucy on it.

They had been slowing down for several hours already, but their final approach involved heavy braking. The others were excited.

"Is that a moon?" asked Alistair, pointing ahead. "Yes," replied Pete without looking. So helpful.

"Welcome to the honeymoon hotel," Mark announced, pointing. Sure enough, the space station was coming into view. There was a big sign on it, saying Welcome, in flashing lights.

"Each of those letters must be hundreds of metres high!" Jack commented. "I wonder whose idea it was?"

They made their final approach slowly. Everything was automated. Mark's memory was that his father had landed on the satellite itself, in a sort of garage, but that was not the case now. They sidled towards a separate structure that was tall and thin, a huge tower effectively. Mark wondered whether the word gantry was appropriate; he had never discovered what one of those was. Giant arms seized the craft as it inched in close, and they were swung away, up and in through a huge door that opened and shut for them. Although they were wearing space suits as a precaution, theoretically there was no need. A small shuttle came and locked onto their craft. Their luggage went in first, followed by themselves. Then with a gentle whirr, the shuttle was projected out of the cargo hold, or whatever you wanted to call it, and towards the space station itself. Its vast hulk loomed up out of sight above them, dimly lit by reflected light from the huge globe of Saturn behind them. Mark had lost all sense of direction long since.

Once again, a door in the side of the space station opened, when it had seemed as if they were going to crash, and they glided to a halt. The outer doors sealed shut, atmosphere was restored, and then with a hiss, the door of their little craft slid open, and they could get out.

Mark was immediately aware that the gravity here was less than on earth, presumably for the sake of those spacepersons who seldom ventured back to earth. Their number was increasing all the time.

He could have jumped and skipped about if he felt so inclined. Nothing was further from his mind.

"Welcome to Saturnalia," said a mechanical voice. "Please take the lift. Your luggage has been sent on to your rooms, which are 434 to 437 inclusive."

The lift doors were open. It seemed best to comply. Mark did not have a good feeling about this place.

Their rooms were virtually identical to those at the Sahara complex. Mark wondered if that was a coincidence.

"Okay," said Alistair when they had assembled. "Let's introduce ourselves to the people in charge here. I wonder where they hang out."

However, there was no need to go looking. There was a polite knock on the door, and on Alistair's invitation, Commander Bill Swanson entered. He was impeccably dressed in an admiral's outfit, it seemed to Mark, and looked every inch the man in charge.

"Welcome," he said. "I hope your stay here at Saturnalia will be a pleasant one. We all wear name badges here, which activate the doors and so forth."

The badges were given out. Mark was Mark Brownstock for the purposes of this trip.

"You all have special clearance to enter the service areas. I have to say I'm pleased at somebody taking an interest in the station. I understand you want to consider aspects of its design for further space station construction?"

Alistair nodded. This was their cover story. "We would like access to the maintenance computers if at all possible. Here is the certificate from the Jim Pond Foundation."

Mark had not felt any sense of wrong in obtaining this. There was a Jim Pond Foundation, he had discovered, which had been moribund for more than a decade. It was no exaggeration to say that he and the others were attempting to carry on the great inventor's work, for the good of mankind.

Bill gave the certificate a quick glance. "I will need to let my staff check it out, naturally," he said. "In the meantime, make yourselves at home. Dinner's at eight."

Bill left them to it. There was a map in the welcome pack, but by agreement, they decided to explore without it.

Mark was struck by just how many people there were walking in the corridors, almost all of them young. It felt like a university campus. They all seemed busy and had no thought for the newcomers in their midst. Can there really be so many people here that they don't realise we are strangers, Mark wondered? And what are they all doing?

The exhibits were good. Jack and Sandra couldn't wait to experience the glide round the vast simulator, but the others chose not to. Mark left Pete and Alistair sitting in one of the observation lounges and wandered off on his own.

The fact is, there is too much on my mind, he thought. I need some space. Then he broke into a hearty laugh despite himself, to the astonishment of a small group of people passing him at that moment. That was a terrible pun - space indeed! His father would have loved that. "Loosen up, Mark!" he said to himself out loud.

He wandered on, peering in to the various rooms he passed, trying not to appear too conspicuous. Most of them seemed to be arranged for seminars and tutorials. Perhaps that was it; had this place become a research centre?

Everybody seemed to be too busy to notice him. However, as he went on, he began to sense that he was being followed. It was most strange. Why should anyone want to track him? Nobody knew he was here, surely?

There was only one thing for it. Shortly after he had rounded a corner, he immediately turned and retraced his steps. Yes, there was somebody. He had seen that person several times. A thin faced young man, fair hair, somewhat nervous. He did not look threatening, and Mark decided to take the initiative.

"Excuse me," he said, "Are you following me?"

The young man licked his lips. "Are you Mark Coulter?" he asked nervously.

This was awful. Mark almost fainted with the shock. How could his real false name possibly be known here? Unless...

"I can see you are," said the stranger. "Can we talk?"

Mark nodded. There seemed to be no desire to blow his cover.

The young man led him through several corridors, stopped outside a door and opened it with his key. It was clearly his bedroom. He ushered Mark in, turning on the lights as he did so. Mark took a seat.

"Sorry. My name's Michael. I thought it must be you. I think you met my sister in Las Vegas? Name of Davina?"

Mark smiled. "This is extraordinary," he began.

"Because she just wanted to say a huge Thankyou. She was overwhelmed at your gift."

“Look,” Mark said. “I feel alarmed that you have managed to trace me. I don’t want my whereabouts known. It’s very important to me. Also, I hope she understood that my motive was so she could get herself a new start and not be trapped in Vegas.”

“Yes, no problem. She understood that.”

“But how did you trace me?”

“Please don’t be angry?”

“I’ll try not.”

“She attached a three month homer to your top. It’s routine. Then when it was taking off into space, she contacted me in case you were coming here, and it turned out you were.”

Mark had to laugh. He had been caught in the same way that he had attempted to keep tabs on Ebed-Inigo. He was also relieved. At first, he had feared that his attempts to make his donation anonymous had not been successful.

“Michael, I feel pretty uncomfortable about this. I don’t like the idea of being tracked one little bit.”

“The homer’s on the shoulder blade. She described the top, and I reckon you’re wearing it.” Michael was already feeling for the device. “There. Got it. You need have no further concern. I’ll put it on me. That should confuse her, not that the signal will carry from here, of course. Anyway, it’s only got a few more weeks to run.”

The device was ridiculously small, and resembled a piece of fluff.

“Thanks. If it’s any comfort to you, Michael, I turned down her offer of accompanying me back to my room. My father was keen...”

“That’s alright. She told me. She was touched. You were very kind.”

Mark was breathing more easily. His main identity had not been compromised, it seemed. In fact, Michael seemed nice, even if he did come across as a bit of a weed. Mark was glad to have met him.

“Michael, if I can take anything down with me when we go back in a few days’ time, I’d be pleased to do so.”

To Mark’s astonishment, Michael was ready for this. He took a small package out of a drawer. It was addressed to a PO Box in San Diego, California. “Could you mail that? I’d be so grateful.”

“No problem,” said Mark. It was small enough to fit in his pocket. “It will be a pleasure, provided it’s legal. But on condition that you don’t tell anybody about me.”

“Agreed and agreed.”

Mark got up to go. “You gave me quite a scare you know.”

Michael smiled. “Look me up if you’re passing the Wensley Library,” he said. “I’m researching Welsh history.”

“Wouldn’t that have been easier on earth?” Mark asked. He was intrigued.

“Everything’s on line, and the world’s leading expert lives up here, so it seemed the natural choice.”

“Got it.”

“There are several hundred academics here who wanted to get a way from it all. The place has turned into an unofficial university. It’s fun.”

“I see.” That explained all the students. “Right, I’d better be going back to join the others.”

“Take care.”

“Bye.”

Michael was a good discovery, no doubt about it.

-oOo-

The replicator was in virtually continuous use, which was splendid, but also frustrating, as the high voltages meant you could not go near it while it was working. All they could do was to stare at the monitor. There was a security camera which panned over the complex from side to side, which seemed to confirm that the replicator was identical to the one under the Sahara.

“This is hopeless,” complained Jack. “I reckon we could probably have accessed all this information back on earth, without having to come all this way. Although, of course, that would have been to miss out on the wonderful experience of the journey and the fun of being here.” Jack added the last part just in time, Mark reckoned. This was his honeymoon as well as a work trip! Sandra would have been justified in feeling hurt.

“Might as well go home,” added Pete mournfully. He really could be a bucket of cold water with no effort required.

“Just make sure there is nothing in the computer that we need to copy,” insisted Alistair. “Handbooks, or development plans or what have you.”

It was a good idea.

“I’ll do a stint first if you like,” Mark offered. “Come back in an hour.”

Jack and Sandra were pleased to take him up on this. The other two stayed to watch.

Mark trawled carefully through all the folders. It was all similar to what they had experienced at the Sahara. The two replicators appeared to be identical. In fact, the files were so like the ones he was already familiar with that by the time Jack returned, without Sandra, Mark had been able to go through everything.

“There’s nothing new here,” he announced. “Wash-out. The only thing to be done is to watch the control panel as all the tasks are processed. That may give some clues on day to day running.”

The four of them did this. The figures in the various columns kept changing. It was somewhat off-putting to find that even the food was made from the rubbish that the space station generated.

“It doesn’t do to be squeamish,” Alistair observed, “but I suppose that when the atoms are reconstituted, there is absolutely no connection with what was there before.”

Mark wanted a break before the others had finished.

“I’ll meet you at dinner,” he said.

He trotted off and stopped at the first map. These were wall-mounted every so often on each corridor to save you getting lost. Yes, there was the Wensley Library. A bit of a trek, but there was plenty of time.

Mark’s route took him past the Bridge, which was the nerve centre of the space station. It would be nice to look in, but doubtless access was restricted. Before long he came to the library door, which was standing open. He walked quietly inside. There was a welcome desk staffed by a male student not much older than himself.

“Is Michael about?” he asked.

The young man frowned. “Nobody’s seen him today. He’s normally here each morning when we open. It’s weird.”

“Oh. Right. What’s his surname, please, so I can trace him?”

“Gantry.”

“Thanks.”

Mark returned to his own room, passing the Bridge once more. He tapped Michael Gantry into the computer. To his astonishment, the machine’s response was Unlisted.

Unlisted? There must be some mistake. It was Mark’s turn to frown. Disturbing thoughts began to come; he tried to repress them.

Dinner was a gloomy affair. There seemed little point in staying at the space station. It transpired that they could return home next day, so they decided to do that.

There was virtually no packing, and nobody to say goodbye to. Mark was not sorry to be going. The whole place seemed faceless, and after you had stared at Saturn for a while, and experienced the exhibits, there was little to do. Perhaps he should have gone in the simulator, but Jack had been somewhat dismissive about it, so it hardly seemed worth it.

They made their way to the embarkation point. Commander Bill Swanson was there to see them off.

“Thank you,” said Alistair, “We have not made as much progress as we would like here, but it has been good to get the feel of the place. I suppose it will become a model for future space stations

in practice. The design works, and the place is running as well now as it always has done, so why change it?"

"Why indeed.," replied Bill. "Ur - Mr. Brownstock, could I have a word?"

Mark froze inside. "I'd prefer the others to listen, if you please." He did not want to be left alone if it came to the crunch. But how could this man possibly know anything?

"Very well. I need to ask why you are here under a false name." Michael must have told him about Davina! But why?

Alistair was ready for this situation. It was a routine he had rehearsed many times.

"Not another word," he said. "Do you realise you are in the presence of someone of supreme importance, whose identity must be preserved at all costs? Keep your suspicions to yourself."

Bill stared at him in disbelief. "I had no such idea. I am investigating a case of money laundering, and I believe Mr. Brownstock may be able to help me."

Mark put his head in his hands. This was unbelievable. Between them, they had just about given away his identity.

"I think you are referring to an anonymous donation I made to Michael's sister," he said.

"Believe me, this was no money laundering, but rather an attempt to allow her to start a new life away from Las Vegas..."

Mark stopped. He could see there was no point in trying to be evasive. Bill Swanson's jaw was just about dropping off. "You are Mark Winter, aren't you?" he said in a whisper.

Alistair reacted with a jerky body movement. "Not another word. It is crucial that this speculation goes no further. We thank you for our visit here. May we remind you that we are on an important mission which is highly confidential. I wouldn't want there to be any difficulty due to careless talk."

"It's no good," Bill was saying. "I understand your concern, but I have no choice. I will need to alert the authorities. Mark, much your best course of action is to hand yourself in. You've done nothing wrong, but equally, things need to be out in the open. I'm sure you are aware of the tremendous search there has been to locate you."

"What do you know about it?" asked Mark fiercely. He might sound aggressive, but inside he was shocked at how well-informed this man was.

"Let's come through to my office," said Bill. "This could take some time."

Just for a moment, Mark wondered whether they should make a dash for it, but he dismissed it instantly. The chances of making it to their spaceship were remote; there would be ways of preventing people from leaving in a hurry, no doubt about that. Then even if they did get away, the messages to earth would travel faster than they could, and there would be a reception committee waiting for them wherever they attempted to go. It was no use.

-oOo-

"Right," said Bill, summing up. "So Mark, not only did you halt the destruction last Christmas Day, but you also have a copy of the programme which controls the orbiting devices in your implant, and you alone know the passwords."

"Which are not in my implant. That's correct. Nobody can gain access to the programme without my consent. You may trust the authorities but I don't. Period."

Alistair had been listening quietly. He was secretly impressed with the calm way in which the Commander was handling the situation. If they were going to fall into anybody's hands, he could not imagine a more expert approach. A safe pair of hands. The man would have made an excellent wicket keeper in a cricket match.

"Mark," Alistair began, "I've always been keen to go with what you wanted in all this. I think you know that, and I hope you have felt supported. However, there's something I have never understood. Why is it that you are quite so concerned about the authorities? I know there are bad people in high places, but all the same, your view seems a little excessive to me."

Mark felt uncomfortable. "I don't know," he said. "I'm just sure that if I keep charge of the locust network, then nobody will get hurt, but if I allow it to escape from me, then anything could happen."

The potential for evil is enormous, believe me. I don't talk about it, but my researches have confirmed my worst fears. The power in those things is truly awesome."

"Right," Bill replied. "Well, I respect your concern. But from where I'm sitting, it is madness for so much to be dependant on one teenage boy. I need to alert the authorities. There's no other choice. You'll be treated as a hero, Mark, rest assured. The world is in your debt."

It was tempting to lay down the burden. He would be able to pursue Lucy if he did. Who cared if other people messed it all up? He might even be able to have a normal life.

No way.

Mark stood up and backed away from them. "Never," he hissed. "Now listen. There is another way. You guys go on without me, and continue with your lives. It's been great knowing you. I'm staying put. The authorities have no jurisdiction out here. I've never been to university, and this seems like a good place to get educated. The deal is that I am left alone to get an education and pursue my understanding of the software. The end is in sight, frankly; I am almost there as it is. In return, I promise that as soon as I can, I will bring the threat to an end in the only sure way I can, and that is by finally terminating the program in an appropriate way and then plunging all the orbiting locusts back into the atmosphere so that they burn up. That way the danger is over and nobody gets their hands on the power, so everybody can relax. Do I make myself clear?"

There was a pause. Then Bill cleared his throat. "As I understand it, you are asking for asylum here. That request would need to come before my committee, but I have to say that in view of the circumstances, your application looks likely to succeed. We would need to know that you have the means to pay all tuition fees and living expenses." Mark shrugged his shoulders, indicating it was no problem.

Alistair looked at the others. They were clearly in agreement.

"Mark, we understand your reluctance to go public back on earth. I don't share your distrust of the authorities, but I do respect it."

"You try watching your own dad being utterly crushed and smashed by the people in charge and thrown away to die!" Mark spoke with tremendous feeling. He was trembling all over. Everybody was shocked, not least Mark himself. He could not have told anyone that he was carrying so much anger and resentment against the headmaster and deputies of the school his father had taught at. The governors had been conspicuous by their absence too.

Bill was gentleness itself. "I can see there's a lot of past hurt," he said. "Stay here with us. Nobody will harm you; find peace. Your real identity will be kept secret until you feel ready to disclose it. I will be your friend. In fact," Bill was thinking aloud, but this was an important moment, "I foresee an important role for you here. You are a young man of exceptional talent. Put it to good use at this space station, which was created by your father's closest friend. We would be honoured to have you."

Suddenly Mark was in tears. He had been carrying such a heavy burden for so long! Here was someone in authority who understood, and was on his side. It meant so much.

There were hugs all round from the others, and kisses from Sandra. "That's from Lucy," she whispered. "I will explain to her."

It seemed a terrible wrench to Mark when the others walked into the lift. He had not realised how attached to them he had become. He stood staring at the lift doors long after they had closed behind them.

It was only half an hour later that he realised that without him they would never get the computer at the Sahara to run. Oh well. He couldn't think of everything. They would find some way of making progress without him.

-oOo-

From: Saturnalia, undated.

To: 014973689X

Hi guys!

I trust the encryption worked and this is not a load of gobbledegook.

It's really good hear. I have signed up for advanced technology (well what did you expect?), history of engineering, Russian, and Gujarat. Can you believe it?! It's great fun. I'm quickly getting to recognise some of the other young people. Nobody to touch Lucy of course, but what did you expect?

I want to apologise. I should have told you about Davina. She seemed in such a poor place, and I have all this finance that my Dad settled on me at berth, so why not use some of it? That was what I reckoned. Too bad the transaction went funny on us.

Maybe it will work out, actually. You won't be able to start up the computer without me, but that might not matter. You could send up the experiments you want to try, and I could run them here. Getting to know how the set-up here works is part of the course. Then I can send the results back down. Perhaps the combination efforts of two ends of the Solar System will do the trick. Yes I know the Solar System goes way further out than Saturn, but you know what I mean.

I'm thinking of you. Take care.

Mark

From: 014973689X

To: Saturnalia

Mark,

I hope this finds you.

Don't worry, the computer is working fine. Pete soon had it up and running when we got back. Some army guys have moved in, so we are now a team of fifteen. I'm hopeful of some real progress. Anyway, we won't need to send experiments up to you to do, but we will send our findings to keep you in the frame. You have such a lot to contribute. I miss working with you.

Lucy and Darren have split, Sandra says, or at least she thinks they have. You never know with young people.

You must be joking about Gujarat. What's that about? And should you take a course in spelling, maybe?

Al

From: Saturnalia, undated.

To: 014973689X

Al,

Tell me your joking about the computer. It can't be working.

Mark

PS Ask Sandra if she's sure about Lucy and Darren.

PPS I do miss you guys. I can't face getting to know people here, as they will only ask a lot of questions I can't answer, and then I'll get a reputation as an odd bod.

From: 014973689X

To: Saturnalia

Mark,

We are perfectly serious. Pete sorted it, as I said. It's no big deal.

Sandra thinks Luce and Darren are back together again now, but she's not 100%. I said they should take a trip out to see you.

Al

Mark was feeling most uneasy. How on earth could Pete have got the computer going? He himself had locked the booting up process so that it could not be tampered with. This meant that one of three things had happened.

One. Somebody had overridden his lock. But this was absurd. It would have had to be done while the machine was running, before they had left for Vegas, so that limited it to Alistair, Jack, Sandra and Pete. It would have required advanced programming skills, way beyond anything that Mark himself could do. None of the others appeared to be in that league. Mark had watched them pretty carefully, and they had all been medium standard. You could tell with people. It had to do with their attitude at the keys and in giving spoken instructions. The latter especially was a give-away; it takes time to learn how to address a computer with the least scope for misunderstanding. None of them had mastered that skill fully. So if one of them had altered his work, then they were a mighty fine actor into the bargain.

Two. Maybe the army personnel were something else at hacking into a computer. Perhaps they had assisted Pete, who was taking the credit. But Mark was confident that it couldn't be done without the implant. Also, the military had failed before, so how could they do it now? That led to

Three. Could it be that Alibaba's head had been brought to the Sahara and powered up sufficiently to release the codes from the implant? That seemed absurd to Mark.

None of these answers made any sense. And yet it must be one of them, surely?

Mark puzzled over it for hours. If someone had managed to override his foolproof work that easily, then what else might they do? Small wonder that he felt threatened.

At some stage during his deliberations, he realised that the locusts might not be so easy to destroy as he had first thought. They were highly mobile, no doubt about that. Their role was to be available for service anywhere on the globe, as required. They might well be programmed with self-protection, in some way; for example, they might resist being plunged into the atmosphere at high speed. The same could apply to commands to dive down into the ocean. They might be unwilling to comply. Anyway, that was not the immediate problem.

Mark was interrupted by another message.

From: 014973689X

To: Saturnalia

Mark,

Jack has produced a paper which I attach. I hope you can understand it!

Al

Attachment

No time like the present. Mark opened the file.

It was indeed hard to take the paper in, but it would be good to get his head round it. What was all this jargon? Transducers, Repositors, Solicitors... Solicitors for goodness sake? Surely that was wrong?

Apparently not. Mark read on.

It seemed that the most awkward by-product of the main replicating process was unwanted radiation. This was released by the atoms and molecules as they rearranged themselves. More than once Jack used the phrase "a dirty process" to describe it. If only there was some way of dealing more effectively with the radiation, the rest of the system could be simplified.

At this point, Mark suddenly remembered something. Hadn't his father, when talking about Saturnalia, spoken of the intense radiation from Saturn?

Mark knew next to nothing about radiation. This called for a visit to the Wensley library. Mark made his way there. Michael Gantry was back in circulation now. It seemed he had been kept out of view pending Mark's detention at Saturnalia. He had done nothing wrong.

Mark had given the little package to one of the others to put in their luggage; he didn't know what had prompted him, but it meant it would get through alright. He hoped it was all above board.

There were surprisingly many hard-backed books lining the walls in the large room. Hall might be a better word. At any one time, there might be a hundred students in it consulting the terminals.

It was computers that dominated research nowadays. Mark had no time for the books. He seated himself before a screen.

Searching the entire internet on a subject you were interested in had long since become impractical. Even with the most subtle search, using carefully defined parameters, excluding unwanted subjects and words, and so forth, the sheer number of sites returned was absurd.

Now, clever people had built searching facilities which were truly intelligent. At times it could be irritating to be asked for so much clarification when you had inputted your request, but rewards came to the patient; if you worked your way through the various choices given, by the time the actual search was conducted, only a few dozen highly relevant sites would be returned. In addition, the genius of this library was that the hardware not only remembered your own field of interest, but also related it to everybody else's, and would offer to put you in touch with another student or member of faculty from whom you might learn if you wished, including people now back down on earth.

It also went on researching on your behalf while you were looking at the individual finds. It had even emerged recently that the length of time you spent looking at a portion of a page would be interpreted by the machines as an indication of where your interest lay, and the search particularised for you accordingly. One young man had discovered this to his cost; by the time he returned from making a visit to the toilet, the machines had already reported him to the disciplinary committee for displaying an unhealthy interest in a black-listed area which was alluded to on screen at the time. From then on everyone had taken more trouble over logging off when not actually attending to the screen.

In short, the longer you used the system, the more it tailored itself to your requirements. Some of the staff who had been there for several years had developed such a rapport with the machinery that a search that would have required a morning's effort when they began would now be achieved in the two or three minutes it took to get a hot drink.

Regarding drinks, the delightfully old-fashioned tea room actually contained a kettle that you had to fill with water yourself from a tap, and required you to plug it in with a cable, and switch it on! Then it would solemnly boil after what seemed an age but was really only half a minute. At this point, you needed to pour the boiling water into a mug in which you had already placed what was described as a 'tea bag'. You then stirred the water manually, with the tea bag still in it, until the colour was as you liked it, before fishing out the teabag yourself with a spoon and discarding it. Finally, you needed to add milk and sugar to taste.

Mark loved it. It was truly creative! His dad would have been so at home here.

Radiation. Visible light was not troublesome to us, he read. Radiation of a longer frequency, the so-called infra-red and beyond, might be harmful; the jury was still out on that one. However at the other end of the spectrum, the ultra-violet and above, the higher the frequency, the more harmful radiation was to humans. X rays and Gamma rays were filtered out by the earth's atmosphere, thankfully, but there was no such provision for Saturnalia.

So the question was, how had Jim Pond tamed the harsh radiation coming from Saturn?

No; take nothing for granted. Was it true that Saturn was as generous with these harmful rays as Mark believed?

Oh dear. Nothing is straightforward. Mark discovered that Saturn did emit a lot of radiation, most of which had started life at the sun originally, but that it was largely held in place by the planet's powerful magnetic field. Surely Jim would not have moored the space station inside the so-called radiation belt?

It was time to study the space station itself, and discover how its radiation protection worked, because there must be some at least, and Jim would have dealt with it one way or another.

In the end, Michael came with him.

Mark had done the research in the service computers. It seemed that radiation control took place in South West sixteen.

It was easy enough to find a morning when they could both be free. The problem was getting the replicator turned off for a couple of hours, but an arrangement was made. They met after breakfast and made their way to the service area. They entered the outer door, and then Mark produced his key to the inner, restricted area. They locked the door behind them. It was no good letting other inquisitive people in to wander freely. They would probably not do any damage or come to any harm, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Mark led him through behind the room which contained the service computers into the lobby where they both put on white protective suits. Communicating by two-way radio was new to Michael. Mark was enjoying filling the role of the expert despite being the junior in years.

“Follow me,” said Mark, as they set off through the final double doors, after removing the all important turnkey and taking it with them, without which the replicator would not operate. Michael stared upwards, amazed at seeing the huge replicator parts spread about, much as at the Sahara.

Mark pointed things out. “That’s the febrillicator,” he explained. “It looks huge because of all the shielding. The actual chamber where the molecules are jostled into position is quite small, right at the centre, only a metre across probably.”

“Sounds like a microwave oven to me,” observed Michael.

“Very good,” replied Mark, who was secretly rather impressed. “A microwave simply heats the food by pummelling its molecules, but this thing is far more sophisticated. For one thing, it works at all frequencies, not just a narrow band.

“Now this vast thing,” Mark indicated a tall black structure that appeared to be made of graphite, “is called the Appoggiatura. That’s a musical term originally. It is so named because it reduces the value of the original input by a half. Don’t ask me what that means, or how it’s done, as I don’t understand it fully myself. The reduction coefficient is referred to time and again in the notes, as if the phrase was informative. If you can enlighten me, I’d be so grateful!”

Michael shrugged his shoulders. “Not my subject,” he explained, “although I do know the difference between an appoggiatura and an acciaccatura in music.”

Mark looked at him, expecting more.

“An acciaccatura is even briefer than an appoggiatura, best thought of as a crushed note. It takes the minimum space and time. To show how slight it is, it’s printed small in the sheet music, and crossed out as well.”

“Interesting.” There wasn’t the physical equivalent of one of those here, but perhaps there soon would be. Mark had been wondering about ways in which the sheer bulk of the appoggiatura might be reduced. Acciaccatura would be a good name for the machine he envisaged.

South West sixteen turned out to be just beyond the last machine of the replicator. The vast span of the roof descended rapidly here until it was only a few metres above their heads. There were notices warning of danger from radiation if you went inside. They had no intention of doing that. However, there was also a larger notice on the wall. There were several hundred words of close print followed by various diagrams.

“We need to study this,” said Mark.

Michael felt he was out of his depth, but he soon grasped that the purpose of the notice was more than to explain the dangers to people foolish enough to consider going beyond the doors. Something to do with radiation whirling round and round. He scratched his head.

“I’ve got it!” exclaimed Mark, his eyes shining. “Brilliant!”

The astonished Michael looked at his friend. “Whatever is it?” he enquired.

Mark could hardly contain his excitement. “Look. The radiation from Saturn falls on to Saturnalia, or rather it would do, if it wasn’t for the coils of wire that surround the entire space station. What happens when you pass electricity through a long coil of copper wire?”

Michael was blown if he knew.

“You create a magnetic field.”

Michael nodded cautiously. It was as well not to show all his ignorance in one go.

“So the brilliant Jim Pond grabs the radiation with his magnetic field before it hits the station and sends it orbiting round the outside of Saturnalia at great speed. It says anything up to eighty thousand revolutions a second here, see?”

So it did. It seemed rather extravagant to Michael. He hoped he wasn't showing his puzzlement in his face.

“Unwanted radiation from the replicator is added. When enough of it has collected, he whacks the radiation in here and collides it with a minute amount of material. This is the really clever bit. Normally, the result of an impact at that speed would be that lots of sub atomic particles would be created and fly apart. That's the kind of thing they do at CERN, the particle accelerator under Geneva, you know, and everything is recorded by the monitors and analysed and all that. But not here. Jim has created a force field so powerful that the radiation is channelled into a tiny *cul de sac*, where it combines with the material, which has been chosen because of its absorbing capacity. What do you think the result is?”

Michael had no inkling, but he was eager to find out.

“A black hole! No, not really, but if the speeds and force field were even greater, that would be the result. No, he has got it all set up so that the result falls short of a black hole. It's called degenerate matter. It is so dense that a teaspoonful of it would weigh a hundred thousand tons. Creating it from high frequency radiation is quite brilliant. An application of Einstein's famous equation that nobody else has thought of.”

Michael wanted to appear knowledgeable. “ $E=MC^2$ ?” he enquired timidly.

“The very one,” said Mark, beaming at his friend. “Normally, people think of creating huge amounts of energy from a tiny quantity of matter, but of course, the equation works the other way round as well.”

“But why does the radiation need to combine with the material?” asked Michael.

“To get rid of it. Short wavelength radiation just goes through things. That's why it is bad for humans; it gets into our innards without being stopped by the skin. Did you know there are some particles that are so minute that they can pass right through the earth without hitting a single molecule on the way?”

“Sounds extraordinary.” Michael was enjoying his friend's enthusiasm. “That would be good for space travel,” he added.

“What do you mean?” Mark was puzzled.

“Well, if you could travel through the earth rather than having to go round, it might save some time,” replied Michael.

Mark tried not to sigh. This was hopeless! “Michael I think you had better stick to Llewellyn the Great. But anyway, back to the plot. Let me see if I can explain. Once you have created your degenerate matter, you're laughing.”

“Am I?”

“Yes, because you can either employ it for some useful purpose, or more probably in this case, dispose of it.”

“Right. I see. Where to?”

“Well, the obvious thing would be to send it down into Saturn, where it would sink to the centre of the planet. I bet there's a gun somewhere, firing off pellets of it every now and then. Let's go and find out.”

Mark led them back to the lobby, where they disrobed and reinserted the turnkey, and made their way out to the service computers. He entered his code as Michael settled on a stool beside him. He searched about. The information would be in a file he had noticed but not yet studied. Ah, there it was.

Mark was astonished. “Look at that!” he breathed.

Michael craned forward. There were graphs showing curved trajectories. It was hard to see anything to get excited about.

“Now,” Mark explained, jabbing at the screen with his finger, “the space station gets gradually heavier as it harvests the radiation from Saturn. That’s an indication of just how much radiation there is. It’s amazing! If you like, think of the degenerative matter process through there as being like a sponge that gets heavier as it soaks up water. Anyway, because the overall mass is increasing, the motors keeping the station in its right place above Saturn have to work harder to preserve altitude. But gradually, the little globule of degenerate matter is growing all the time. Too small to see, if it wasn’t suspended in the middle of the absorbent material. As it is, it’s a microscopic particle in the heart of the pellet. Look, there’s a picture. Doesn’t it look just like a rabbit or sheep dropping?”

“Perhaps,” admitted Michael.

“The day comes for release. You want to get a thing like that down to the surface promptly. No good letting it combine with a moon on the way by accident! The implosion would be catastrophic. No, whack it down fast. Do you know that when a really big asteroid hits the earth, which is thankfully only every hundred thousand years or so, it can shoot through the atmosphere and down to the ocean floor in under three seconds?”

Michael really did need to take a course in astrophysics or something, no doubt about it. Welsh history suddenly seemed very dull, despite Owen Glendower.

“So,” Mark continued, “a powerful ejection is called for. The gun is a long tube, stretching right through the heart of the space station, wrapped in another coil of copper wire. When electricity surges through the wire, it exerts a powerful force on the pellet, which is massively accelerated, and flies off down to Saturn in a few microseconds. Wheeew!” Mark made a whistling sound to give Michael the idea. “But, the space station is now lighter again, so the altitude motors need to be subtly adjusted to prevent a recoil and maintain equilibrium. Here’s the amazing bit. Look at this graph. The system is so well set up that nobody on board feels any jerk or jolt at any time during the firing. Have you sensed any unexpected movements since you arrived here?”

“Can’t say I have,” Michael acknowledged.

“And yet, during the last year, there have been twelve firings. That’s one a month. So you have experienced a good number of them, and never noticed a thing. Marvellous!”

Michael was impressed, he had to admit it. “I never knew there was so much to sheep droppings!” he quipped. “Mark, you seem very well up in all this.”

“Michael,” Mark said, with tears in his eyes, “you haven’t heard the half yet. The human race is on the verge of a massive break-through. Jim’s system for dealing with unwanted high frequency radiation was fine thirty years ago, but since then we’ve got a new set of even denser materials. Better sponges, if you like. Oh yes. We can do it far more efficiently! Now we’re really going to have some fun!”

Michael was way out of his depth, but he did understand one thing. Mark was thrilled to the core of his being. His glowing face could have been used to make toast. Michael was delighted for his friend.

“Brilliant!” he said. “Many congratulations! I’m really chuffed for you. Let me know if I can help.”

-oOo-

From: Saturnalia, undated.

To: 014973689X

Al,

Excellent. Your idea of bouncing the radiation between concave mirrors to focus the beam is a big improvement - far better than the orbital route. Of course, it does mean that there will be a minimum length for the replicator to allow sufficient space between the mirrors. My suggestion is

that we offer a choice of models of different lengths; the longer the model the quicker it works. People for whom a compact size is important will have to accept slower manufacturing speeds. It ought to be possible for punters to have any length they choose, if you think about it, custom built at the factory. I take it that will be the Sahara complex?

Will it be feasible to build a model with a zoom on it, i.e. the tube can be lengthened or shortened at will, or will the presence of moving parts be too much of a drawback?

We may not have got it down to Sandra's handbag size, but the improvement is still utterly wonderful.

I wish I was down their with you.

Please congratulate Pete once again. I had no idea he was so smart. He certainly hides it well. His recording of my brain activity taken in the lift was just brilliant!

I can't wait for tomorrow. Tell Sandra. I've been saving my first go in the giant simulator for Lucy's visit so it's a new experience for both of us.

I feel so excited, for every reason!

Mark

-oOo-

Mark stood on one foot, then on the other. He couldn't contain himself. He had not realised how much this visit meant.

The lift doors opened, and Lucy stepped out. No Darren, thank goodness. Even at the last minute, Mark had not been a hundred percent sure whether he would come or not. He had been practising his welcome speeches in front of the mirror, just in case. "Darren, great to meet you. Darren, good to see you; I'm glad you could come. You must be Darren, that's good," and variations, all accompanied by a handshake. Now none of them would be needed.

The welcome hug was more than perfunctory. She seemed as pleased to see him as he was to see her.

"Lucy, how wonderful to see you again. I'm so glad you've come. Here, let me take your case."

Everything was going well. The discovery leading to the invention, and now this visit.

"Mark! You're looking so well. What's happened?"

"There's lots to tell you. What do you need most? Something to eat or drink?"

"Really, I'd like some exercise. The spaceship is so small; I feel all cooped up. Is there a fitness centre somewhere here?"

"Of course. Let's put this in your room and then we can go."

Mark had not been in the gym before. There were the usual body-building machines and sweaty young people.

"Come running with me?" Lucy asked. There were two moving running tracks side by side, with country backdrop projection screens beside them. You really felt you were running through Alpine meadows, which was the theme they selected.

Lucy was clearly well into this kind of thing. Mark was determined to keep up.

"So what's all the excitement, then?"

"We've managed to miniaturise the main process in the replicator. Whereas it used to take up an area the size of a football pitch, and require a lot of height as well, now you could fit the smallest version of it into a three bedroom house, if you took out all the interior walls. It's such an improvement. Except for the main tube, which would need to stick up above the roof like a flagpole. Really, for serious work, you would need a replicator the size of an office block. But even that is a big improvement on the one here, size-wise."

"Mark, that sounds great. And let me guess; you had a teeny weeny hand in it?"

"You could say that."

"Clever boy. Darren's so jealous."

"Tell me about Darren." Show an interest, for goodness sake!

"We've been together a long time. He wants to marry me, but I'm not sure. It's a big step."

“Sure is. You need to be certain. What does he do?”

“Research student. Business studies. He wants to run his own business in a few years, buying and selling.”

“You must know him pretty well.”

“Yes, I suppose I do, really.”

Lucy seemed reluctant to talk about Darren when it came to the point. Mark was beginning to feel tired of running, but there was no way he was going to show it.

“Mark?”

“Yes?”

“It’s so kind of you to come running with me. Darren never has, and you’ve done it on our first day.”

“It’s what you wanted to do.”

“You’re so sweet!”

The smile was worth everything.

-oOo-

“Why have you handed yourself over?”

The square-jawed interviewer was not hostile, but he was thorough. His over-large cranium suggested high intelligence. Mark and he were seated in a small portable office somewhere in America. There was no attempt at a locked door, which felt good to Mark, even if he would die of thirst in the desert if he made a run for it. But that was not his purpose.

“Several reasons, but the main one is that I want to be able to have a normal life. I don’t want to be avoiding you people any more.” There was no need to mention Lucy; it would only complicate things.

“What are the other reasons?”

Mark sat back in his plastic upright chair and took a deep breath. For the hundredth time he wondered whether he had been right in following Lucy’s advice. She had been gentle but persistent about him coming forward. It had taken a long time for Sandra’s part in the plan to come out. That presumably meant Al as well, Mark reckoned, although that was unclear.

“Okay. Here’s my story. Last Christmas Day we discovered by chance that the mad monks were going to cull a third of the human race. I guess you know all about that. When we arrived at the retreat house, we found that the Sahara leader was not dead, as we supposed. He was clearly the master of the whole scheme. So I moved in close and read his implant. It was possible on those early models; why the makers of the implants didn’t think of it I can’t understand. It’s been corrected now of course. Fancy marketing a piece of memory storage that can be so easily raped, as it were! It’s beyond belief.

“It was just like that ‘Don’t Think of a Pink Elephant’ dodge. The moment you say that to someone, they immediately think of a pink elephant. The man knew he must not give away the passwords, and in so doing, gave them away.

“So there I was, in sole possession of their system, because that is what it amounted to, once I had changed the passwords. Nobody else could access it other than me. I knew it conferred tremendous power on me. It was my choice to keep it that way. I did not want to let anybody else use it. I was and still am too frightened to imagine what could happen if it fell into the wrong hands. It’s taken me many hours to really understand the programme, but I have got it sorted.

“I am ready now to destroy the orbiting devices once and for all, although it could be easier said than done. In some ways, that seems the best idea. But there is another use it could be put to, which would benefit us all. I’ll come to that later.

“Another reason why I’ve come forward is that some friends and I have made a gigantic stride forward in hardware technology, and I want to be involved in the design and marketing process. Sorry, no details on that at present. The final reason is that I could see myself being stuck on Saturnalia indefinitely. When my friend Michael came back to earth, I felt lonely. And that’s it.”

“Right. Well, that’s fine as far as it goes, but I think you misunderstand. It’s not just you that wants to stop this great power falling into the wrong hands. If you were going to destroy the monks’ creation, then the time to do it was before you understood how it all worked. Now it’s too late. You have made yourself a liability by mastering the software. There are people out there who will kidnap you if they possibly can and do terrible things...”

“No! Don’t say any more!” Mark was horrified. “I know too much. That never occurred to me. You’re right. What a fool I’ve been. Oh dear. Even if the whole of the monks’ system is vaporised, I’m still a threat, because I know how to make another one. This is dreadful.”

“I hope not, Mark. I like to think there is still some vestige of civilisation on this planet. You have come to people of integrity, I trust! We can normalise your life a good deal, but you will need a new identity every now and then, and it’s no good contacting your family ever. Do you hear? Ever. People will be watching for that. I’m sorry, but there it is.”

“But I was hoping to marry and settle down.”

“No reason why you shouldn’t marry. But it needs to be incognito, and your wife and any children will be implicated. They will have to move around with you; settle is the one thing you cannot do.”

“Right.” This was awful. Mark had assumed that whenever he wanted, he could lay down the burden he had been carrying, but now it seemed to have become a part of him. He couldn’t ask Lucy to share a life of that kind, always on the run, or anyone else for that matter. It was a shocking realisation. If only they could have discovered a clue to Jim’s biometric disguises, but there had been no trace of one anywhere. No help in that quarter.

A vague memory of the start of Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress floated into Mark’s mind; there, the burdened sinner had found his burden rolled off his back and disappeared into a cave when he reached the cross. That was not an option for Mark. His heavy rucksack was a permanent fixture.

He felt dreadful. “Sorry, Jesus,” he muttered under his breath. “Even you can’t save me from this.” It was unusual for him to pray, Mark reflected. Perhaps he should do more of it.

“What are you thinking?” The young man looked surprisingly calm.

“I’m weighing the implications. I had no idea I was getting myself in such a fix.”

“There is another way.”

Mark was all attention.

“You could have the implant removed, and undergo some brain therapy. Of course, it would only be of help if everybody was convinced that you had no lingering memory of the material; there are people out there who might not believe you no longer knew it no matter how thoroughly your memory was erased.”

“Become a zombie to gain my freedom. Thanks a lot!”

“That doesn’t sound too attractive I can tell. Then there’s the final option.”

Mark waited for it.

“You would be of value to us on our staff. Poacher turned gamekeeper. You could help us police the world.”

So that was where it had all been leading; recruitment. This guy was good, Mark had to admit. He laughed out loud.

“Go on then. Tell me about pay and conditions.”

“Pretty good, on the whole. You get an interesting life. And you’re firmly on the side of law and order. Only people of integrity and worth need apply. If you can convince us that you are your father’s son, then you have every chance of being taken on. He was greatly admired, you know, more than he knew.”

“Do you enjoy what you do?”

“Absolutely. I wouldn’t have missed it for anything. You meet such interesting people.”

Mark laughed again. “Okay. Here’s the deal. You look after me and I work for you. In return, I want to be where the action is. My father believed in mankind expanding to fill the galaxy, and I believe in it too. I want to be part of the push onward and outward. Is that something you guys can involve me in?”

“I think you will find you are not the only one thinking like that. Whatever else happened that Christmas Day, a lot more people are interested in seeing mankind getting off this one planet. We will all benefit from spreading out a bit. Your monk was igniting more than one fire by his actions.”

“Well, this is most interesting. It brings me back to my idea for the orbiting controllers, or whatever you want to call them. Rather than crashing them down into the sea, perhaps they should go off planet and be put to use round the solar system. They are pretty sophisticated as small devices go, and they could be helpful.”

“Well, well. Put the little fellows to good use. Isn’t that just a great idea!”

The interviewer was smiling broadly. That was strange.

-oOo-

“I don’t think it’s calibrated right. Somebody call Marcus.”

‘Asteroid’ Jim, so named for his lumpy appearance, stared up at the huge tube running away into the Martian clouds. The sun reflecting off it was blinding, even through the smoked glass visor of his spacesuit. At least the sunlight lifted the temperature sufficiently at the equator during daylight, where Jim and the rest of the construction gang were standing. Still, it was all very well talking positively about sixteen degrees Centigrade, which made it sound like a Spring day back in London, but that was only at ground level. Nobody had told him that the temperature dropped with every foot of height, and that his head would feel colder than his feet. It was one of Jim’s quirks that he turned off the temperature control of his spacesuit whenever he could, preferring to work only in the middle of the day so as to be in touch with the elements.

Marcus Greening was brilliant, no doubt about it. Rumour had it that he had even been on the team that developed the Rep4. Be that as it may, he seemed to know how to fix the problems. He knew the computers like the back of his hand. Shame he was so withdrawn, though. Computer nerds were often like that; zero social skills.

Marcus was not impressed. “Didn’t I tell you that these things are best left running? How are you going to make a lasting impact on the atmosphere if you keep turning the gas supply on and off? All you will achieve will be to lengthen the terraforming time span by a few centuries. Take a grip!”

“Marcus, it’s just not practical. There are too many requirements. We can’t dedicate this Rep4 to just one job; it has to multi-task.”

Marcus had already tapped in a number of commands. The machine appeared unresponsive, but sure enough, within a minute, the life-giving gas started pouring out of the vents once again.

“There you go. Don’t meddle with it! Now, how are the orbiting mirrors doing?”

“Some are keen to drift out of position, but most of them are fine. There’s even a result already; the global temperature has gone up a thousandth of one degree in just three months.” Jim had to force himself to stay calm. Marcus might be well qualified, but he was so abrupt!

“Well, it’s a start, but it’s pretty pathetic. I told them that a hundred square kilometres was nowhere near enough. That’s only ten by ten, of course. They should be thinking of many more mirror systems of that size. Still, the horticulture project should help. Have you been to see it?”

“Not yet. There’s precious little to see so far, but at least it’s not dying off as some said it would.”

“Not to worry. You’ll get on better when the Rep5s arrive. They should be here in a couple of months.”

“Where have I heard that one before?”

“That’s enough of that. Okay, if you’re happy, I need to be packing up. We’re leaving for Venus in fifty minutes.”

Right, Jim thought. Don’t let me stop you. Try relaxing some time; it might help.

-oOo-

“Bruce, I need to hear it in your own words.” The military prided themselves on being thorough.

The young technician sighed. “No, you don’t. Somebody has to go on this mission. I am available, over-qualified, resourceful, and I have my reasons for wanting to be on my own which is perhaps the number one qualification, and I don’t want people to know about them least of all you.” These jumped up authority figures! As if anyone else would be happy to be cut off from the human race indefinitely.

“And the R34 replicator.”

“Of course. It won’t need maintenance, rest assured, but if it does, I’m on hand.”

“Right. Well, you’ve been cleared by the high-ups, so I needn’t detain you. Just remember that an awful lot depends on you. The crucial thing is that the data should keep on coming back without interruption. We would appreciate you composing messages of how things are going in addition to the automatic transmissions. It lends a human touch. Any and every perception.”

“No problem.”

There was no need to mention about Lucy. He hoped she and Darren and their three children were happy. The realisation that he could never have a relationship with a girl without ruining her life had been shattering. Even now it still seemed a most cruel blow. Why had life turned out so awful?

At least this way, he could do something for mankind.

The Colonel stood up. “Look me up when you get back,” he said. “I hope to still be around.”

Bruce shook his hand. It would be a mistake to intimate that they would not be meeting again.

It was nice to have taken on his father’s name. It felt right, in that he had finally adopted the faith that his father had made his own, and which David had also discovered in that remarkable way.

Walking up the gangplank into the massive spaceship was very hard. He resisted the temptation to look back.

-oOo-

It seemed ages until the first of February, but the day finally arrived. David waited until 1145 before creating the secret mailbox. Ben had adjusted the computer so that his trembling fingers no longer produced unwanted double presses, which was so helpful.

The first email was cryptic in the extreme. “Loosen your belt and expand to full girth.” There followed more letters and numbers for the next mailbox. Nothing else.

This seemed very odd. Never mind. It was a pity to have to wait a whole month for the next instalment. David noted the address details in his diary on the appropriate day. He waited until ten minutes past twelve in case there were any more messages before cancelling the account.

-oOo-

It was February 29<sup>th</sup>. Ben was coming over next day to discuss the house. It did seem ridiculous David living in it all on his own. Also, although he was still fit enough at present, the day would come when he could no longer manage the stairs, and you had to be practical.

David wanted to show Ben the email when it came, and explain what it was all about. He arranged for him to come at 1200 for an early lunch, so that he could demonstrate the procedure. You have to be realistic in this life. At David’s age, nothing was guaranteed any more.

Ben was a few minutes late. After ringing the doorbell for ages, and getting no reply on the phone either, Ben was truly worried. In the end, he decided to force the back door. It was shocking walking through the house, wondering where he would be. There was the bread and cheese lunch, lying ready in the kitchen. Pate unwrapped on a plate, lettuce washed and ready. No sign of the chef.

Oh how dreadful. He was lying on the floor by the computer. Clearly dead. Heart attack, it looked like, not that Ben knew anything about it. Better ring Marigold.

What was this? Had he been sending an email? Who was it to? Ben took a closer look.

The window containing the message was a small one, but it was large enough to show how far he had got. The text read

1. From : Mission 12  
To : Undisclosed Recipients  
Sent :

And that was it. Strange last words, really. And what was that nonsense about Mission 12? The undisclosed recipients were going to be disappointed. Ben pressed the delete button and closed down the machine before picking up the phone.

“Hello darling. You were right. He has gone, looks like a heart attack, I suspect this morning. But it appears to have been quick. I’ll ring the same undertaker we used for Mum.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I’m going to really miss him. There was something he was keen to tell me, but we’ll never know what it was now.”

“Never mind, dear. It doesn’t matter any more.”

“No. I’ll wait here for the undertakers. Shouldn’t be too long; they were pretty quick last time. Love you.”

“And you. See you later.”

“Bye.”

If only Mark was still around. It was sad to lose your remaining parent without knowing it. Oh well. Nothing to be done about that.

Ben looked down at David lying there, his snow white hair hardly ruffled. His eyes filled with tears. He had been such a good friend.

He bent down and closed the eyes on the body. You were meant to do that.

The case was now closed.

-oOo-

### Acknowledgements

*2001: A Space Odyssey*, film, Turner Entertainment, 1968.

Beatles, the, *We all Live in a Yellow Submarine*, Song, 1966.

Bible, the, especially 2 Sam 23:20.

Bunyan, John, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, c.1677.

Cain, Paul, a preacher who once began a memorable sermon by apologising for apologising.

Charterhouse, the balcony in hall, where the boys would drum with their feet as a sign of appreciation at the end of term assembly or calling-over in the 1960s.

Clarke, Arthur C., *The Fountains of Paradise*, Gollancz, London, 1979.

Constable, John, *The Hay-Wain*, Oil on canvas, 130 x 185 cm, National Gallery, London.

Lewis, C.S., *That Hideous Strength*, John Lane The Bodley Head, 1945.

Maclean, Alistair, *Breakheart Pass*, HarperCollins, London, 1974. Film 1975 by MGM.

Milne, A.A., *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Methuen, London, 1926.

Nazirite Shock Trooper, a phrase of Roger Forster’s, September 1970.

Nineham, Dennis, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, Library of Philosophy and Religion, London, 1976. I have not opened this book, but I find the title thought-provoking

*Pinocchio*, Film, Disney, 1940.

Shakespeare, William, *As you Like it*, Act two, Scene seven.

Solzhenitsyn, Alexander, *First Circle*, 1968 for the left and right hand phrase from the New Testament.

Stainer, Robert (1918-1943) was killed in action while flying off Squantum, Massachusetts. He was my mother’s younger brother.

Synagogue in Bristol I once attended which was so progressive as to offer me the opportunity to give a blast on the ram's horn, which I declined, feeling it was not my place.

Thomas, Brandon, *Charley's Aunt*, play, 1892.

Thorne, Kip, *Black Holes and Time Warps: Einstein's Outrageous Legacy*, W.W. Norton & Co, New York, 1994.

Willcocks, Sir David, who instructed the Cambridge University Music Society chorus to change the word in No. 27b of J.S. Bach's St Matthew Passion from 'bottomless pit' to 'fathomless pit' for our performance in 1972. Or was it perhaps the other way round?

Wilkerson, Rev David, of New York, for an audio tape in the early 1970s about dire things to come, which ended by emphasising that God has everything under control.

Woking Snorkellers, which our children attended for a few weeks, for the concept and an enjoyable barbecue.