

Gathering Clouds...

The Cloud Brothers

Book One

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Cover by David Colon

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CHAPTER 1 Egg Shape

Within the next few seconds Trevor will either experience a titanic swell of satisfaction—or die a gruesome death.

Let this be understood before we go any further: Trevor Cloud is a genius. He is too modest to admit it, and too engrossed in his experiments to even consider the possibility, but at the young age of twenty-three he possesses more intelligence than any other person on planet Earth.

'I'm a coward and a fool,' he muttered. 'Press the key and get it over with.'

His finger hovered one centimetre above his laptop "enter" key, hanging there while he gathered the nerve to jab. One simple jab and his creation would come alive; and nothing or nobody would ever be able to turn it off or stop it—that is, if his calculations were correct.

The trouble is, if he had miscalculated, he would die.

'Come on,' he said, 'do it, you know it will work.' His finger shook and sweat stung his eye. One jab. Life or death. 'Come on, do it.'

He knew it would work because he had made several miniature models.

Admittedly, the first model had remained dead; the next model had glowed white hot and melted; the third model had exploded leaving a huge crater in the ground and felled all trees within a ten-metre radius; and the fourth model had wobbled clumsily in the air until it shot off into the clear blue sky and headed for space, out of control and lost forever.

But the next model had worked better than he ever dared hope for. A simple-looking object the size of an ostrich egg, connected by straightforward radio signal to his laptop, the end result

of passionate university study and hundreds of thousands of pounds from his bank account. It had floated in the air, manoeuvring perfectly; up, down, left, right, in any direction he wanted; silent and effortless, like a soap bubble floating in a gentle breeze.

Not much to feel proud about, you might agree, yet it would only move according to his command and no other influence could budge it, or damage it in any way or form. He had whacked it with his cricket bat and the egg stayed put and the bat snapped in two. He had tied one end of a rope around it, attached the other to his car bumper, and tugged until the rope snapped. He had given it both barrels of his shotgun, only to watch the pellets fall lifeless to the grass as if the egg had sucked all the energy from them.

Finally, he had taped a stick of dynamite to it, lit the fuse and hid behind a massive oak tree. Instead of exploding with a monstrous boom, the dynamite had made a pathetic "fut" sound. When the thick black smoke cleared, his model still floated in exactly the same position, its surface as clean and unmarked as ever.

The egg had still responded to his commands. No damage outside, no damage inside. *Well that's it then*, he had thought. *My theories work, my calculations are correct, now let's get started on the real thing.* With the experiment over, he had broken the connection with his laptop and watched the egg drop from the air and shatter on the ground.

If everything is so fine, he thought, *why do I worry?*

He worried because he now sat inside the full size egg; a structure as large as a barn and totally empty apart from the desk he sat at and a few essential items—like a fridge-freezer, a microwave oven, a sofa to sleep on, and a grandfather clock.

It has to work, he thought. He'd checked his calculations four times. They were exactly the same computations he had used on the models—except on a much grander scale. The only difference now was he could never turn it off again. There was no "plug to pull".

Once he plucked up courage to punch his battered key, his invention would become alive, drawing energy and life from everything around it. A huge indestructible egg he could move in any direction he chose. That is, if it didn't simply refuse to work, or explode, or melt, or shoot off into outer space.

A ball of sweat gathered on Trevor's brow and trickled down to his nose tip. It hung there for a second then dropped to the back of his poised hand where it stung like a needle stab. He closed his eyes and sighed, and with a gentle movement he pressed the enter key.

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Approximately twenty-one kilometres away, something like the distance of a half marathon, Trevor's younger brother Russell, tall, fair and athletic like a Viking, bowed to his martial arts pupils and beamed with pleasure. The five panting lads were the remains of his last beginners' class, the devoted ones who would eventually achieve black belts.

'Well done, boys,' said Russell. 'You did very well today. Three more weeks until your next grading and I'm certain all of you will pass easily. See you all Monday. Have a nice weekend.'

Even the oppressive July heat hadn't put the boys off from coming—each of them dreamed of becoming a hero. They were all fans of Bruce Lee and action-crammed kung-fu movies. Russell chuckled; the late Bruce Lee was one of his own favourites. The exhausted boys thanked Russell, changed without showering, and left.

Alone in his dojo, Russell squatted in the lotus position and sighed. He wondered how he could make them understand the martial arts constituted so much more than a means of self-defence, or beating up a pile of thugs single-handedly.

He sighed again, deeper this time, and closed his eyes to meditate. *Martial arts focuses our spiritual aspects*, he thought, *it increases our self-confidence, our assertiveness, and our concentration.*

But Russell found it difficult to concentrate. The overwhelming heat and physically hard training session had left him feeling giddy and his thoughts wandered. He bounced to his feet, shook the tension from his limbs, sank back to the floor, and drew one deep breath after the other. He considered chanting, but settled instead on visualisation. He would visualise a downpour with cold water streaming down his face and neck, and his tongue catching huge rain drops...

Russell began to form the image in his mind, but a faint scratching noise by his right knee stole his attention. It sounded like a mouse nibbling a piece of toast, or a dry leaf rocking on a draft. He resisted the urge to open his eyes; such irritations were a trick of the mind, he reminded himself, so he set the sound aside and strove to focus his thoughts.

His daydream budded slowly.

Dark grey clouds gathered above his head; and with the clouds came a chilly breeze; and with the breeze came the pungent scent of rain. He held the image for a few minutes, letting it assume physical form like a phantom presence materialising before his eyes.

His images were always lifelike, but this was far superior to anything he had previously experienced. He gave himself a mental pat on the back and opened his full awareness to the perception.

The scratching by his knee started to annoy him, so he included the sound within his image and pictured the hazy outline of an insect rubbing its legs together. The insect fitted snugly into his scene and Russell drew his attention back to the gathering clouds.

The clouds billowed high into the sky, closing together and shutting out the blue. A brilliant flash of lightning forked across the clouds and Russell jumped. *Something isn't quite right here*, he thought. *Where did the flash come from? I want rain, not lightning.*

The scratching sound grew louder and more persistent. With a disapproving grunt, Russell gave in and opened his eyes. A long, slender, greenish-brown insect swayed on spindly legs, and Russell recognised it as a praying mantis. 'What are you doing here pestering me?' murmured Russell. 'You're supposed to be in the Mediterranean or somewhere warm.' Then he chuckled. 'Yes, I know, it is warm.'

As he spoke, the hairs on his forearm bristled and he shuddered. The room remained dark and cool as if the heavy clouds still hung over his head, and the scent of rain still lingered in the chilly air. A menacing roll of thunder rumbled in the distance and he supposed, at long last, that a real storm was on its way.

The six-centimetre mantis remained where it was, unafraid and unperturbed, and as Russell watched, he could swear the ugly little monster grew...

This is a bad omen, thought Russell. Something wasn't quite right here. Something unpleasant was about to happen. 'Are you real or am I still dreaming?' he asked the insect. 'If I wasn't such a nice guy I'd squash you under my boot.'

The mantis grew to the size of a cat. It sat back on four rear limbs and held a stout pair of front legs together in prayer, rubbing them gently as if looking forward to something. Dark circular points in the centre of each bulbous green iris glared at Russell—and now the mantis was dog size.

'What are you and what do you want?' gasped Russell, a quiver of fear in his voice.

The insect's front legs had sharp spines and claws. Behind them, its piercing eyes were now on the same level as Russell's. The claws twitched as they prepared to grab. Unable to move, the beginning of a scream gurgled in Russell's throat...

CHAPTER 2 A Dry Planet

The vision burst and Russell laughed as if he had just come to the end of a big-dipper ride. 'Spooky,' he said and looked at his watch. 'I don't know what that was all about, but it took twenty minutes.' Once again, the room was bright, hot and stuffy, and the memory of his nightmarish vision soon withered into obscurity. 'If I hurry,' he said, 'I'll be at Trevor's by eight; just like I promised.'

He didn't usually talk to himself, but found the sound of his voice reassuring. 'I must have eaten something bad,' he said, 'or perhaps I need some salt like they keep telling us on the radio.' He jumped to his feet and reached for his water bottle, half the water went down his throat, the rest he poured over his head.

He opened a tap in the shower. It gurgled and spluttered but no water ran out, not even a drip. It didn't bother Russell, he could shower when he arrived at Trevor's. His brother had his own water well so he wasn't affected by the water rationing. Russell wiped the sweat from his body with a towel and changed into a light tracksuit.

After locking his dojo securely, he stepped off the pavement and crossed the busy road, dodging hooting traffic as if it was a game. Safely across, he entered a large public park and broke into a run.

A young man dressed in sporty tee shirt and shorts jogged on the path ahead. The path was long and steep but Russell's long stride soon had him trotting beside the stranger.

'Come on, man, race you to the top,' said Russell.

The jogger leant forward, lifted his knees, and sprinted. His feet pumped up and down in a clumsy, inefficient manner. Russell breathed easily and slowed his pace to allow the jogger the pleasure of winning. When they reached the hill top, the jogger gasped for breath and huge sweaty patches soiled his immaculate tee shirt.

'Good race, thanks,' said Russell. He gave the young man an encouraging pat on his shoulder, left the path, and sped off across the dry and dusty grass towards a distant line of trees.

He passed a long fenced-off section and noticed a drowsy group of donkeys grazing on the other side. Their necks, ears and tails hung with fatigue, exhausted after so many weeks of hot dry weather.

'Had a hard day, fellows?' called Russell, waving his arm in salute as he trotted past.

The narrow dirt track twisted between prickly gorse and tall bushes until it led up a steep hill into a barren wooded area. The warm summer evening lingered on. Sunlight flashed and twinkled through the trees causing Russell to blink and shade his eyes.

Without warning, a large man blocked his way.

'That's far enough,' growled the man. 'Give me your wallet.'

Jogging on the spot and smiling, Russell assessed the tall stout stranger. He was dressed in frayed baggy jeans and stained vest. Broad hairy shoulders bulged with muscle and a well-fed stomach bulged with fat. He had a broken nose, cauliflower ears, and short-cropped hair the same length as the stubble on his chin.

'Stop prancing about and give me your wallet,' he repeated.

'Why should I?' asked Russell.

'Because if you don't, me and me mate will break every bone in your body and hang you over a branch to dry.'

Two huge Alsatian dogs dragged a new man into view. The dogs strained on chain leashes, gnashing and snarling, their eyes fixed on Russell, eager to tear him apart. The new man dug his heels into the ground and, by sheer size and weight, held the animals at bay.

'Worried now, ain't you?' said the first man, not taking his eyes away from Russell's bouncing figure.

'My name is Russell,' he said, trying to sound natural. 'I live around here and I've used this path ever since I was a boy. I don't think we've met before.'

'Hey, Bert,' he called. 'We've got a smart arse here, looks like we're going to have a lynching party.' His cold green eyes never left Russell as he spoke, and he pushed his mangled face close into Russell's. 'If you want to know, you ain't seen us because me and Bert are specialists. We move about from place to place, a quick grab or two and move on, and we don't mess about with little old ladies and sissy girls, do we, Bert?'

'Not likely, Alf. They go to the cops and cry their little eyes out. Gets us into trouble they do.'

'Yeah, but not tough boys like you, eh, sport?' said Alf, prodding Russell in the chest with a gnarled finger. 'Tough guys like you are too proud to snitch.'

'A good plan,' admitted Russell, still smiling. 'I like your strategy even though it won't work with me. I'd really love to stop and chat with you guys,' he stopped jogging and let his body relax, 'but I really am in rather a hurry. And before anything else happens, I have to inform you that I have a black belt in five different disciplines of martial arts.'

'Well excuse me,' said Alf, mimicking Trevor's upper-class accent. 'You've got me shaking in me boots.'

'Yeah, me too,' said Bert, 'shaking in me boots.' He burst out laughing so hard he almost lost grip of the Alsatisans.

'Well if you want to know,' snarled Alf, 'me and Bert here are prize fighters, and we eat wimps like you for breakfast. Now, give me your damned wallet.' A long-bladed knife appeared in his right hand and sunlight flashed from the clean steel as he waved it in front of Russell's nose. He stretched his left hand out for the wallet.

What happened next mystified Alf. He suddenly found himself lying on his back, winded. Rising onto one elbow, he noticed in bewilderment that Russell now held his knife. He watched the tall slim boy gauge the knife's weight and balance. With a fluid motion, the boy hurled it away. Not wanting to lose his precious knife, Alf followed its flight. It turned twice in the air and struck a tree trunk with a solid thud, its point buried deep into the hard wood.

'Set the dogs on him, Bert,' he gasped.

Russell bent down on one knee and waited for the animals. The dogs skidded to a stop when they reached him, barked ferociously, gnashed their teeth, and sprayed blobs of saliva like irrigation hoses.

'You handsome fellows don't really want to eat me,' cooed Russell. 'I bet you've already eaten and your tummies are good and full.'

This wasn't the reaction the Alsatisans were used to, and the confused dogs growled suspiciously.

'What fine looking dogs you are. How's about you and I being friends? I bet you'd like your ears scratched?'

The Alsatisans cocked their heads sideways, lifted their ears, and frowned. Russell's pacifying tone had the dogs spellbound and they took comfort in his calm voice. They eased their noses forward and sniffed his outstretched hand—then lunged with open jaws to bite it off.

Russell snatched his hand back. Sharp teeth scraped the back of his fingers and he winced. The dogs' jaws snapped shut with a loud bang. Before the dogs had time to realise his fingers were still attached to his hand, Russell leaped to his feet.

'Stand off, Chums,' commanded Bert. The dogs grew rigid. Only their brutish heads and ravenous eyes followed Russell as he backed away. 'I'll teach you to mess with me dogs,' shouted Bert, running forward and drawing his own knife.

Russell told himself to stay calm. He felt sure he could handle the thugs, but the dogs were an interesting problem. Dogs as large as ponies were about to molest him and he wondered if this was the meaning of his vision. He shook his head to clear it, but the vision had been vivid and his confidence was shaken.

This was the first time a real situation had confronted him, the first time he would make use of his martial arts in a real fight. He was used to pain. Black eyes and broken bones were all part of his life, and during his years of training and competitive fights, he'd broken his nose twice and both arms and left leg below the knee once. But on those occasions, medical help had been close at hand and referees had jumped in to stop fights if they became too injurious. For the first time in his life, Russell was in fatal danger—and the prospect made him tingle with excitement.

Of the five martial arts Russell mastered, he preferred aikido, and his body softened into a composed stance. 'The way of harmonious spirit,' he muttered as Bert charged towards him like an angry bull. *Such a graceful art, he thought, such little effort required.*

Bert lunged with his knife, his bulky body charged with brute power. He drove the knifepoint at Russell's right shoulder. In an instant, Russell's shoulder swayed aside and an effortless side-stepping counter sent Bert's feet lifting off the ground. He flew through the air and flapped his tattooed arms like an overweight turkey with clipped wings, landing with a strangled squawk on top of Alf. The thugs cursed and untangled themselves in time to see Russell weigh and balance Bert's knife. Again the knife turned twice before thudding into the tree trunk, landing so close to Alf's knife the handles vibrated against each other with a sound like a neurotic woodpecker.

'Kill,' shouted Bert, and the Alsations sprang forward.

'No. Call them off,' screamed Russell, dashing for the nearest tree. He grabbed a branch above his head and swung his feet up like a trapeze artist. The biggest of the dogs bounced up, caught Russell's jacket, and hung by his teeth. The combined weight was too much for the dry branch and it snapped with a loud crack. Russell fell backwards and landed on top of the dog, he heard air wheeze from its lungs like a violent sneeze and hoped the animal was stunned.

The second dog lurched forward with its shiny white teeth aimed at Russell's thigh. Russell still held the branch and pushed it into the dog's jaws. With his free hand he gathered the dogs' chains and wrapped them tightly around the branch.

'Well, it's been nice talking to you gentlemen,' said Russell as he turned to sprint away. 'But I really must be getting along, perhaps we can have a friendlier chat another day, and by the way, I don't carry a wallet. Bye.'

Alf stuck his boot out and Russell tripped. His nose and forehead splattered against a tree trunk and he only managed to stay on his feet by holding onto the tree. With blood spouting from his nose and stars blurring his vision, he spun to face his aggressors.

The thugs laughed so hard they found it impossible to stand up. Russell prodded his nose. He didn't think it was damaged, but his injured self-esteem craved retaliation. The rabid Alsations strained against their chains and drew closer, tripping and stumbling in their eagerness to reach him. Russell bunched his muscles and clenched his fist so hard the joints cracked. The martial arts were for self-defence he reminded himself, not for aggression. He swallowed his anger and ran.

'Come back here, you skinny runt,' called Alf. 'We'll meet again all right and when we do I'll bash your dimwit brains out.'

'Yeah, me too,' said Bert.

Russell hurried on through the woods with a salty mixture of blood and sweat in his mouth, but the bleeding stopped as quickly as it started, and his injured pride eased. *I did well*, he consoled himself. *I mostly managed to stay calm*.

He glanced over his shoulder. Neither the thugs nor their dogs followed so he slowed to a comfortable pace and breathed deeply. This part of the woods was relatively unspoiled by human activity, and he felt Mother Nature's gentle spirit reach out to ease his soul. Birds sang above, crickets chirped below, and the rhythmic pat-pat of his feet sounded like a gentle heartbeat. He sighed; life wasn't so bad after all.

All too soon, the path came to a high-wire fence and split off in two directions. Russell turned right, carried on for another hundred metres then stopped in front of a padlocked gate. He unlocked the gate, closed it behind him, and snapped the padlock back in place. He was on his parent's property now, the extensive estate surrounding the Cloud's mansion, and set off along a barely perceptible path.

The narrow path wound its way down a steep cliff, skirted a large, dried-out pond, passed a few rundown outhouses and ended at a dirt-track road. His parents' stately house stood to the left, visible through the trees, but Russell turned right knowing his brother would be busy playing with his experiments under deeper forest cover.

Earlier in the day, Trevor had phoned him and babbled about the 'crowning result of his experiment', and how Russell had to be there at eight-o'clock sharp 'to witness the outcome—one way or the other!' Russell had grown accustomed to his brother's crazy experiments. Not all of them were successful, in fact, most of them were a miserable flop and Russell's job was to pat him on the back and wish him better luck next time.

For months now, his brother Trevor had spent every waking hour constructing a hideous, egg-shaped—something or the other. He never clarified his experiments until finished and working. If they worked, he'd sleep, eat, and play with them a few days until a new project popped to mind. If they didn't work, he'd sleep, eat, and walk around with his hands in his pockets until a new project popped to mind. All in all, Trevor wasn't the most talkative person in the world. Not that Russell minded, he didn't understand a quarter of Trevor's explanations anyway.

Trevor's greatest achievement so far was a communication device he called a 'Zip-ling'. The Zip-ling was no larger than a memory-stick Russell plugged into his computer. The Zip-Linq came equipped with various coloured buttons for various obscure operations, and was designed to clip onto a zip. Trevor had flapped his arms and dribbled with excitement as he praised the Zip-Linq's qualities. 'It utilises a completely new technology,' he had ranted, 'making it undetectable and able to communicate over extreme distances, even to the moon.' Russell took his word for it, but he couldn't see the point. As far as Russell could make out, it did the same as an ordinary walkie-talkie.

This latest experiment of Trevor's had taken far longer than any other. Russell had watched with much merriment as Trevor erected a wire frame as large as a cowshed, covered the frame with fine wire until it looked like a rusty old scouring pad, and finally packed it in crinkly kitchen foil so it resembled a gigantic baked potato. What met Russell now as he plunged into the clearing made him skid to a stop and rub his eyes in disbelief.

In the baked potato's place, stood a huge majestic egg as white and luminescent as a fluffy summer cloud.

Russell crept forward and placed both hands on the shell. The texture resembled satin, or velvet, or smooth silk, but something beneath the surface resisted his prodding like solid iron. It was neither hot nor cold, but reflected his hand's temperature like polystyrene foam.

He rapped his knuckles against the peculiar surface then smacked it hard with his flat hand; either way, no echo or sound bounced back. Fascinated, he walked around the entire circumference searching for joins or marks—and found none. Without doubt, the object was as dead and lifeless as a giant, solidified, marshmallow.

'Hallo, Trevor, where are you?' he called, then cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted into the woods. 'Trevor. Where are you?'

'I'm inside,' came a reply from somewhere within the egg. 'Hang on a minute and I'll open the porthole for you.'

Low down towards the egg's curved belly, an elongated hole appeared. A narrow ramp reached out to touch the ground. 'Come on in,' said Trevor, beckoning from inside the doorway.

Walking through an open doorway is normally done without physical discomfort, but as Russell stepped through this one he jolted in agony. An electric surge tore into his body. Sparks danced and crackled from his toes to his fingertips and out the top of his head.

'Yow!' he cried, sinking to his hands and knees in front of Trevor.

'Oh dear, did it hurt that much?' said Trevor, frowning. 'Must've been a bit off with my calculations. I'm afraid I haven't had a chance to test it properly yet.'

'Why didn't you warn me?' gasped Russell, his arms and legs shaking. 'It feels like I've swum across the English channel—towing the car ferry. I'm exhausted, shattered, done in...'

'If it's any consolation,' said Trevor, more interested in his own theories than his brother's discomfort, 'you won't feel anything the next time you go through. What happens is this; I tell the computer to expect a body mass of such and such, and as you come through, the computer takes an exact biochemical copy and remembers it for evermore. The closer I am with my initial calculations, the easier it is to come through first time.'

'But why didn't you warn me?'

'Well, yes, I'm sorry about that. But believe me, it would have been much worse if you came through hesitantly. And if I'd warned you, you might not have dared come through at all.' Trevor cupped his hand under Russell's arm and gave a little tug. 'Here, let me help you up. But what's this I see, blood all over your face and your tracksuit torn to bits? That isn't my doing. What's happened?'

Russell let his head drop. 'Oh nothing really,' he mumbled. 'I met a couple of guys walking their dogs and they asked to borrow some money. They were a bit disappointed when I told them I didn't have any, but they soon cheered up. They were laughing when I left them.'

'But where did the blood come from?'

'I was a bit clumsy and tripped, that's all.'

'You picked a fight with them, didn't you?' Trevor spread his legs and held his hands on his hips. 'You're eighteen years old, Russell. I told our parents I'd look after you while they're away. How can I look after you if you keep getting into fights? Come and lay down on the sofa until you regain your strength.'

Trevor propped his shoulder under his brother's trembling armpit and they staggered across to the sofa. Russell collapsed into a ball and put his head in his hands.

'I'll be all right in a minute,' he mumbled through his fingers. 'My head is spinning and I'm famished; do you have anything to eat and drink, do you have any salt?'

'I'll fix you something. Just you relax.'

For a long time, conversation was impossible. Russell gobbled cold chicken, cheese and pickle, cold ham, salad, coleslaw, pickled onions, crusty white bread, butter and jam. Followed by half a fruit cake, moist and heavy, apple pie and tinned custard. With everything washed down with four bottles of brown ale, Russell sighed, burped, rubbed his swollen tummy and smiled.

'I'm sorry it's only cold food,' apologised Trevor, shocked to see all his provisions devoured in one ferocious gulp. 'But as you can see, I don't have an oven in here yet.'

Russell looked up for the first time and glanced about. His smile vanished. 'Ah! That's revolting,' he said, gazing at living skin stretched all around them. The sun's last rays shone through, silhouetting an intricate map of pulsating arteries and veins. 'Well, I was impressed by the outside,' he said, 'but let's face it, the inside is disgusting. It feels like I'm sitting inside a giant chicken stomach with flashing Christmas tree lights hung all over the place. What's the point of this thing you've created—apart from nearly killing people when they enter?'

'Yes, I'll have to look into that,' mused Trevor. 'But can't you see what we've got here?'

Russell laughed. 'A giant hard-boiled dinosaur egg with the centre shovelled out?'

'Ha, ha. Very funny,' said Trevor. 'To start with, let's stop calling it an egg; an egg sounds so fragile.' He moved over to his desk and sat facing Russell, so excited he couldn't sit still. 'What we have here is a travel machine. We can go wherever we desire, anywhere, through the sky, under the ocean, even up in space. Can you imagine that, Russell, we can visit the moon if we want to.'

'Oh no. Not me. I don't want to go anywhere in this thing. How safe is it anyway? And look at the state of it in here, it's a shambles, a grungy mess, we can't live in here. No, no, just let me out.'

'Have another piece of cake,' said Trevor, pushing the last half under Russell's nose. 'Let me try to explain.' He leaned forward, placed both palms on his knees; and spoke softly, stressing each word. 'The shell of this machine is indestructible.'

'What do you mean by "indestructible"?' said Russell, licking his fingers.

'I mean impossible to destroy. It absorbs energy from anything and everything. If a force presses against it or tries to destroy it, the shell soaks up the energy and uses that same energy to strengthen itself.'

'Yeah, but how much energy can it absorb before all the wires melt?'

'That's the beauty of it,' said Trevor, and smiled with pride. 'There are no wires. Energy floats around on ultra-violet ions and laser beams. Do you remember that very fine mesh on the outside?'

'Yes, the whole thing looked like a giant scouring pad.'

'Precisely. Actually, it was an elaborate cobweb of extremely special filament wire, and when electricity first flowed along those delicate circuits, the wire evaporated into a kind of ion gas. From then on, and forever more, energy will flow along those same circuits—supporting themselves.'

'What do you mean, "forever more"? Can't you just turn it off?'

'I have created a magnetic continuum, a kind of cosmic sphere with a billion pathways along which energy flows. The circuit draws energy from the environment surrounding it: the sun, the wind, the warm earth, gravity, everything. It's a living thing, self protecting and programmed for life.'

'You're joking? I might not be as clever as you, but I know perpetual motion is impossible.'

'Of course, every idiot knows perpetual motion is impossible, but this isn't perpetual motion. I utilise the free energy around us. Understand this, dear brother, the planet we live on, the planet Earth, is one gigantic battery. It has stored the sun's energy for millions of years. The sun makes trees grow, trees turn into oil, oil turns into electricity, and electricity turns into light and heat in

our homes. This machine of mine draws energy from the battery Earth, or the sun, or any other source whatever the form.'

'Yes, I see,' said Russell, scratching his head. 'But how do you use this energy?'

'If you jump on a trampoline, the springs absorb the energy and throw you back up into the air. My machine does the same. It's the same effect. Gravity pulls us down, I use that energy to push us up... we float in gravity-energy changing form.'

'Well I can certainly feel my energy returning,' said Russell, losing interest. He dropped to the floor and counted fifty press-ups.

'At this very moment we are floating in gravity,' continued Trevor, used to his brother's abundant vitality. 'While you were inspecting my machine before you came in, did you notice it's not resting on the ground but hovering a couple of centimetres above it? I can just as easily make it float two metres above the ground, or two hundred, or under the sea—or out in space...'

'Yeah, but not with me on board. How does it work...all this...stuff?'

Trevor puffed his cheeks and raised his eyebrows. 'We're discussing hyper-dimensional physics, what can I say? This ionised gas in the shell is a super conductor of electricity and causes a kind of rotating plasma which reacts to magnetic fields.'

Russell nodded his head, then shook it, then shrugged his shoulders.

'Plasma is made up of ions and electrons that are found in the sun, the stars, and fusion reactors...'

'Okay, okay. I believe you,' laughed Russell. 'Spare me any more details. How about calling your machine "The *Cloud*"? After all, our surname is "Cloud" and this creation of yours looks like a cloud from the outside. But you'll have to do something in here, you can't live in this.'

'I was hoping you'd help me fit it out. You're gifted when it comes to carpentry and decoration. I'll give you a free hand—anything you want. There's room for three floors in here, you can have the top floor all to yourself. Fit it out with a gym or dojo if you like, your own lounge and kitchen and bathroom—your very own apartment. I'll take the middle floor for my apartment and control room, and at the bottom here we could have stores and tools and a garage. And when it's all finished, we can go for trips, anywhere you like.'

'How can we go anywhere in the *Cloud*?' asked Russell. 'The military will shoot us to pieces before we get one hundred metres into the air.'

'You haven't been listening,' sighed Trevor. 'We're indestructible. Besides, nobody will be able to see us. I can make the *Cloud* invisible simply by reflecting an image on one side of what's on the other; it's like looking right through. And radar signals won't be reflected back, we soak up the energy and use it ourselves. We can go anywhere and nobody will know anything about us. Eh! What do think? Sounds exciting, doesn't it?'

Before answering, Russell drummed his fingers on his knees and pursed his lips. 'Well, I must admit,' he said, touching his bruised nose, 'nothing ever seems to happen in my life. Tell you what, I'll do the fitting out and have it looking like a palace in here. But let's not go anywhere just yet.'

'Good. That's settled then. I'll do the electrics and plumbing, plus a few other small details.'

Russell jumped to his feet, eager now to get started. 'I'll come back tomorrow with a caravan and park it outside next to yours. That way I can live here until we've finished. Come on, it's getting late, you better get back to your caravan and grab some sleep.'

At the porthole, Trevor hesitated and pulled back.

'Aha!' said Russell. 'You haven't been through it yourself yet, have you? How long have you been in here?'

'I've been in here since this morning when I turned the *Cloud* on.'

'And you say I'll feel nothing this time when I go through?'

'That's my theory. You go, I'll stay here a while longer.'

'Oh no you don't,' said Russell, lifting his brother under one arm. He gritted his teeth, closed his eyes, and darted through the port.

CHAPTER 3 Vanishing Vapour

The scene terrified Professor Maurice Masterson. The middle of July and England's green and pleasant lands were parched and dry like the southern Mediterranean. Everything was dead. Night-time temperatures sank below freezing, day-time temperatures rose above thirty degrees. Woodland fires flourished, water rationing was reduced to one hour per day, youngsters were kept home from school, and the elderly were dying of dehydration and heat stroke.

The professor stood at his office window and scowled. He straightened his bow tie, took a large white handkerchief from his tweed-suit trouser pocket, and mopped his brow.

'What can I do?' he shouted, and waved his fist at the cloudless sky.

Skirting his tidy desk, he rambled across to a large glass display-cabinet and scowled at his many trophies. Those were the days, he thought, captain of the rugby team, captain of the cricket team, and twice Olympic gold-medallist in fencing. *I was a young man then*, he thought. *Now I'm old and useless.*

His old discarded cricket bat leaned against the cabinet side. He picked it up, felt its weight and wondered what he could smash.

He laid the bat on the desk, picked up a felt-tip pen and marched to the corner where his training equipment stood. He wasn't an artist, but the caricature he drew on the punchball was unmistakable.

'Now look here, Mr High and Mighty out-of-space alien fart face,' said the professor through clenched teeth. 'Come to bully us, have you?' He replaced the pen on his desk and swaggered back with his bat. 'Come down here and face me like a man, you yellow-livered coward.' He prodded the punchball alien face, setting it rocking. 'You dastardly fiend... you pirate of the universe... you thieving heathen... you extraterrestrial freak... I'll teach you a lesson...'

The bat whistled through the air with all the force a seasoned cricket captain could muster. With a mighty twang, the alien head snapped off, rocketed across the room, and crashed through the window.

One of his personal bodyguards burst in from an adjoining room.

'It's okay, James,' said the professor. 'It's only me letting off steam again. Put your gun away and tell George to get the mini ready— 'm going out.'

~*~

Russell Cloud parried Professor Maurice's sword and delivered a potentially lethal thrust to his chest.

'Touché!' acknowledged the professor.

'Your actions are mechanical, your movement is clumsy, and your mind is elsewhere,' said Russell. 'You haven't managed to deliver a single strike tonight.'

'You talk too much,' said the professor. 'Don't forget, it was me who taught you to fence. I could beat you blindfolded, with my legs tied together, and carrying my grandmother piggyback.'

'Come on, Professor,' said Russell. 'Your mind's not on it tonight. Suppose you tell me what's up?'

'Nothing,' said the professor, 'except for this damned heat.' He lunged forward for the kill.

Russell parried and drew the professor in so their heads almost touched.

'I shouldn't have come here today,' whispered the professor. 'I have a problem; the whole world has a problem.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'I can't ... it's driving me nuts, but I can't.'

'Trust me. You obviously haven't come here to sword fight. I can keep a secret, I promise.'

The professor pushed Russell away and made ready for a new attack.

'You and your brother are a pair of wasters,' said the professor, letting his frustration show again. 'I wouldn't trust you to look after my ballpoint pen. Your brother was the best physics pupil I ever had. He was the best pupil the university ever had. And what does he do now? Play with model aeroplanes.'

'Well, yes, something like that,' admitted Russell. 'Although "flying-saucers" might be closer to the mark.'

'Flying-saucers?' repeated the professor, momentarily impressed. 'Codswallop! The boy's crazy. Scientists have been working on those things for years without success. Why doesn't he join them in America where they have the resources, know-how, and facilities? I'll tell you why: because he's an ass.'

Russell smiled and placed his hand on the professor's shoulder.

'And you're no better,' continued the professor, prodding Russell with his sword. 'Why don't you do something with your life? We need men like you. Become a bodyguard. Join the army. Join the police. Get a job. Do something ...'

'Would you like to meet Trevor again?' asked Russell. 'How long has it been since you saw him last, two ... three years? He has a place where we can talk in complete privacy.'

'You blithering idiot. There is no such place, I don't fully trust my own highly secured environment.'

'You're forgetting how clever my brother is. A mosquito couldn't get into his den if it wasn't welcome. Come and see at least. Give your bodyguards the rest of the day off. Let me be your bodyguard until we get back here.'

The professor grunted his consent and they set off through the parkland in silence—followed at a discrete distance by two dedicated bodyguards.

~*~

'In there we can talk,' said Russell, pointing to the *Cloud*. 'If Trevor lets you in.'

The professor stopped and stared, his back erect, chin up, hands adjusting his bow tie. 'What do we have here?'

'Trevor and I call it the *Cloud*, It's a flying egg.'

'I haven't come all this way for the sake of my health,' grumbled the professor. 'If this is a waste of time I'll have you thrown in a prison cell for a month.'

They stepped away from the trees and into the clearing where the *Cloud* hovered. As they approached, the porthole opened and Trevor jumped out.

'Russell,' said Trevor. 'You know what we agreed on. No strangers. Who is that?'

'Don't you recognise him?' said Russell, drawing closer. 'He's an old friend of yours. He works part-time for the government now and needs to talk to us in private. Can we come in?'

'Gosh, yes, the professor,' said Trevor. He ran forward and took his old tutor's hand in both of his own, his face shone with pleasure. Then he turned to Russell. 'You know it's against my policy to let anybody in. This is our secret, how can it remain a secret if we start inviting guests to tea?'

'What is this magnificent object?' asked the professor, staring at the opaque bubble with professional interest. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

A dog barked in the distance.

'Somebody's prowling about,' said Trevor. 'Did anybody follow you here? Never mind, forget my bad manners, Professor, come on, let's get inside.'

'Is it okay?' asked Russell, nodding towards the porthole.

'Yes, yes. I've adjusted it now; but let me go in first to configure the computer. I'll call when it's clear. Come on, let's hurry.'

Bushes rustled in the distance and the dog barked again.

'Come on in,' called Trevor. 'It should be fine now.'

Russell stood aside and the professor bound up the narrow ramp. As he passed through the open port, his hair stood on end and sparks flashed around his jerking body. 'Damn it,' he managed to scream before fainting. With a cobweb of purple static electricity dancing and crackling though his clothes, the professor fell in a heap and lay prostrate.

'Oops!' said Trevor. 'I must have adjusted it the wrong way.'

~*~

With a groan, the professor opened his eyes and wondered where he was. He laid on a comfortable bed, in a plush and peaceful bedroom—a bedroom he had never seen before. After a moment, he remembered. Closing his eyes again he made a mental examination of his body; every muscle and joint ached, and a faint smell of singed hair and burnt clothes tugged at his nostrils.

'Where are you two jerks?' he screamed, sitting up so fast he nearly fainted again. 'Where am I? I'll break your skulls into a mush. I'll... I'll...'

Russell skittered in. 'Ah, welcome back with the living. You've been out for almost eight minutes. How do you feel?'

'I feel like murdering you, that's how I feel. The moment I'm back on my feet I'm going to knock your head off. I only wish I had my cricket bat with me.'

'Well, if it's any consolation, I know exactly how you feel, and so does Trevor. But if you can get to your feet, come with me, there's something I think would interest you. Here, take my arm.'

The professor trembled to his feet and threw a wild swing with his right fist. Russell caught the feeble punch and lifted the professor's arm around his shoulder. Without further protest, the professor let himself be hoisted out of the room.

They crossed a broad landing and hobbled down a shallow flight of stairs.

'Is this your house?' asked the professor in a weak voice. 'Very pleasant, and it'll be my pleasure to send a bulldozer through it as soon as I get out of here.' He shook his head and glanced at his watch. 'Eight minutes? Did you say I've been unconscious for eight minutes? More like twenty-eight. I must get in touch with my people before they miss me—they're supposed to know where I am at all times, and if I don't send them a message every...'

Russell threw open a door and the professor stopped speaking mid-sentence.

'My God! You crazy people,' gasped the professor, managing to stop himself falling to the ground fifteen metres below.

Outside, three metres away, floating in mid-air, Trevor sat at his desk. A massive grandfather clock floated beyond the desk, and a sofa and two comfy reclining chairs floated in front.

'It's quite safe,' said the two brothers in unison.

Russell stepped through the door and strolled across the open space to stand beside his brother at the desk. 'Come on, Professor, try it,' he encouraged.

'What is it, glass?' asked the professor, searching for a reflection or mark that would give it away. He tapped one foot across the threshold, and felt something solid. Hanging on to the doorframe with both hands, he stepped onto the invisible floor and cursed.

'My God! You crazy people,' he repeated, feeling giddy from the height. He released the doorframe and, forgetting to breathe, shuffled across to the desk. Behind him, the door floated in empty space, the rest of the *Cloud* had vanished.

'I... Is there an edge we can fall off?' stammered the professor.

'We're standing inside a room, Professor,' said Russell, 'but the walls, floor, and ceiling are all invisible. Show him, Trevor.'

With the touch of his keyboard, drab grey walls sprang into existence. With the next touch, they disappeared again.

'Neat, eh, Professor?' said Trevor.

'Yes,' agreed the professor, still hardly daring to breathe. 'My heartiest congratulations, and my deepest apologies for all those unkind words. I assume we're still inside your contraption. I'm not sure what you have here, but it's obviously something monumental. Why, this is simply spectacular.'

'Look down there,' said Trevor, pointing to the ground beneath their feet. 'A man just broke into your caravan, Russell, and another is on watch outside.'

'They look too well dressed to be thieves,' said Russell. 'Who are they? What are they looking for?'

'That's easy,' replied the professor. 'They're looking for me. They're my bodyguards and I expect they're worried about me. I was supposed to send them a message four minutes ago.' He tapped a short message into his mobile phone and pressed the send button.

'I'm afraid they won't get that message,' said Trevor. 'Nothing comes in or goes out unless I let it. Here, borrow my phone.'

The professor snatched the mobile phone and tapped again. He looked down as the message peeped on his bodyguard's phone. The bodyguard opened the caravan door and called to his companion. They read the coded message, nodded, and sat down on the caravan step, satisfied for the moment all was well. One of them lifted the phone to his ear and spoke.

'He'll be asking for a trace,' said the professor with a smile, 'and checking who owns the phone. That won't be a problem, they know I am in the Cloud brothers' company, but they'll certainly wonder where we're hiding.'

A flock of crows flew into the *Cloud's* side. Six birds dropped to the ground, landing at the bodyguards' feet. The surprised bodyguards looked skywards and scratched their heads.

The professor ducked. 'They've seen us,' he said.

'No, they can't see us, we're invisible; not only to eyesight but also to any instrument. But the birds were something I hadn't thought about. Shall we take you back to your office?' asked Trevor.

'In this?'

'Yes. It'll be its maiden flight—in honour of you.'

'I'll have some explaining to do when I suddenly turn up back at my office, but it'll do them good; keep them guessing; keep them on their toes. Come on then.'

'Look now,' said Russell, pointing below.

His two thugs blundered into the clearing, Alf leading and Bert holding the Alsations back.

'He's going to ask for their wallets,' chuckled Russell. 'This could be interesting.'

The bodyguards drew guns, but the dogs had obviously been trained to recognise weapons and leaped at their wrists.

Bert threw the guns into the bushes and tied his dogs to the caravan. The men faced each other a moment, measuring and estimating what they were up against. A fight was brewing and none of them wanted to back down.

'Art of the trade versus brute force,' said the professor. 'My boys will win. I'll give you four-to-one odds, one hundred pounds down.'

'You're on,' said Russell. 'Don't underestimate those thugs, they've been in a fight or two.'

The art-of-trade bodyguards sprung into action, peppering the thugs with short, sharp blows. If Bert felt pain, it didn't show. He raised his arm and swung his fist like a wooden mallet, thumping his bodyguard on the head. The bodyguard's eyes crossed, his legs turned to jelly, and he melted to the ground. Bert sat on him.

'Good grief,' said the professor. 'It's like an elephant sitting on a tiger.'

Bert made himself comfortable on the human cushion and watched how his partner faired. Alf crouched forward in a typical boxer's stance, protecting his head. The bodyguard pumped his fists but soon grew impatient. It was like hitting a punch-bag and just as ineffective. He pirouetted on one foot and aimed the other at Alf's stomach.

'That was a mistake,' said Russell.

Before the foot landed, Alf stepped forward and caught the bodyguard in a bear hug. He lifted the bodyguard off his feet and squeezed until the man's lungs peeped. With no apparent effort he raised the bodyguard above his head and pirouetted. Alf twirled for a whole minute, spinning the bodyguard like a helicopter blade. Then he dropped him.

The bodyguard swayed to his feet, threw a wild punch, and toppled over. He didn't try to get up again.

'Nice one, Alf,' said Bert. He climbed off his bodyguard and pulled the man to his feet.

'Yeah. Fought well though, didn't they?' said Alf, and helped the other bodyguard to his feet.

Trevor burst out laughing. 'They enjoyed it. They've had fun. Ha! Ha! Ha! Look at them, the best of friends.'

'Yes,' agreed Russell. 'There's a strange code of respect amongst those sort of people. Let's call it a draw, eh, Professor?'

'Blah! My boys were only playing. It was like two tigers sparing with an elephant and a gorilla. But I concede.'

They shook hands.

'Are you sure this contraption works?' said the professor.

Trevor nodded. 'Positive.'

'You'll have to fly low, can't have you causing a risk for aviation traffic. Do you have radar?'

'Um, no, not yet, I didn't think of that.'

'Of course you didn't, stupid question really. Now take me back to my office.'

'Where to?'

'You can drop me off on top of the department store in town, that's close enough.'

The *Cloud* shot sideways—straight through a high-voltage electricity line.

'Sorry,' muttered Trevor and jiggled his joysticks with more care. The scene around them flashed past, and although there was no sensation of movement within the *Cloud*, both Russell and the professor lost balance and tumbled to the invisible floor.

'Not so fast,' shouted the professor. He lay on his stomach and kicked himself around until he faced the direction of travel. With arms and legs spread-eagled, he knew now how superman must feel as he shot through the air. 'Higher,' he shouted. 'To your left, watch out for that block of flats.' He scrunched his eyes closed, covered them with his hands, and didn't dare opening them again until Trevor spoke.

'Here we are, Professor,' he said, 'all safe and sound. Flies like a dream, doesn't it?'

The professor peeked through his fingers and recognised the helicopter pad on the roof of the building above his office. Russell was already on his feet and bent to help the professor. 'Get your hands off me,' he barked, and wobbled to his feet unaided. He brushed himself down and straitened his bow tie. 'I can't have you two flying around in this thing. Go straight home and stay there until I decide what to do about this. Do you understand?'

Trevor and Russell glanced at each other. Russell cleared his throat. 'Before you go, professor, wasn't there something you wanted to get off your chest?'

'You two are certifiable crazy,' said the professor, checking his cufflinks. 'I don't see why I should tell you anything. But then again, I can't see why not. We both have a secret to keep, and you two are so crazy nobody would believe you even if they tortured you.' He adjusted his chain and pocket watch, and fastened the top button of his tweed jacket. 'Put the walls up, before I turn as crazy as you two.'

They appeared.

'Thank you. Feels much safer, don't you think?' Relieved at having a normal floor under his feet he paced up and down, and wondered how much he should tell them.

'A little over one year ago,' he began, 'reports started landing on my desk concerning irregular global weather conditions. Only short memos, you understand, but exceedingly urgent. Of course, there's been plenty of hysteria around this global warming phenomenon, but these new apprehensions were of a slightly different nature.'

He reached the wall and turned abruptly.

'How much do you two know about global warming?' he asked. 'Never mind, I'll explain briefly. The sun warms up Earth's surface, and infra-red radiation cools it down. It's a fine balance, and to keep the climate warm and habitable these temperatures are regulated by gases in the atmosphere; mostly water vapour and carbon dioxide.'

The brothers nodded.

'All this hysteria around global warming is based on increased levels of carbon dioxide, caused by fossil fuel burning and such nonsense. I must admit, when I saw these reports my first reaction was to screw them up and throw them into the waste bin.'

He paused.

'Now then, of these two gases—water vapour and carbon dioxide—water vapour is by far the most significant. Eighty-five percent of the earth's natural greenhouse effect is due to water vapour.'

The brothers nodded again and waited.

'These new reports were not concerned with increased levels of carbon dioxide, they were concerned with decreased levels of water vapour.'

The professor resumed walking the floor, gathering his thoughts.

'Well, what could I do? I authorised a certain amount of funding expecting nothing more to come from it. But three weeks later, a new report took me totally by surprise.'

The professor indicated the sofa and waited for the brothers to sit. He cleared his throat and said, 'The next report stated that our water vapour was being siphoned off by extra-terrestrial aliens.'

Russell burst out laughing. The professor's serious expression only made his fit worse. Unable to control himself he doubled up, slapped his knees, and howled.

'I'm sorry,' spluttered Russell, blowing his nose. 'I can see it wasn't meant to be a joke. Please go on.'

'Oh, it's all right,' said the professor. 'My first reaction was the same. Unfortunately, it doesn't end there. We pinpointed the aliens with our telescopes and their existence is indisputable. They ignore all communications, and recklessly—I can see the folly of my decision now—I voted in favour of sending a NASA space shuttle to investigate. We sent the *Wayfarer*.'

The professor lowered his eyes. When he looked up again they sparkled with moisture. 'The two crew members on board are close friends of mine.' His fist clenched in anger. 'Nobody understands what happened, but as the space shuttle approached the aliens—it disappeared. Vanished without a trace...'

'When did this happen?' asked Trevor.

The professor opened his fists and sighed. 'Four days ago.'

'I'm sorry,' commiserated Russell. 'I really hope no harm has come to your friends.'

The professor shrugged in agreement.

'I suppose,' said Russell, 'this explains why everything is so dry and hot. If anybody other than you had told this story, I wouldn't have believed it.'

'It had to happen sooner or later,' said Trevor. 'It's extremely egoistic to imagine we're the only inhabited planet in the universe. Do you know how the water vapour is being siphoned, professor?'

'The scientists are working on it. They say the alien's method of removing moisture from Earth is similar to that used by a de-humidifier. But time is running out. Soon the whole planet will look like the Gobi Desert.'

'Can't you simply blast them with an atom bomb or something?' said Trevor.

'It's been suggested, and a missile is in preparation, but don't you suppose the missile will vanish as easily as the space shuttle?' The professor stood and adjusted his bow tie. 'Now you know it all. If you will excuse me, I have other important things to attend to.'

Trevor opened a desk draw, found what he was looking for, and held a neat ornament in the palm of his hand. 'This is a "Zip-Linq",' he said, handing it to the professor.

'A Zip-Linq,' repeated the professor, turning the trivial object in his fingers. 'What am I supposed to do with it?'

'It's a communication device. Press the blue button and we'll be in direct contact with each other. It's my own design so it's quite secure, nobody else has the technology to eavesdrop. Just clip it onto a zip.'

'My tweed-suit uses buttons.'

'Well then, put it on your key-ring.'

'Thank you,' said the professor, slipping it into his trouser pocket. 'One last word before I leave. I cannot stress enough the importance of secrecy. I have divulged this information because I know I can trust you, and because you are two of the cleverest, "craziest" individuals on this planet. Who knows, perhaps you will come up with something? Any suggestion could be helpful. I for one, for the first time in my life, am totally gob-smacked. I am at a total loss. Good day, gentlemen.'

CHAPTER 4 Test Flight

'Let's investigate,' said Trevor. 'We can't let aliens mess about with our planet and get away with it.'

Russell gazed at his brother and shook his head. 'Are you suggesting you want to fly up into outer space in this *Cloud* contraption and take a closer look?'

'Yes, that's exactly what I think we should do.'

'We?'

'Yes, you and me, the Cloud brothers, daring young men, pioneers, soaring through space and saving our planet. Heroes.'

'No way. Absolutely not. I'll agree you've built something fantastic here, but you can't simply fly off into outer space. How do you know it'll work up there?'

'I know it'll work because I've designed it to work. Don't you trust my capabilities?'

'It's too risky. Theories are one thing, putting our lives at risk is something totally different.'

'Come on,' said Trevor, taking hold of the joysticks. 'One little peek at the aliens.'

'No!' said Russell. 'Take your hands off those joysticks or I'll brake your wrists.'

Trevor sat back and sighed. 'Perhaps you're right,' he said. 'Listen, Russell, maybe we should put the *Cloud* through some tests before we go into space, you know, put the *Cloud* through its paces. Will you come into space if I prove its worthiness?'

'What do you have in mind?' asked Russell, knowing how devious his brother could be.

'Where would you like to go?'

Russell rubbed his brow. 'Can we leave the walls up, or do we have to fly around suspended in loose air? I agree with the professor, it feels worse than a roller coaster ride.'

'Yes,' said Trevor. 'It is a bit alarming.' He pressed a key on his laptop and the walls disappeared. 'The trouble is, I need to see where I'm going. Try sitting, you might find that feels better.'

'Does it have to be all or nothing?' said Russell, making himself comfortable. 'What I mean is— can't we at least have a visible floor to stand on, perhaps even a low wall around the sides?'

'It'll take a bit of extra programming,' said Trevor, 'but yes, I can do that. Good idea really, it'll be like standing on a ship's bridge. Now then, stop changing the subject, where do you want to go?'

'How about flying nice and easy back to the woods, so you can fix us a floor before we gallivant off some place?'

'No, no, no,' said Trevor. 'It won't take me long to fix that. Do you know what I fancy?'

Russell shook his head. 'I'm not sure I want to know. How about cruising home and dropping me off there, then you can test it all you want. In fact, you can drop me off here.'

'I've always fancied a trip under the ocean,' said Trevor, ignoring his brother. 'This'll be great, make yourself comfortable and enjoy the ride. A dip under water will soon reveal how air tight the *Cloud* is.' A twitch of his right-hand joystick sent the *Cloud* catapulting into the sky. People, cars, trees and houses shrunk to ant size. Within seconds, the whole of London town shrivelled into the surrounding countryside. Another twitch sent the *Cloud* hurtling forward, breaking the sound barrier ten times in rapid succession.

Russell dug his fingers into the armrests and stared wide-eyed. He slammed his eyes shut and braced every muscle until he felt faint. Suddenly, he realised something was amiss. 'I can't feel any movement,' he said through clenched teeth. With a jolt, he realised why and relaxed. 'We're not moving at all, are we? You're running a film and we're still sitting on the ground; ha, ha! Good one, you had me going there.'

With a cheeky smile, Trevor turned to face his brother. 'You can't feel movement because it's compensated for. There's a false gravity in here, a pseudo-gravity. We're travelling at about twelve thousand kilometres per hour, which means we'll be over the Pacific Ocean in an hour or so.'

'Hmm,' said Russell, not fully convinced. 'But then again, there's no sensation of movement in a high-flying aeroplane either.' He peeked between his feet to the ground far below. 'Must be the

same view from a hang-glider or parachute. Who knows, with time I might get used to it, I might even find it enjoyable. One hour just gives us time to eat something.'

'We're higher than air traffic so we shouldn't bump into anything, but even so, I'd better keep an eye on things here, so why don't you make us some sandwiches and bring them back here?'

Russell jumped up, swaggered bravely to the door and entered the hall beyond. Sighing with relief, he leaned his back against the closed door and waited while his limbs stopped shaking. Everything appeared normal away from the control room, and if he didn't know better, he could easily imagine they were sitting quietly on the ground.

A wide flight of stairs led down to the basement, another led up to his own apartment, but Russell crossed the hall, entered Trevor's apartment and made straight for the kitchen. He glanced through the window and frowned at the clear blue sky.

Russell knew the window was only a monitor, and the view a projection, but the effect was so lifelike he couldn't tell the difference between that and the real thing. He picked up a remote control and flicked a few buttons, swapping the sky for an image of Trevor's woods at home. Nodding in satisfaction, he found it practically impossible to believe they were shooting across the sky at goodness knows what speed.

Not wanting to hurry back, he sat on a high stool and looked around Trevor's kitchen. The words "scientifically functional" crossed his mind. It had taken almost five months to fit out the *Cloud*, and Trevor's choice of furnishing made his apartment stark and cold. In Russell's own apartment on the floor above, he'd used warm wood, curved edges, and soft comfy furniture.

He found a large tray and buried it under food. Sandwiches filled with an oozing assortment of cheese, pickle, sliced meat, and peanut butter soon wobbled precariously. Two steaming mugs of tea stood beside the biscuit barrel, and with mild persuasion, he found room for a milk jug, sugar bowl and jam pot.

Russell carried his precious load back to the control room. Nothing had changed except the view beneath them—dark blue sea covered the entire panorama.

'Strange,' said Trevor, rubbing his hands with delight at the sight of food.

'What's strange?'

Trevor grabbed a sandwich and pressed half in his mouth. Without chewing, he swallowed. 'I haven't seen a cloud. We've travelled halfway across the world and I haven't seen a single cloud.'

'Is that the Pacific below us?' asked Russell. 'I was only away a half hour, are we here already?'

'Yes. I got bored so I put my foot down. Did you hear what I said about the clouds?'

'Must be some truth with what the professor told us. This weird weather is all they're talking about on the radio. They're saying amateur astronomers have found a glistening object in the outer atmosphere which looks like a splinter of glass, and they're tying the two phenomena together.'

'A splinter of glass?' said Trevor, taking the next sandwich on the pile. This time, he chewed thoughtfully. 'Hmm, means they've discovered the aliens.'

'Yeah, more than one group of freaks are predicting death and annihilation at the mercy of aliens. But the world's governments refute every such speculation. The official story is that the Chinese are building a space telescope out there, and the Chinese won't admit it—or deny it.' Russell shrugged. 'I haven't given it much thought really. At the moment, I'm more worried about what you're planning to do. This *Cloud* invention of yours isn't going to short-circuit in water, is it, or burst like a bubble?'

'We'll see,' said Trevor, grinning at his brother's misgivings. 'Let's go down and hover above the surface while we finish our tea and watch the sun rise.'

The ocean expanded and rushed towards them at horrendous speed. Trevor brought the *Cloud* to a standstill ten metres above the surface. 'There. Perfect timing,' he said, and took another sandwich.

They had left England in the evening, but on this side of the planet the early morning sun was hidden below the horizon, making everything appear navy blue and dull. Russell spotted an island in the semi-dark, nothing more than a low bump on the horizon with a few palm trees sprouting here and there. He took another sandwich from the depleting pile, wrapped his left hand around the warm tea mug, and leaned back in his chair.

Captivated by the scene, the two brothers finished their breakfast in silence. The sun peeked over the horizon, sending red light trailing towards them. Soon, the cloudless horizon blazed in hues of orange and yellow, brightening the morning sky. Then the sun rose rapidly, and a sudden breeze ruffled the sea surface.

'I know you're in a hurry to dive,' said Russell, breaking the spell, 'but let's take it easy, eh?'

'The sea isn't very deep just here,' said Trevor, nodding, 'so we'll drop in slow and easy.'

They moved downwards, pushing aside the watery surface, exposing the marine world in all its glory. The sea level rose, lapping against invisible walls, then slid over their heads, veiling the world of fresh air. It appeared as if nothing separated them from the sea, and despite Trevor's reassurance the walls were infinitely strong, Russell shuddered at the thought of them caving in.

They sank to a depth of ten metres and stopped one metre above the sandy bottom. The sunlight was strong at this depth, and white sand glistened brightly. The clean seawater, as clear as fresh air, allowed them to spot fish a hundred metres away. Beyond that, everything turned blue and opaque. Above them, they could see the rippled sea surface, breaking the sun's rays into endless shimmering cascades.

'What about air?' asked Russell. 'We're not going to suffocate, are we?'

Trevor chuckled. 'Dear brother. The floor below us is filled with machinery, gadgets, batteries, workshop, garage, and food stores. Part of the junk down there is our life support system.'

'How does it work?'

'My word,' said Trevor, 'you are worried. To put it simply, we split water molecules into hydrogen gas and oxygen gas. It's a simple process of electrolysis. The poisonous carbon dioxide we exhale is sieved and mixed with the hydrogen, which makes more water. There, are you happy now?'

'What happens if it conks out?'

'It won't. But if it does, we've plenty of oxygen in gas cylinders.'

Trevor sniffed the air, then took a deep breath. 'Well, it seems all right at the moment. Come on, let's explore.'

For quarter of an hour, they skimmed over fine smooth sand, heading towards the island. They reached a coral bank and spent a while watching colourful fish swim amongst gently swaying sea-plants and magnificent sea anemone. Then, turning away from the coral, they swung left and headed towards the open sea. Without warning, the endless plain of sand came to an abrupt end and an underwater cliff edge loomed before them. As the black abyss opened, the brothers drew deep breaths and grasped firmly onto their chairs.

Trevor fumbled with a pile of paper on his desk and dragged a sea map to the top. 'According to this,' he said, pointing with a shaky finger, 'this gulf goes down to a depth of approximately ten kilometres.'

'Well, we can't go down there, so let's get out of it,' said Russell.

Trevor spun in his office chair to face Russell and slapped his hands on his knees, all traces of fright replaced by eyes that gleamed. 'I'd like to try. It'll be a proper test.'

'Won't the water pressure crush us to death? And anyway, how can you force this gigantic air bubble to go down?'

'Let's submerge to a depth of one hundred metres and see what happens,' said Trevor, turning back to his joysticks and ignoring his brother's groan.

Smoothly, rapidly, the powder blue surface water dimmed to a murky indigo. At one hundred metres, the sun's distant rays still glistened faintly. 'The pressure outside is now about ten atmospheres,' said Trevor. 'This is peanuts. Let's try one thousand metres.'

As they sank deeper, all sunlight faded out and their surroundings grew darker until pitch-blackness reigned, a big bubble lit by subdued lighting, containing two fragile humans who dared to challenge the crushing weight of the deepest ocean.

Trevor turned off their lights and turned on the searchlights. Attracted by the lights, hundreds of colourful fish escorted the *Cloud*, matching their speed with ease.

'There is a force working against us,' said Trevor, 'trying to push us to the surface. This force represents an energy that the *Cloud* captures and utilises. In effect, the upward force is neutralised, and all I have to do is add a little energy to tip the balance. It's the same with the pressure, the more it wants to crush us, the more power we have to resist it. Now let's stop messing about and give it a serious test...'

They moved through a silent world of darkness, alone now as they slid into deeper water. Nothing could be seen beyond the floodlight's radiance, making it impossible to discern movement. There was no stir, no sound of any kind. Only a display of ever-ascending digits on Trevor's computer gave evidence of their never-ending descent into the pressing, awesome, depths.

The grandfather clock ticked unconcerned, counting out the seconds as the anxious brothers glared into the gulf below. Even with the floodlights, the illusion of motionlessness was preserved. There was nothing in the water to mark their progress. They might have been floating in the black void of space.

'There it is,' pointed Russell, blinking into the haze and smiling with relief. A rugged landscape of sharp stones manifested, devoid of life and ghostly. Trevor brought them to a stop three metres above a high rock.

'Here we are,' said Trevor. 'Nine thousand, eight hundred and forty-two metres. Wow, this is fantastic, nobody else has ever been this deep before. We're pioneers. Heroes. And you're remarkably brave, my dear brother, to participate on such a daring expedition.'

'But you told me it was totally safe,' said Russell, 'are you now telling me there's an element of danger?'

'Who can tell? All my calculations tell me there's no danger—but calculations are only as accurate as the data you put into them. Looks like I'm right though, doesn't it? And this is nothing, according to my calculations this wonderful *Cloud* is totally indestructible.'

Russell wondered how his otherwise timid brother could sit there so calmly. 'You've been so occupied with your calculations that you haven't had time to be nervous,' he said. 'Earlier today I had acrophobia, and now I've got claustrophobia. These extremes of height and confinement test my panic tolerance to the limit. Aren't you worried at all?'

'Like sitting in a fish bowl, isn't it?' said Trevor. 'With us on the inside. Actually, we're not looking through glass, we're looking at a holographic projection, just like the windows in our apartments.'

Concentrate as he may, Russell found it impossible to tell where air ended and water began. 'You're exhausted,' he said after a moment. 'You've started blabbering. How about taking us out

of here so we can get some sleep? This isn't much to look at, is it? Must be what it looks like on the moon—except a bit wetter.'

'You go and lay down,' said Trevor. 'I'd like to hang about here a while, I'd like to test the life support system properly. Go on, we're quite safe. When I'm content everything is working satisfactory I'll grab a doze.'

Russell yawned, stretched his joints until they creaked, and left the eerie room. To allow his mind time to unwind and slow down, he stopped often on the broad, thick-carpeted stairway. He admired the paintings hanging there—he smiled, most of them were "borrowed" from their parent's stately house. On the top landing, he patted a full-size statue of Happy Buddha on his bald head. The Happy Buddha always cheered his mood. He entered his apartment, sniffed the clean air and sighed with satisfaction. He felt warm, relaxed, and already lost in a dream. He stretched out on the sofa and fell fast asleep.

In his control room, Trevor pushed his chair back, raised his feet to the desktop, and snored.

As the two brothers slept, the *Cloud* sat effortlessly on the ocean bed, almost ten thousand metres below the surface with its life support systems working perfectly, and its shell of indestructible energy operating with an automated intelligence all of its own.

~*~

The aroma of egg and bacon roused Trevor from sleep. Wincing with pain, he lifted his stiff legs from the desk and sat up. He checked the computer for problems, found none, groaned to his feet, and limped in search of the food.

'Ah! There you are. Good morning, dear brother,' said Russell as he adjusted the finishing touches to the breakfast table. 'Just like being at home, isn't it. Who would think we were ten thousand metres under the sea? Tea?'

'It feels like I haven't eaten for a week,' complained Trevor. 'What have you got there?'

'I've got plenty of food, so tuck in.'

Trevor's cosy little clearing in the woods was framed in the windows, vivid and alive. 'It's easy to imagine we're still at home,' said Russell. 'I don't know how you've done it, but all this is fantastic.'

'Thank you,' mumbled Trevor, his mouth full of bacon and sausage. 'It's all done with mirrors, isn't that what they say?'

'You're not trying to trick me, are you? You haven't flown us home in the night, have you?'

'I haven't done anything except sleep all night. No, we're still submerged, with one thousand atmospheres trying to squeeze the life out of us.'

'Hmm! Don't you think we should leave while we're still alive?' said Russell. He broke two eggs into the frying pan and tossed bread in the toaster.

Their knives and forks flashed until Trevor pushed his half-eaten breakfast away and sighed. 'Do you remember what you said about it looking like the surface of the moon out there?'

'Yes, I remember saying that.'

'Well, I've finished my tests,' said Trevor, fingering a crust of toast, 'and I've done some calculations and it shouldn't be a problem.'

'What?' asked Russell, afraid he knew the answer.

'Let's go to the moon.'

Russell's knife and fork hung suspended above his plate. 'Have we time to finish breakfast?'

'Good! You finish off and I'll get things ready in the control room.'

'You want to have a look at that alien, don't you?' said Russell, utensils still poised.

'It wouldn't hurt to have a peek. We'll keep our distance and remain invisible.'

Russell laid his knife and fork on the table and looked at his brother. 'Actually, I've been thinking along the same lines and I'm starting to feel quite safe in the *Cloud*. Take us to the moon if that's what you wish. On the way back we can check out the aliens. Just give me time to finish my breakfast.'

Trevor crushed his serviette and threw it onto the table. He hurried out of the room, leaving his brother to finish eating and tidy away.

~*~

Satisfied his apartment was clean and tidy, Russell made his way down to the control room. Unlike his brother, he didn't hurry; he shared the same pioneering enthusiasm but preferred to let life take its own course, ride on the current, and solve problems as they occurred. He settled into his office chair in the control room and gazed outside. Nothing had changed. Their lights exposed a grey and featureless landscape, and an oppressive blackness, dense as black ink, hung above them.

'Are you ready?' asked Trevor.

'Let's get out of here before I turn bananas. I sincerely hope I never have to see this place again. Just look at that emptiness above us, no stars, no moon, and no snug layer of cloud. Keep your speed down, we don't want our wake to kill or hurt some plant or animal on the way up.'

Trevor twiddled his control levers and the *Cloud* eased away from the sea bed.

'We won't get the bends or anything like that, will we?' asked Russell.

'No, the pressure in here is always the same no matter what. Relax and enjoy the ride.'

The brothers watched spellbound as fish began to appear, few at first without much colour, but increasing in number and size as they neared the surface. Then sunlight began to filter through, and the number of fish dwindled and disappeared. Accelerating the *Cloud* through the last few metres of water, they burst through the surface into brilliant sunshine and clear blue skies.

'Same old weather,' observed Russell. 'Not a cloud in sight.'

The *Cloud* rose rapidly, and the brothers watched in silence as the horizon bent. The sky turned indigo, then violet, then black. Not blackness like the ocean bed, not even the blackness of a clear night where the stars are no more than glimmering pinpricks. High above the atmosphere, the brothers were surrounded by a billion distant suns and galaxies, intense, vivid and welcoming.

'Wow,' whispered Russell. 'I thought space was supposed to be empty, but just look at all those stars. And look at the world below us. It seems so calm, so peaceful. How small each person's troubles are when you see the planet from this distance.'

'How philosophical you've become all of a sudden,' said Trevor, eyes as glassy as his brother's. 'But pull yourself together and look out for the moon.'

'Don't you know where the moon is?' asked Russell, instinctively looking up. 'Don't you know the direction?'

'I haven't plotted in any co-ordinates if that's what you mean. As soon as I see it, I'll steer towards it. Ah! There it is, rising behind the earth.'

The half moon crept out of hiding, clearer and brighter than the boys could ever imagine.

'How long will it take us to get there?' said Russell. 'Doesn't it take several days?'

'Well, if we travel at the speed of light it will take us less than two seconds. But I don't think we're in that much of a hurry, are we?'

As Trevor spoke, he manoeuvred the *Cloud* around the earth until the moon was directly in front. With firm pressure, he pressed his right-hand joystick forward. Ahead, the moon grew in size like a balloon being pumped with air, and behind them, the earth shrunk, as if punctured.

'From the earth to the moon,' said Trevor, glancing at the grandfather clock, 'in five minutes and twenty seconds. That's not bad, is it? Do you think we can find the spot where Neil

Armstrong took "one small step"? It won't be easy to find, they only left a flag and a pile of rubbish.'

'Seems every major nation on Earth has all sorts of contraptions crawling over the moon these days,' said Russell. 'Let's forget about them and take a look at the dark side.'

'There is no dark side. There is a near side and a far side, and the near side is always facing Earth, but the far side has as much sunlight as any other part of the moon.'

'I didn't know that. Very well then, let's have a look at the far side.'

They skimmed across the moon's smooth plains, only rising at the poles to fly over highland craters. The whole surface was covered in a thick layer of fine dark dust and rocky debris.

'What a peculiar sensation,' said Russell. 'Here we are, gliding across the moon with apparently nothing more than our reclining chairs beneath us, dressed in our tee-shirts, and behaving as if it was the most natural thing in the world.'

'Yes,' said Trevor, a quake in his voice. 'Were getting used to it, aren't we? Who would have thought it possible?'

Russell hugged himself and doubted his legs would carry him if he tried to stand. Even his vocal chords had trouble functioning in his knotted throat. He swallowed twice before they responded. 'The dust is a lot darker than I expected,' he said, hoping his mundane comment would help him relax. 'From Earth, it looks silvery grey, but up this close it's almost as dark as charcoal.'

'The moon reflects the sun's rays because it's surface is mostly as flat as a pancake. Don't forget, there's no atmosphere or weather here, so there's nothing to disturb the dust; except when a meteor impacts—which causes the dust in the first place.'

'Not much different from the bottom of the sea, is it?' said Russell. 'Just as dreary. Nothing but grey dust, boulders and craters. Take a look at the earth though, what a beautiful sight—home sweet home.'

Trevor brought them to a standstill facing Mother Earth.

'Get a bit closer,' said Russell. 'There's something strange about the old girl.'

'Oh I don't know.' Trevor leaned back in his chair, head flopped to one side. 'The sea is blue, the land is patchy green and brown. Ice on both poles and the highest mountains, what's strange about that?'

'There aren't any clouds. Or at least, not many. Too few, far too few.'

'Yes, that's true,' agreed Trevor. 'Look how they whirl towards one point. Shall we move closer and take a look?'

'Yes, let's. That's probably where the aliens are siphoning off our water vapour. You take us closer, I'll fetch my camera.'

Trevor gazed at his brother a moment and let his shoulders slump forward. 'I wonder if we should get mixed up in this,' he said. 'Let's sneak back and tell the professor what we've seen.'

'Oh no you don't,' said Russell. 'We haven't seen anything yet. Let's take a closer look.'

'But it might be dangerous.'

'Dear brother, what are you worried about? Haven't you demonstrated the wonders of your machine? It's indestructible. You've managed to persuade me into coming along on your "tests", now let's do something useful. Aren't you curious? If you want to sneak somewhere, then sneak alongside that alien spaceship and see what's going on. The least we can do is give an accurate report to the professor and take some decent photographs.'

Trevor drummed his fingers and puffed air through his nostrils. He pulled open a drawer and lifted out a pair of binoculars. He peered into the distance, adjusted the lenses, and tossed the useless binoculars onto his desk. 'There is an element of uncertainty. How advanced are these aliens? To them, the *Cloud* might be as primitive as our clockwork grandfather clock...'

'The lost space shuttle *Wayfarer* might have seemed primitive, but surely the *Cloud* is more advanced than that?'

'In theory, the *Cloud* is indestructible. However, the rules, ideas, principles, and techniques that apply to the *Cloud* may not necessarily be relevant to a far superior intelligence.'

'When you talk like that,' said Russell, 'you make me nervous. But we have to take a chance. They won't expect anything to creep up on them from outer space. Move in slowly and keep your finger on the reverse button.'

Trevor bit his lip and glanced at Russell to see if he was serious. 'Oh all right,' he said. 'But at the first sign of trouble, we leave, and leave fast.' With taut fingers, he steered the *Cloud* towards Earth, manoeuvring them to the spot where the clouds were caught up in a swirling spiral.

'Look at that,' said Russell, pointing to a glistening crystal orbiting Earth. He picked up the binoculars and held them to his eyes. 'It looks like an iceberg—must be the size of Mount Everest. That's what they're doing with our water—siphoning it off and storing it in a huge iceberg.'

'Probably collecting it here ready for transport,' said Trevor. 'Let's leave.'

'Hang on a moment. Take us closer. There's something moving across the iceberg, perhaps it's the alien spaceship.'

Excited by the prospect of actually seeing an alien spaceship, Trevor swallowed his concern and edged closer. From the spaceship's rear, a vapour filament reached down into Earth's atmosphere like a long straw. And from the spaceship's side, fine ice crystals curled down to the iceberg like a moth larva spinning a cocoon.

'Let me take some pictures before we go any closer,' said Russell.

'Closer? Aren't we close enough?'

'They obviously don't know we're here, so get as close as you can and I'll take some close-ups.'

After a good scratch on the back of his neck, Trevor sighed deeply and guided the *Cloud* alongside the alien spaceship, tagging along as it drifted around the ice mountain.

'They must be asleep in there,' said Trevor, tightening his jaw muscles. 'Surely their instruments are sensitive enough to detect us.'

'They're not expecting something like the *Cloud*,' said Russell. 'They're not bothering with a lookout. Won't the professor be excited when he sees these photographs; aren't you excited? This is the first encounter with extra-terrestrials, your name will go down in history.'

'I'm too nervous to be excited. Suppose they're hostile?'

'We're indestructible,' said Russell, snapping photographs in rapid succession. The alien spaceship incorporated two bulbous parts, one much larger than the other. Even the smaller part was four times bigger than the *Cloud*.

'The two parts are separate,' commented Trevor. 'It looks as though that large part at the back is a factory, gathering and processing moisture from the earth; while the small part is control room and living quarters. I expect the two parts can detach when necessary. Are you satisfied now? Can we get out of here?'

'Yes. Get away. Hurry,' shouted Russell.

'What's the sudden panic?' said Trevor, snatching at his joysticks, hurtling them back towards the moon.

'Look down there.'

A missile climbed laboriously away from Earth, trailing a huge plume of flame and smoke.

'So the professor has decided to blow them out of existence,' said Trevor.

'Is that missile an atom bomb?'

'Most certainly.' Trevor shook his head and clicked his tongue. 'They'll spread the iceberg over the whole universe. All that water will be lost. Such a waste, I don't know if our planet will ever recover. I think the professor is desperate now, it must be his last chance, his last hope.'

Russell covered his ears and squinted. 'Are we at a safe distance, or are we also going to be spread over the whole universe?'

'We shan't feel a thing,' assured Trevor. 'Sound doesn't travel in space and the flash will be filtered down to a level our eyes can tolerate. Here it comes—take more photographs.'

Before Russell had time to raise the camera to his eye, the missile disappeared. It simply vanished—gone—as if it had never been.

'Well I'll be damned...' said Russell.

'Just like the shuttle,' said Trevor.

'Get back over there,' said Russell. 'Let's see if we can find something.'

They dodged and flitted around the alien spaceship, but all they found was the fast diminishing trail of rocket exhaust.

'Maybe the aliens hijacked the missile and took it on board,' said Russell. 'Maybe the *Wayfarer* shuttle is on board too. Let's become visible and try talking with them. After all, we're indestructible and they can't harm us—can they?'

Trevor drummed his fingers and pursed his lips. 'I think that might be too reckless. Let's pull away and see if we can speak to the professor. I'll call him on the Zip-Linq.'

'Isn't there a good chance the aliens are clever enough to pick up the Zip-Linq's signal? That'll give us away anyway.'

'True,' admitted Trevor.

'If the aliens find they can't harm us,' said Russell, placing his hand on Trevor's forearm, 'they'll be compelled to talk to us. I say we reveal ourselves and set up a link with the professor. Let him negotiate.'

Trevor bent over his computer and typed in a command. 'I hope we're not doing something foolish,' he said. 'There, they should be able to see us now.'

A dull "pop" made the two brothers jump. Trevor typed at his computer and looked up in amazement. 'They fired an energy ball at us. Enough to punch a hole through the moon. Hasn't done us any harm at all though.' He laughed, his face aglow with triumph. 'That'll make them think again. Thought us Earthlings were a load of primeval primates. Well perhaps now they'll want to talk.'

The lights dimmed and the floor shook.

'What the heck was that...' shouted Trevor, fingers blurring across the keyboard. 'An energy drain...'

The lights died and a violent jerk threw the brothers from their chairs. Gravitation pressed them into the floor, squeezing till they gasped in agony. Air hissed from their lungs, blood trickled from their ears and noses, until, at last, they lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 5 Junkyard

I'm either dead—or I've lost the use of my senses, thought Russell. He drew a deep breath through his nose, and the stale ice-cold air sheared his nostrils like a jagged knife. If nothing else, the pain told him his senses still worked and he was alive.

He wondered where he was, floating in deathly silence and total darkness. Then he remembered, no gravity, inside the *Cloud*, Trevor's indestructible machine. It hadn't been destroyed, exactly, but it certainly wasn't working very well.

Repressing an attack of panic, he reached out for something solid. His fingers brushed against some other floating object, then it was gone.

He wiggled his toes and fingers, rubbed his sore chest and throat, shivered from top to toe, and resisted the urge to be sick.

'Okay,' he managed to whisper, sounding more optimistic than he felt. 'I'm in pretty good shape.'

A groan came from somewhere behind him.

'Trevor?' he called, with a voice somewhere between a frog's croak and a crow's squawk. 'Are you here? Are you awake?'

'Is that you, Russell? I thought I was dead... Oh, my head.'

'Are you all right? Can you move? Can you feel anything?'

'Only my aching head.'

'Good,' said Russell, 'and in case you wonder how I am, I'm okay.'

'Thank goodness.'

'But I don't know where I am, I can't feel anything, I'm just floating in the dark.'

'I'm hanging on to the leg of my desk,' said Trevor. 'I've got a torch in the drawer, give me a minute... I'm going to be sick...'

'Try and hold it,' said Russell. 'Please... Think of the mess, all those bits of carrots floating about. Relax and take a few deep breaths, it soon passes.'

Trevor clamped an ice-cold hand to his mouth and swallowed. A new wave of nausea made him gag—he swallowed harder. 'It's passing,' he said between gulps. 'What happened? I need light and I need my computer.'

Feeling his way along the desk leg, Trevor found the drawer and pulled it open. Rummaging blindly, his frozen hand found the torch. He pushed the torch's button, knocked the torch with his other hand, then rapped it against the table.

'What's wrong?' asked Russell, longing for the light.

'It doesn't work. The batteries are flat. Nothing works. I don't understand anything. Where are we? What's happened?'

'Okay! Okay! Calm down,' soothed Russell. 'Whatever you do, don't panic. Give yourself time to think—that's what you're good at.'

'A box of matches, hang on, I've a box of matches here somewhere.' Trevor groped in another drawer, found the box, and struck a match. It sputtered and glared, but the flame was weak and died out. 'There's too little oxygen in here,' he said. 'Even the match won't burn properly. I daren't strike another.'

'You don't need to strike another,' croaked Russell. 'One was enough. I'm orientated now.' He had seen, in the dull glare, which way was up and which way was down, and where he floated in relation to the walls and floor, but the chaos and devastation he observed in that short glimpse made him shake his head in denial.

Trevor also caught a glimpse of his surroundings in that brief spell of light, but instead of being upset, his considerable intellect engaged. 'Just before this happened,' he said, 'a tremendous surge of energy drained out from the *Cloud*. It seems as though the aliens have stolen our energy as easily as they are stealing water from our planet. Everything is dead in here, nothing works.'

'But you said the *Cloud* drew energy from everything,' said Russell. 'Surely it should be charging itself up again?'

'Yes, it should. I don't understand. If only I could see something...' He gave a little shout of excitement. 'I know. In my apartment somewhere I have one of those gimmicky wind-up torch radios, you know, those things that don't use proper batteries but have a little handle you turn to generate electricity.'

Exactly like swimming underwater, Russell pushed and kicked against the thin air until he bumped into a wall. 'There,' he said, feeling the knot in his stomach loosen. 'If we can find the door, it should be easy to feel our way around. Keep talking so I know where you are.'

Little by little they felt their way to the door. Hand in hand they floated across the hall and entered Trevor's apartment. Russell led the way, pushing aside airborne furniture and other jumbled objects. They found Trevor's cupboard containing his treasure trove of electronic gadgets and curiosities. Before much longer, Trevor had the torch radio in his grasp. He turned the small handle briskly and light flooded the room, blinding them both.

'Nice to see you again,' squinted Russell.

'Likewise,' said Trevor. 'Good grief. Look at the mess in here.'

'Never mind that. We can tidy up later. What do you want to do first?'

Guided by the torch, they scurried down to the basement. Trevor cast a quick glance over the fifty or so bulky batteries. Thankfully, they were dry cell, or they'd have leaked acid all over the place. He hoped the sudden discharge hadn't damaged them. 'We'll need to charge at least one battery to restore order.'

'What about oxygen? You said you had oxygen bottles. Let me hold the torch while you sort it out.'

Trevor opened a valve and the air sweetened. After a few deep breaths, he turned to the task of salvation. Taking the torch from Russell, he pointed the beam around the room. 'I have a couple of spare batteries over there, and a car generator over here, and if I mount the generator to your training bicycle...'

The difficulties of weightlessness slowed them down, but with the help of a few wooden planks, a bicycle inner tube, and half an hour of basic carpentry, they constructed a makeshift generator. Russell tied himself to the bicycle saddle, strapped his feet to the pedals, took a firm grip on the handlebars, and pedalled furiously.

'How long do I have to keep this up?'

'An hour will do just fine—for now. That should be enough for us to return things to normal. You don't need to pedal like a maniac, take it easy, save air.'

Slowing to a moderate pace, Russell pedalled until Trevor nodded and told him to stop. Trevor disconnected the empty batteries from the *Cloud* and connected the newly charged one.

'Did you feel that?' asked Trevor, head raised and listening.

Russell blinked. 'It felt like the *Cloud* has been holding its breath and suddenly sighed.'

'Yes, that's what I thought, like it was relieved of a burden—yes, something like that. Whatever it was, it felt good. Let's get back to the control room and see if the computer still works. I have a spare if it doesn't, come on, you lead the way.'

The computer and joysticks floated in a jumble, anchored together by thin control wires. He pressed the computer's start button and smiled as the screen glimmered into life. 'Okay,' he said, as soon as the operating system finished booting. 'First of all, let's get some gravity back in here, I'll try to do it gently, but just in case, get ready for a bump.'

Floating objects started drifting towards the floor. Trevor held the computer with one hand and gathered in the joysticks with the other. He bumped onto the floor on his left hip, more worried about saving his computer than himself.

Russell landed on his feet, caught the desk with his free hand, and placed it back in its old spot. He wound up the torch-radio and left it on the floor. The grandfather clock landed on its side and the two reclining chairs ended on their backs. He stood them all in place and sat himself down to let his own insides untangle.

Trevor wobbled to his feet and set the computer down on his desk, he placed one joystick on either side and dragged his chair closer to the desk. 'There. That feels better,' he said, bent over his keyboard. 'Now the lights... And now the air...'

'What about heating?' asked Russell, rubbing his hands and blowing on his fingers.

'No need for that. We'll soon be warm—too warm. The vacuum of space is a perfect insulator, and our own body temperature will soon make it stifling hot in here. We'll need cooling, not heating.'

'How long will the battery last with all this stuff running?'

'Not long I'm afraid. One whole day maybe—if we don't consume any more power than right now. Looks like you'll be getting plenty of exercise on your bike. Give me a few minutes to check the status of things on my computer, and I'll be able to tell you more.'

Chewing his bottom lip and grunting at odd intervals, Trevor tapped his keys, read information, and searched the *Cloud* for damage. There were many shortcomings in his program, it told him practically nothing. He'd left no provision for warnings or alarms, or a log to store them.

'Well, this is the situation,' he said at last, fighting the urge to cry. 'First they tried to destroy us with an energy bomb, and when that didn't work they sucked all the energy out of us. I'm sorry, but that possibility never occurred to me. The *Cloud* is designed to soak in energy like a sponge, but they squeezed it all out.'

'All of it?'

'Yes, every scrap: kinetic, potential and chemical. From anything producing or storing energy.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' said Russell, scratching his head, 'but it sounds serious.'

Trevor sunk his head and turned away. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have dragged you into this.'

'Hey now, brother. What kind of talk is this? It was my idea to challenge the aliens. Buck your spirits up and think optimistically. Tell me something positive.'

Trevor nodded and grinned. The grandfather clock had been made by one of their distant ancestors in the late eighteen hundreds and was very advanced for its time. The escapement was mounted on gimbals to maintain a level position and the pendulum automatically compensated for changes in temperature. It ticked reassuringly. 'Fortunately,' said Trevor, 'I have a little joker up my sleeve. Inside the grandfather clock is a huge spring connected to a piezoelectric crystal. In case of power failure, I utilise the spring and crystal as a backup energy source.'

'A good old fashion clockwork spring?'

'Yes. The energy in the spring is mechanical and they couldn't steal that. Otherwise, the *Cloud's* whole membrane structure would have collapsed.'

'You're a genius,' said Russell, and patted his brother on the shoulder. 'Who would have thought? Cogs and a spring saved the day.'

'If I'd been quicker, I could have stopped the energy drain from happening at all, but I just can't type that fast.'

'Well, never mind,' said Russell, resting his hand on his brother's shoulder. 'We're still alive. A bit shaken, but a lot wiser. You can fix the bugs when we get back to Earth, and it won't take us long to straighten out the furniture and get things tidy.'

Trevor dropped his face again, avoiding his brother's eyes. 'Well, I'm sorry, Russell, but I don't think the earth is below us anymore.'

They stared at each other in silence while the magnitude of Trevor's words sank in.

'Do you mean we've also "disappeared"?'

'Yeah, it looks that way. And wherever we are, there is practically no free energy out there, only enough to keep the shield active.'

Russell leaned back into his chair and covered his face with his hands. 'That isn't what I wanted to hear,' he mumbled.

'Shall we take a look outside?' asked Trevor.

Without waiting for an answer, he pressed a computer key and the walls vanished. The two brothers stared in disbelief. Earth was gone, the alien spaceship and iceberg were gone, the moon was gone, and only a few unconvincing stars smouldered feebly in the remote distance.

'Where are we?' whispered Russell.

Trevor shrugged. 'Lost in space.'

Russell stared at the distant stars and the pit of his stomach twisted into a knot, and like a lost child, all he wanted at that moment was to go home. 'This is worse than the ocean bed,' he said, squinting in every direction. 'But we're not the only ones. Take a look around.'

Scattered about them, barely visible in the almost complete darkness, were hundreds of dead spaceships—ruined vessels of every imaginable shape and size.

'It looks like a junkyard,' said Russell.

'Yes,' agreed Trevor. 'I'm afraid it looks like we've been dumped at the edge of the universe—in an outer-space junkyard.'

CHAPTER 6 Where Are We?

'Before we do anything,' said Trevor, busy gathering scattered books and sheets of paper, 'let's make ourselves comfortable. We can't be as comfortable as we were on the ocean bed, because we now have to conserve energy. But we can tidy our apartments, make the beds, and check our supplies. We'll probably need to ration our food.'

Leaving his brother to tidy the control room, Russell headed to his own apartment. Strewn ornaments blocked his way on the stairs and landings so he set them in order as he passed. He sat Napoleon's bust back on his pedestal, re-hung the smiling Mona Lisa, and re-arranged the silk roses that reminded him of his dear old granny's cottage garden. On the top landing he rolled the heavy stone statue of Happy Buddha back into his corner, and with a merry chuckle, patted him on his bald head – Happy Buddha's cheerful face always made him chuckle.

It looked as though a hurricane had blown through his apartment, with the kitchen hit hardest. Cupboards and drawers gaped open and the fridge door swung on its hinges. Eggs, jam, vegetables, flour, ketchup, crockery, cutlery, pots and pans; everything was spread across the ceiling, floor and walls in a slimy mess.

'Give a little whistle!' said Russell, rolling up his shirt sleeves and filling a bucket with cold water. He didn't think the situation was so bad, they were alive and well, that was the main thing. But if they were going to be stuck out here for a day or two, he did think a decent energy supply would make life more pleasant.

The lounge was easier to set straight—but no quicker. One long wall was covered floor to ceiling with bookshelves, and Russell spent almost three hours replacing and re-categorising his books. He slid the last book in place and stood back to admire his collection. Some were old

classics, some were childhood favourites, but most were modern works of fiction, all waiting to be read.

He whisked through the two bedrooms and dojo, and returned to the kitchen with his stomach begging for food. He salvaged a hotchpotch of unsavoury fodder and loaded a tray. Expecting his brother had finished tidying his own sparsely furnished apartment, he made straight for the control room.

'Take a look outside,' said Trevor, without turning from his computer or noticing the food.

Russell glanced and almost dropped the tray.

Two spindly creatures dressed in light spacesuits clung to the outside of the invisible wall. Each creature had four legs and two arms, and with a rude awakening, Russell remembered his vision. These creatures were the same shape and size as the insect that wanted to eat him, and he realised his nightmare vision had been a prophetic warning.

'Enough to make you swear, isn't it?' said Trevor, typing furiously. 'But don't worry. I don't know what kind of tools they're using—a can opener for all I care—they can't get in. They can try until their green faces turn pink, or get a double hernia from the effort, or rot with old age; nothing will help, they simply can't get in.'

'You're worried,' said Russell, forcing himself to stand nose-to-nose with the nearest creature. 'And I think they're using something better than a can opener. Looks more like a blowtorch to me.'

'It won't help them.'

'They look like some sort of giant insect.' Russell waved his hand in front of the insect's face. 'They obviously don't realise we can see them.'

'Obviously not.'

'Perhaps we should invite them in for a cup of tea.'

Trevor shot a glance at his brother. 'Don't make me laugh, I'm trying to concentrate. How can you stand so close to those creepy-crawlies? Don't they make your skin crawl?'

'Yes, and I have a horrible nasty feeling about them. I think we're going to need all our cunning if we're to survive against these fellows.'

'Get away from there if it makes you nervous.'

Russell pushed his nose closer, not stopping until it touched the invisible wall. 'I'm standing so close because I have a fear I need to overcome.'

'Since you are that close, what do they look like?'

'Apart from a green face like you said, I can't see them properly. They're wearing a spacesuit.' He thought a moment, remembering his dream. 'But I know what they are, they're a giant species of Mantis.' He shuddered, but wouldn't let himself turn away. 'They've got nimble little claws. It looks like the other Mantis is fiddling with some sort of measuring instrument.'

'Mantis, eh? insect eaters, or by the size of these, meat eaters. Intelligent too.' He followed the other Mantis while it studied the face of its instrument. 'They're examining us at the moment; analysing and studying the *Cloud's* structure. We must pose quite a problem.'

'If that's all they're doing, why are you worried?'

Trevor's eyes never left his computer screen. He read a newly written page of program, clicked his tongue, corrected a line of code, and carried on writing. With most of his mind engrossed in his work, he said: 'I'm worried they'll try that energy draining trick again. To make us safe, I need to write this new piece of program and I don't know how much time I've got.'

'Then I shall leave you in peace,' said Russell. 'Is there anything you need? Try to eat something.'

'Go and pedal. The last thing we need now is a flat battery.'

~*~

Two hours passed before Russell strolled back into the control room. His forehead glistened with sweat, and drops of perspiration ran down his neck and soaked into a towel draped there.

Trevor lounged with his feet on the desk and a leg of cold chicken in his hands. 'They gave up and went away,' he said. He threw the empty bone onto the tray and licked his fingers. 'I've only this minute finished at the computer. The new program should be okay, but we won't know for sure until they try something. Unfortunately, I can't test it.' He pushed the tray towards Russell. 'Here, tuck in.'

Russell sat, dabbed his brow with the towel and looked out into space. 'Well, I'm glad we're safe, but what do we do when the food runs out? Can't you simply make us invisible and take us somewhere else?'

Pursing his lips, Trevor hesitated before answering. 'There's something I need to explain. I'll put it gently.' He drew a breath. 'There is nowhere else.'

'Nowhere?'

'If we head towards those distant stars over there, and travel at the speed of light, and grow to be one hundred years old, the stars would seem just as far away.'

'Can't we fly faster? After all, it didn't take us long to get here.'

Trevor screwed his eyes shut and concentrated. 'Dear Russell,' he said, opening his eyes and studying his fingernails, 'of course, you're right. Evidently, it is possible to fly faster than light. At the moment, I don't know how. If I had enough time though, I'm sure I could work it out.'

'Oh, you'll come up with something,' said Russell, patting his brother's back. 'As for food, perhaps we can capture one of those green alien bugs and eat them. And who knows, perhaps they fart oxygen.'

'Nothing would surprise me,' chuckled Trevor.

Russell helped himself to a cheese sandwich, and waved it towards the junkyard outside. 'Do you think those other spacecraft suffered the same fate as us?'

'Incredible as it seems, yes.'

'Perhaps we can find food and oxygen on some of those?'

'Yes, I've thought of that too. We have air for at least a year, so that's no immediate problem. We've plenty of water too, but we desperately need food and a stable energy supply.'

'Have we any spacesuits?' asked Russell. 'Can we explore?'

'Russell, my dear young brother, I never dreamed we would find ourselves in a situation like this. I have never even considered the possibility of needing a spacesuit. I'm sorry.'

'Okay,' said Russell, swallowing disappointment along with his sandwich. 'I'll stop asking questions and start working on answers.'

~*~

Three Mantis returned, carrying between them a machine similar to a pneumatic drill. The drill hammered at the *Cloud* for over an hour, moving at regular intervals, seeking a weak spot.

'Why are they doing that?' asked Russell, as the insects started drilling in yet another position. 'Isn't a forcefield equally strong everywhere?'

'The *Cloud's* shield isn't really a forcefield,' explained Trevor. 'It's a living organism that tightens its muscles when and where necessary. It's a wall, a shell, a self-adjusting, bullet-proof coat of armour. It's all there is between us and them; it's all there is between us and the ocean, or between us and the vacuum of space.'

'So they can't break in then?'

'Certainly not with that toothpick they're using at the moment. Mind you, it's a powerful tool, and it's using an awful amount of energy. I wonder where they get it from?'

'They steal it,' said Russell. 'Can't we pinch some of it back?'

'No. Like I said, the shield absorbs the energy and uses it all in self-defence. There,' he said, shoulders sinking as he relaxed, 'looks like they've given up.'

Without visible means of propulsion, the Mantis drifted back to their shuttle and disappeared inside. Their shuttle was smaller than the *Cloud*, and shaped like a dumpy sausage. It had a dull olive-green sheen, reminiscent of mould.

The brothers watched; Trevor with a stiff frown and cold sweaty palms, Russell with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. Nothing happened for five long minutes, then a small hatch opened in the shuttle and a cannon snout poked out.

'Uh oh!' said Russell. 'Here comes a broadside. Either get out of here or...'

They heard the little "pop" sound again.

'That was it!' shouted Trevor, jumping to his feet and laughing. 'My program worked! We're safe! The suckers tried to suck the life out of us again, but they didn't suck-ceed.'

Russell's smile erupted into laughter and he clapped his brother's back. 'They've met their match then, ha, ha! Poor creatures, can you picture them scratching their craniums.' His laughter weakened and a glimmer of questioning hope shone from his eyes. 'So this mean we're safe now, we can breath easy? They can't harm us in any way—can they?'

The laughter died. Trevor dropped back into his chair and sighed. 'Yes, we're safe from them, but how long can we last without food?'

The Mantis's cannon drew in, the little hatch closed, and their shuttle turned away and shot off. Surprised by the sudden move, Trevor fumbled with his joysticks and followed.

The *Cloud* caught up with the alien shuttle and shot past.

'Arghh... I'm so clumsy with these joysticks,' growled Trevor.

'Relax,' said Russell. 'You're doing fine.'

The Mantis shuttle held its course for forty-five minutes. A tiny dot of light appeared ahead and the shuttle slowed. The dot grew into a pale-green sphere, large enough to house a cathedral. It bristled with antennae and dishes. The shuttle docked against its side.

'That's where they live,' muttered Trevor, holding the *Cloud* at a good distance. 'A tiny artificial planet. Good grief, what a cold and dreary outpost.'

'They must be pretty bored,' said Russell.

'Well, we've given them an interesting puzzle to solve, that'll make a change for them.'

'Yes,' mused Russell, scratching his head. 'The trouble is, they won't leave us alone until they've solved it. Can they solve it?'

'Who knows? Wait and see, they won't give up, they'll be back.'

'Perhaps we should befriend them,' beamed Russell, pleased with his simple idea. 'After all, it's stalemate. We can't hurt them, and they can't hurt us. Surely we can be friends, keep each other company...' He noticed Trevor's sullen face. 'Things aren't looking too bright for us, are they.'

'Well, we've nothing to worry about at the moment. We've got food for the time being, water, air, gravity, warmth... I'm tired. Let's go to bed. I always think better in the mornings.'

~*~

Russell snuggled the duvet under his chin and took three deep breaths. He concentrated on physical perceptions and became aware of his weight against the soft mattress. His hands and brow tingled, and, as he concentrated, the wonderful sensation spread to the rest of his body, filling him with calm. Within seconds, consciousness faded and he slept untroubled for nine hours.

Without Russell's meditation techniques, Trevor's mind screamed a hundred different messages, and each message craved his immediate attention. He tossed and turned, his mind and body rebelling against sleep. After drowsing for two hours, he woke with a pounding headache.

He swallowed two aspirins and groped his way to the control room. 'This is the only place to be,' he rasped, and slumped into his chair. With bloodshot eyes, he stole a glance at the alien's sphere. All was quiet, nothing threatened. He lifted his feet to the desk, leaned back into his chair, and slept for another five hours.

Russell breezed into the control room carrying a large tray of sandwiches and two giant mugs of black, sweet tea.

'My word,' said Trevor, tearing his hungry eyes away from the tray and up at his brother. 'You do look fit and healthy. How can you sleep with all this going on?'

'You've been snoring your head off too,' said Russell, equally surprised at his brother's bright state. 'Eat, and enjoy. The bread isn't as fresh as it could be, and the tea is stone cold. All we have left after this are a few soup packets...then we start eating each other.' He took a sandwich from the pile and grinned. 'Unless you've come up with a solution.'

'Well, we won't find a solution by sitting here stuffing our chubby little faces until the pantry's empty,' said Trevor, feigning a pout. 'But on the other hand, we might think better on a full stomach.' With which he took another sandwich and pressed it into his mouth, making further speech impossible, and leaving his hands free to manoeuvre the joysticks.

He turned the *Cloud* away from the sphere and raced back to the orbiting junkyard. 'This is where our salvation lays,' he said. 'There must be unimaginable treasures hidden within these derelict spaceships, and somehow or another we're going to find a way of boarding them.'

'Now that's what I call positive thinking,' said Russell. 'We'll soon be home and drinking hot chocolate.'

The brothers stared in all directions. Scattered and forlorn, the once proud spacecraft of countless alien empires tumbled and turned like dead leaves floating on a warm autumn breeze.

Trevor guided the *Cloud* through a desolate maze of wreckage. Each spacecraft differed immensely in shape and size, and only one in every few hundred appeared undamaged. Each vessel spun haphazardly, held in a gravitational orbit around the distant sphere; each vessel moved in the same direction, but at different speeds and distances according to their mass. Occasionally, they bumped into each other causing even more damage and nudging themselves on new trajectories.

Trevor's mouth dropped wider as each new spaceship slid passed. 'What treasures must be hidden in those magnificent vessels,' he muttered. 'Can you imagine the technology, the intelligence, the knowledge?'

Russell glanced sideways at his brother and raised his eyebrows. 'I was wondering what had happened to the occupants, the aliens who had manned all these spaceships.'

'Yes. Yes. We mustn't forget them,' said Trevor, briefly closing his eyes in prayer. 'But just think...there could be food and power sources...there must be...surely.'

'Oh, we'll find something, no doubt about that,' said Russell. 'Do you think these Mantis are the cause of all this destruction?'

'Obviously. I expect they've all suffered the same fate as us.'

Russell shuddered. 'This is like wandering around a battlefield when the fighting is over; it's sheer meaningless destruction; nothing but cold-blooded disrespect of another's life.'

'Try and concentrate or we'll be two more species of alien who die at their hands,' said Trevor, determined to stay cheerful. 'In the meantime, have you noticed that every single port, or door, or whatever you call it; on every single spaceship, is wide open?'

'Yes, I've noticed. And I know what you're thinking; everything worth stealing has already been taken. Maybe, but most likely they've only taken water.' Russell leaned forward and scratched his head. 'Why do they need so much water?'

'Remind me to ask if we ever meet them. In the meantime, keep your eyes open.'

'Okay,' said Russell, jumping to his feet and stretching his long limbs. He walked around the desk, glancing through invisible walls in every direction. 'What are we looking for?'

'Inspiration! And I won't know it until I see it.'

Shrugging his shoulders, Russell faced his brother. 'I think I'll leave you to it,' he said. 'I'll go and cycle for a while then I'll have a proper workout in my dojo. Give me a call if anything turns up.'

Trevor's brow creased, and his keen eyes flitted restlessly. 'You do that,' he said. 'But don't work up too much of an appetite.'

Left alone, Trevor found it easier to focus; he glided amongst the relics, scanning each spaceship patiently and methodically. He shook his head often and little by little, his mouth drew into a frustrated grimace.

Then he said, 'Ah!' and sat up straight. Far in the distance, a colossal spaceship caught his eye. He picked up the binoculars and studied it closer, and even from a distance he could see it was undamaged. He had seen other colossal spaceships, but they were ungainly and bulky, whereas this was—graceful. Yes, he decided, graceful, like a plump angelfish without fins.

His heart beat faster. He dropped the binoculars and guided the *Cloud* closer. Something about the spaceship reminded him of human workmanship: the streamlined contours, the smooth finish, the proud lines, as if straight from the brush of a Hollywood artist.

Port and hangar doors gaped open. 'Oh, this is great,' he mumbled, spying a hanger so large he could fly straight in. He headed for the dark opening and considered using his floodlights, but knew that would flatten the battery in five minutes. With a grunt, he backed away and soared over the spaceship's broad convex side. It was at least fifty kilometres across and totally undamaged.

Russell returned to the control room, his skin sparkly clean and rosy pink after a cold shower. He carried two mugs containing cold black tea and a paltry packet of dry biscuits. He sat them on the desk corner and gazed outside. His mouth dropped open.

'You've found it.'

'Well, yes,' said Trevor, misunderstanding his brother's excitement. 'Beautiful, isn't she.'

'The American space shuttle,' spluttered Russell, pointing a shaky finger. 'The *Wayfarer*, you've found it.'

Following his brother's gaze, Trevor gasped and let his own mouth drop open. Just beyond the giant spaceship's rim spun the missing space shuttle. In his excitement he hadn't noticed the flea-sized vessel, but now, with fingers trembling, he guided the *Cloud* alongside.

'Now I'm even more convinced,' said Trevor.

'About what?'

'That this gigantic spaceship is our salvation. Look there, the *Wayfarer* has gone into orbit around it, as if it's found a new parent to snuggle up against for comfort and protection... As if it knows.'

'Yes, it's a good omen,' agreed Russell.

'Let's see if we can board the *Wayfarer*. We'll need to connect with it somehow.'

'The docking shoot is open,' said Russell. 'The Mantis have obviously been in there before us, but what do you think has happened to the astronauts?'

Trevor grabbed five biscuits and forced them into his mouth. He bent towards his keyboard and started typing. 'Let's get inside and find out,' he said, spitting crumbs in every direction. 'I'll have to be careful. To compensate for my clumsiness, I'll make the joysticks less sensitive.'

'That sounds sensible.'

'Now then, I simply need to match speed and rotation—like that.' He dropped the joysticks and typed in an instruction. 'Open our porthole and make it larger—like that.' He picked up the joysticks again. 'Move over the *Wayfarer's* docking shoot until it's just inside the *Cloud*—like that.' He went back to typing. 'And shrink our porthole size until it makes a seal around the shoot—like that!'

Russell stood with hands on hips, following closely. 'It mystifies me how you can type so fast. I'm impressed.'

'My typing? Is that what impresses you? Typing is clumsy and slow. My mind is always waiting for my fingers to catch up, and more often than not they hit the wrong key anyway. This whole method of operating the *Cloud* is clumsy and slow.'

'Don't be disheartened,' said Russell. 'I'm impressed with the *Cloud* too. Can you stop us spinning? It's like being on a merry-go-round.'

'Yes, hang on a moment. Gently does it, let's not damage the *Wayfarer*... A few more adjustments... That's it.' Trevor jumped up. 'Come on. You can climb through into the *Wayfarer*. It's quite safe. The shuttle doesn't seem to be damaged, there's no air leakage and the pressure has equalised. See if you can find a spacesuit or two.'

'Or an astronaut or two,' suggested Russell. 'Why do I always get the dangerous jobs? Why can't you go?'

'Because you are the chief assistant,' said Trevor, pushing his brother towards the door. 'No, seriously, I need to keep an eye on things this side. Come on, this could be the start of our survival. With a spacesuit, we could go exploring.'

'We?'

'Well, all right, you. Now hurry along, before those Mantis come back and catch us red-handed.'

The moment Russell entered the *Wayfarer* he became weightless. This time he rather enjoyed the sensation. It reminded him of his boyhood flying dreams. Steering with hands and feet, he propelled himself through the forward docking bay and into the cabin. Everything was orderly and a few dim lights glowed, the Mantis hadn't needed to use their energy-draining weapon. But he found no trace of the astronauts, nor any sign of struggle.

A hatch in the ceiling led into the flight deck. There was no trace of the astronauts or a struggle here either. He went forward to the cockpit and gazed with fascination at the impressive display panels. Switches, knobs, levers, and dials bristled from every available space.

Vintage junk, he thought. All Trevor needed to control the *Cloud* was his computer and joysticks, and even that he complained about. Thinking the instrument layout reminded him of an aeroplane cockpit, he wondered what function they all had. With a childlike urge, he flipped a switch.

Three new lights blinked into life and an urgent "peep" made him re-flip the switch.

Hurrying, he turned his back to the cockpit and floated down into the cabin. 'Can you hear me?' he shouted, trying to sound innocent.

'I hear you. I'm standing in the *Cloud's* airlock. What have you found?'

'No astronauts, and the power is on.'

There was a moment's pause before Trevor spoke. 'Hmm! It means they transported it here without bothering to drain it of energy. I hope you haven't touched anything?'

'I flipped a switch.'

'What?'

'Only a small one.'

Trevor raised his eyebrows and sucked in his cheeks. 'Let's hope those Mantis haven't noticed, they can almost certainly detect even small electromagnetic disturbances. We'd better hurry. Have you found spacesuits and food?'

'I've found the spacesuits, I'll chuck them across.'

'How much do the suits weigh?'

'A tonne each by the look of them. But they come in several bulky parts.'

'Pick a couple that'll fit us and bring them here, I'll drag them over to this side. Hurry up.'

Russell moved as fast as he could. The spacesuits were stowed in *Wayfarer's* forward cargo bay. Afraid the Mantis would catch him red handed, he glanced through a small observation window each time he glided back to collect a new part. 'This is making me nervous,' he said to Trevor as he pushed the last pieces into the *Cloud*. 'Go back to the control room and keep watch while I search for food.'

Back in the control room, Trevor scanned space with his binoculars. He saw nothing, and swore quietly. 'Where are the scanners and probes and instruments that would automatically warn of approaching danger?' The answer was simple; he didn't think he'd need those sort of things, how was he to know they'd end up in a place like this?

All too late, he saw the Mantis shuttle.

Russell pulled open a gallery locker and found it filled with vacuum-packed provisions. In the same instant, Trevor dashed back to the airlock and screamed, 'Get out of there, Russell, the Mantis are coming.'

With clammy hands, Russell scooped food trays into a large, black, plastic rubbish bag. Obstinate, a few trays floated away from his grasp.

'What are you doing,' screamed Trevor. 'They're outside...'

Russell grabbed the last three trays and stuffed them into the bag. He heard a ripping noise above his head and the whistle of escaping air. He pushed away with powerful legs, reached the docking-port, and scrambled into the *Cloud*. 'I'm in,' he yelled.

Trevor was already back at his computer and stabbed at a key to shut the *Cloud's* porthole. He stumbled and his finger missed. The finger stabbed again, this time it hit accurately.

Instantly, the shield closed, and *Wayfarer's* intruding docking-shoot, severed cleanly, clattered to the *Cloud's* floor.

'Let's see how you like being rammed,' shouted Trevor, and drove the *Cloud* at the Mantis shuttle. It dodged easily. 'Cowards!' he shouted, shaking his fist. 'I don't know what sort of creatures you are, but I'll get you...'

'Brother, brother,' soothed Russell, as he reached the control room. 'Let's not show aggression. At the moment they're only curious, don't make them an enemy, don't provoke them. Let's try contacting them, talk to them, see what this is all about.'

'How many of these have tried "talking"?' asked Trevor, waving at the dead spacecraft cluttered around them. 'These insects are ruthless. They're not interested in talking. They go directly for the kill.'

'Well, maybe you're right,' consented Russell. 'But still, let's not irritate them, eh?'

A lethal ray of brightly visible energy burst from the insects' shuttle—a ray wide enough to encompass both the *Cloud* and the *Wayfarer*. The *Cloud* neutralised the burst effortlessly, but the *Wayfarer* disintegrated in a blur of radiant gasses and dust.

'I think they're already irritated,' said Trevor.

'Temper, temper,' mumbled Russell, watching the Mantis shuttle turn away and head back to the sphere.

The two brothers looked at each other—and smiled with relief.

'So far, so good,' said Trevor. 'We're still alive. Come on, let's run down to the airlock and sort out the booty.'

The boys separated the spacesuit parts from the food. Russell gathered an armful of vacuum-packed food trays and headed towards his kitchen. 'The food doesn't look very appetising,' he said over his shoulder. 'And there's only enough for a few days. But that's all we need. In a few days we're bound to have found something better.'

Trevor turned his attention to the spacesuit parts and his own optimism rose. With the spacesuits they could explore and he was certain their salvation lay within the huge spaceship he had discovered. He pushed his hand into an arm assembly. The half a centimetre thick material was so stiff he could hardly bend it. Shaking his head in disgust, he threw the arm assembly aside and sorted through the other parts.

Returning for more food trays, Russell looked at his brother and collapsed in laughter. Trevor had donned grossly oversized gloves, boots, and huge bulky helmet.

'Makes the rest of you look like a pin man, even with that podgy tummy.'

'You needn't laugh,' said Trevor, his voice muffled behind the dark visor. 'You'll be the one wearing this gear.' He lifted the helmet and broke into a laugh. 'Look here,' he said, holding up a thick pair of pants, 'this is your toilet—a nappy!'

'Any idea how it all fits together?' asked Russell, straining to lift a hard upper body construction.

'No problem there. The biggest problem will be putting it on. The whole thing easily weighs twice as much as you—it's designed to be used in a weightless environment. I'll probably have to make this outer airlock non-gravitational when you dress. It'll take me a while to write some new software, so why don't you go and pedal while I sort things out. You haven't forgotten we need the battery recharged every day?'

'Great exercise,' said Russell, scooping up the last food trays. 'As soon as I've tidied these away, it'll be my pleasure.'

It took Trevor the rest of the day to write the new software. The program itself was soon finished, but these new alterations and additions needed careful attention. If he wasn't careful, his entire complex program would become untidy and difficult to follow. So he took his time with the details, not only with these changes, but also with rushed changes he had made earlier, not stopping until he was entirely satisfied.

Later that evening they devoured a cold meal of re-hydrated beef and vegetables.

'I enjoyed that,' said Trevor.

'Must mean you're starving.' Russell collected the empty trays and took them to the kitchen.

'About tomorrow,' said Trevor. 'I think you should explore that huge spaceship I discovered. I have a good feeling about it.'

'Does that mean you're sending me in there alone?'

'Yes. I think it would be better if I stayed here.'

'Surprise, surprise,' said Russell.

'I found a massive port where you can enter. I'll move in as close as I can and you'll be able to float across. Then, as soon as you're in and before those insects become suspicious, I'll move away. Not far. I'll try to make it look like we're exploring other spaceships close by. You know, just sort of cruising.'

Reaching across the table, Trevor placed his hand on top of Russell's and looked him in the eye. 'And don't touch anything this time, don't even use your spacesuit lights until you're well inside. Even then we don't know how sensitive the Mantis instruments are, maybe they can see right through the walls, who knows? Just be careful.' He took a Zip-Linq from his pocket. 'Take this,' he said, offering the little device to Russell.

'Is this the same gadget you gave the professor?' said Russell, spinning it by its chord.

'Yes, an exact copy. Stop playing with it and hang it around your neck.'

Russell caught the Zip-Linq and held it in his palm. He prodded it with a finger, careful not to press any buttons. 'What does it do?'

'It does lots of things, but for the moment you won't be able to do anything with it because it'll be on the inside of your spacesuit. But I can trace you with it...'

Russell's eyebrows shot up into his forehead. 'Won't those insects be able to trace me too?'

'Unfortunately, yes,' shrugged Trevor. 'There is a slim chance. It operates with a very weak signal on a very tight beam. Nobody on Earth has the technology to trace it, but who knows with these aliens, it might be as easy as smoke signals to them. I won't force you to take it, but if I need to come and get you...'

Trusting his genius brother, Russell slipped the Zip-Linq over his head.

'It's also a radio-transmitter,' continued Trevor, 'a camera, a torch, and much more besides. Think of it as an electronic multifunction pen-knife.'

'A handy little tool,' smiled Russell. 'If I should need it, what do I do?'

'If you press the little blue button we can talk to each other. Hopefully, you'll never need to use it.'

Russell spooned coffee powder into his mug and topped up with cold water. 'What do you suppose they look like,' he sipped his coffee as if it was hot, 'those aliens in the big Hollywood spaceship?'

'I'm hoping they're a lot like us,' said Trevor, studying a biscuit before throwing it in his mouth. 'It would be typical for us humans to build a spaceship as fancy as the Hollywood. All those smooth shapes aren't necessary out here in space. Out here there's no resistance to worry about so a square box would be much more practical—did you notice how ugly most of the other spaceships are?'

'I agree, there's undeniably something human about the Hollywood.'

'I expect you'll find some photos and stuff like that.' Trevor paused. 'But don't waste your time on that sort of thing—we need food and power. Let's hope the place isn't littered with dead bodies.'

'Well, the crew of the *Wayfarer* were missing,' Russell reminded him.

'That's true. But they were only two men; there may have been thousands on board the Hollywood spaceship.'

Russell sighed and pushed his empty cup away. 'How long can I stay before I run out of air?'

Trevor stuck out his bottom lip and stroked his bristly chin. 'I seem to remember reading somewhere that a spacesuit has enough air for seven hours, plus half an hour in a reserve tank.' He looked at his brother with a frown. 'I don't know exactly, so keep an eye on your dial.'

'How can I let you know I want picking up?'

'Ah, Yes,' said Trevor, scratching his head. 'How about this: I'll fly past the port every half an hour and you wave when you want picking up?'

Russell sniggered. 'Only a genius like you could think of a plan like that.'

'Thanks. Simple but effective. Now listen; as well as food, try to find a storeroom, they must have loads of spare parts and tools. Follow your intuition and see what turns up. I don't think we

should be too ambitious this first trip. Let's think of it as reconnaissance. You'll probably have to make more than one trip whatever happens.'

'Well,' said Russell, jumping to his feet. 'I'm tired, and you must be shattered. Let's get to bed. Tomorrow could be the day of our salvation.'

~*~

The *Cloud* drifted so close to the Hollywood spaceship that Russell could reach out and touch it. They passed the large gaping port and he braced himself, ready to leap. With perfect timing, he glided across.

Blinding darkness engulfed him, and all sensation of movement and direction vanished. He expected to bump against something, but after what seemed like ten minutes he lost his nerve and fumbled for the helmet light.

The beam made little difference in that huge area, but Russell saw he was about to collide with the ceiling and glimpsed a vast hanger spread below, where small space vessels were parked neatly in rows and columns. He turned off the torch, bump against the ceiling, and daring another short burst of light pushed towards an open door in the farthest wall.

His imagination started playing tricks. He fancied he floated in an immense hollow tomb where a thousand lost souls lamented. Eerie spots and shapes danced before his eyes, and shadowy hands clutched at his skin.

'Blow this!' he gasped, and switched on his light for good.

The open door rushed towards him. Three metal steps led up from the floor below. Russell grabbed the handrail and brought himself to an elegant stop. He took a reel of string from a spacesuit pouch and fumbled in his thick gloves to tie the loose end to the handrail. A delightful thought crossed his mind—both the door and the handrail were human size.

Russell hung there, neither daring to peek behind his back nor brave enough to enter the door. Reason told him to press on. Without food and energy they would die anyway. Holding his breath, he floated across the threshold into a long corridor—and yelped. A fully clothed skeleton blocked his way.

'Nice set of teeth,' said Russell, and although he wasn't religious, he made the sign of the cross. A sideways glimpse at the grinning skull made him shudder, and the thought of touching the skeleton made his skin crawl. Nonetheless, he nudged it to one side. 'Pardon me,' he murmured, 'but I need to come past.'

He peeked through each open door along the corridor as he passed. Each was furnished like an office and each was occupied by at least one fully clothed skeleton. The corridor ended at an elevator shaft, he entered and floated upwards, trailing his string behind. Twelve levels passed before he reached the top and emerged into a large round auditorium.

Wrong direction, he thought, *no food or energy here.*

Instead of turning back into the elevator shaft, Russell drifted further into the auditorium and let his lamp scan the tiered rows of seats. Here and there, still seated, were more clothed skeletons. He thought about the poor souls, dying so fast they didn't even have time to move, probably sucked dry on the spot, and decided the Mantis must be as cold hearted as the insect species they evolved from.

He wondered what had happened here. A fantastic spaceship like this must possess an unimaginably advanced technology, and yet it had been defeated without any sign of battle. A surprise attack, he guessed, but even so, surely it could have defended itself?

Then he remembered how easily the *Cloud* had been defeated. All energy had been instantaneously drawn out, and this spaceship had suffered the same fate. How much energy must

a ship like this contain, he wondered, and how had it been drawn so rapidly they were left defenceless, transported here to the junkyard, and drained of all moisture?

Remembering his mission was to find food and energy, Russell took a deep breath and turned away. He tugged at his string and made ready to follow it back down the elevator shaft to search in the opposite direction.

All of a sudden, the nape of his neck tingled. He recognised the sensation from his martial arts training and knew it meant danger. Hampered by the clumsy spacesuit and weightlessness, he turned in slow motion to face the elevator shaft. Four Mantis floated there, like spiders dangling on invisible threads. One held something in its claw, and before Russell had time to say "how do you do", a wave of vibrating energy tore through his body.

His vision darkened and pain screamed through his nerves. He tried to call out for Trevor and warn him, but his paralysed vocal chords refused to work. A silent prayer lingered as consciousness withered. *Goodbye, dear brother, and may God's mercy be with you.*

~*~

Bright coloured confetti spun in a whirlwind. Russell watched the gay patterns for a while with dizzy fascination. The wind quietened and moved away as if it had other places to visit, and the confetti settled like snow.

What now? he managed to think, then shuddered as he remembered. Being knocked out for the count was becoming a bad habit.

Gravity was normal, he realised, and he lay awkwardly on his side, still wearing the spacesuit. He was hurt and confused, but nausea and a painfully throbbing body meant nothing compared to the joy of being alive. He swallowed noisily and moaned softly. A shadow covered his closed eyes, and with an effort, he forced them open.

He closed them again.

I'm imagining things, he told himself. Blinking his eyes open, he stared into the faces of two humans.

'You can take the helmet off,' drawled one of them with an American accent. 'The air's quite breathable.'

Russell tried to sit up, but found it impossible inside the spacesuit's dead weight.

'Just keep calm. Lay still and we'll get you out of the EMU.'

As expert fingers worked at the helmet and drew it off, the American drawl continued. 'I know you feel pretty rough at present. Don't try to speak until we get you out of this goddam contraption. My name is Commander John Mossman of the NASA Space Shuttle *Wayfarer*, and this lady is my wife, pilot Samantha Mossman. She goes by the name of Sam.'

'Russell Cloud,' he mumbled, fighting both a massive head and stomach ache.

Piece by piece the spacesuit fell apart until only the inner body suit was left.

'Can you manage the rest by yourself?' asked John.

Russell sat up and squinted at the two humans. John's round head was bald and he had the face of a friendly schoolteacher. Sam had a mass of dark hair and bags under her sad watery eyes, making her look like a lost puppy. Both were tall, fit and healthy. Both were dressed in crispy clean shorts and vests.

Smiling through his migraine, Russell hugged his legs, rested his chin on his knees, and tried to focus on them both. 'Oh boy,' he said. 'Am I glad to see you.'

'And who the heck are you?' asked John, backing away with distrust in his grey eyes.

'My name is Russell Cloud, from London, England.'

'Okay, wise guy.' The suspicion in John's eye turned to anger. 'What are you doing here and why are you wearing one of our spacesuits?'

'And where are we?' asked Sam. She raised her arms and pressed the heel of her hands into her temples. 'Are we in Russia? Or China? Or some kind of a goddam alien spaceship?' Her eyes filled with tears and her chin trembled. 'My God,' she said. 'I don't understand a single thing.'

John put a hand on her shoulder. 'Go and make us coffee, Sam.'

With a sniff and a nod, Sam disappeared through a door.

'She gets a bit emotional,' explained John. 'She misses our kids.'

'Coffee sounds nice,' said Russell. Still sitting, he wrenched the inner body suit off and threw it aside. 'That's better. It's warm in here.' He leaned back on taut arms and stretched his long legs forward. 'I look like you two now, shorts and vest.'

John kept silent.

'I'm sorry about Sam,' said Russell. 'How many children do you have?'

'Two sons and a daughter.'

'What about you, John, it can't be easy for you either?'

'Damned right,' snapped John, staring into Russell's face.

Russell felt uncomfortable sitting on the floor, so he staggered to his feet, stretched, and stood at attention. Drawing a deep breath, he rolled his head and shook his arms and legs until some of the tension drained away.

'You and me are the same height,' said John, 'which is why you could wear my spacesuit. Now suppose you tell me where you found it?'

'My friend,' said Russell, 'I am as confused as you, and I'm slow with my answers because my head is spinning. As to the suit, I borrowed it from the *Wayfarer*. As to where we are I can only guess, but one thing is certain, we are an awful long way from home.'

'This is nonsense,' said John, anger and confusion written all over his face. 'Let's start again. Who are you?'

'Russell Cloud, from London, England.'

'Where are we?'

'I can only guess, but it's a very good guess, that we are prisoners in an alien sphere, on the very edge of the universe.'

John narrowed his eyes. 'How come you're here?'

'We arrived by the same route you took. It's a long story, and you might not believe it.'

John nodded and sighed. 'I'm sorry. My nerves are all messed up. It's not knowing anything.' He put a hand on Russell's shoulder and briefly closed his eyes. 'Goodness knows,' he said, 'we're comfortable enough, but I feel like a fish that's been plucked from the ocean and dropped into a glass bowl.'

'I promise I'm on your side,' said Russell. 'We have a common friend by the name of Professor Maurice Masterson and he told us all about your disappearance. He's very worried about you both.' Russell swayed and let his head roll forward. 'I say, John, I don't feel too good, how about this coffee?'

John patted Russell's shoulder a couple of times then gently propelled him in the direction Sam had taken. As they stumbled along, John gestured with his other hand. 'This room is the entrance hall. Behind us is the main door, which is always locked, and this door on the left,' he guided Russell towards the door Sam had used, 'is our front door.'

'Go make yourself comfy,' said Sam, as they entered, 'the coffee is almost finished percolating. Coffee aroma is wonderful, it reminds me of home.'

Settling in one of four bulky armchairs, Russell glanced around. 'Very cosy,' he said. 'Does the log fire work?'

'Everything works,' said John, sitting opposite Russell. 'It's a wonderful system—we burn wood, and more turns up. Don't ask me where it comes from because I never found out. More appears whenever our backs are turned, or when we're in bed or on the john. Not that we've used the fire much; like you said, it's warm in here.'

Sam sat next to John and reached for his hand. 'All this is an exact copy of our own house,' she said. 'Through there is the kitchen with hot and cold running water, and a fridge full of food. Everything is here; the bathroom, bedrooms, even the garage with our Buick.' Her eyes clouded and her face tightened. 'The only thing missing is my kids.'

'I'm sorry,' said Russell.

'Even the view from the window is the same as at home. Sometimes... sometimes...' She peeked sideways at John who laid his hand on her knee and nodded encouragingly. 'Sometimes I see our kids out there, waving to me from a distance. But the windows and doors don't open... I can't stand it...'

'Go get the coffee, Sam,' said John, 'it's making that "finished" gurgling sound. Our kids are well and healthy, and so are we. Don't give up hope just yet.'

'All this is amazing,' said Russell, finding it impossible to imagine they were anywhere other than earth. 'And you're perfectly right, John. We'll find some way of getting home.'

Sam pulled herself up from the sofa, pushed her tear-stained face close to Russell's, and poked him in the chest. 'I don't know who or what you are, mister, a spy maybe. Perhaps you hope to gain some information, or are you some kind of a trick to confuse us even more?' She pulled back and rubbed her hand through her hair. 'Hell, man, I don't know, all we've seen so far are some giant green bugs and then you turn up dressed in one of our spacesuits, unconscious and dazed, acting all friendly and calm.'

'Now then, Sam,' said John. 'Let the young man speak. Let's hear him out. Just go get the coffee first.'

'Okay,' said Sam, backing away. 'Let's say I trust you—for now.' She turned and sauntered to the kitchen, returning almost immediately with a glass jug of steaming black coffee in one hand, and three mugs hooked on the fingers of her other. 'This is so damned weird,' she said. 'We don't understand what happened, we were sent to observe an alien spacecraft, a preliminary survey they said, up and down, take a few snapshots they said. I promised our kids we'd be back in two days...but, but, everything blacked out, including us, and when we woke, we were here. Wherever here is.'

Russell sipped his coffee before answering. 'What I am going to tell you,' he said, 'will sound fantastic and impossible, but hopefully it will answer some of your questions and give you a bearing on our situation. Let me answer the easy bit first—where are we? Do you remember that old television show "Lost in Space"? You know, with the Robinson family and that robot?'

Both nodded.

'Well, that's what we are; well and truly lost in space.' He told them about his brother, Trevor, and the *Cloud*.

John and Sam looked at each other and burst out laughing.

'Are you telling us,' said John, finding it hard to control himself, 'that you have a brother out there, flying around in a home-made spacecraft tied together with bits of wire mesh and tape, and that these all powerful aliens can't harm him in any way?'

'Precisely.'

'How come you're here then?'

Russell explained how the energy had been drawn from the *Cloud*, and how the Mantis had kidnapped them, and how Trevor had re-programmed his computer to make the *Cloud*

invulnerable to the insects' energy-draining weapon. He told them about the junkyard on the edge of the universe, and the fate of their own space shuttle *Wayfarer*.

The nervous laughing stopped, and the astronauts gritted their teeth and clenched their fists.

Russell told them about the gigantic Hollywood spaceship and his search for food and energy. When he told them how easily he had been captured they shook their heads and tut-tutted.

'My brother is a bit worried,' said Russell. 'He thinks they'll eventually find some way of getting into the *Cloud*, but at the moment they can't touch him.'

'Incredible,' said John.

'Awesome,' agreed Sam.

'So there you have it. My brother, Trevor, is an exceptionally clever guy, and somehow or another, he'll find a way of getting us all back home again.'

John and Sam stared at him, agape.

'Sure doesn't sound like much reason for hope,' said John. 'I'd rather put my trust in God to get us home.'

'Amen!' said Sam.

Russell smiled, full of confidence, and reclined in his chair as if he had just popped in for a cup of coffee and a friendly chat. The two astronauts looked at each other, their expression making it clear they thought they were speaking with a loony.

'Look here, Russell,' said John, speaking as if talking to a naive school boy, his mug of coffee forgotten and cold. 'Perhaps it's you who doesn't understand the situation. You have explained, and we have no reason to doubt, that we are prisoners in an alien space station on the outskirts of the universe. Most probably, we're only alive because they consider us peculiar and harmless pets. There's no way out of here, and even if there was, there's no way of getting back to our own planet Earth.'

One of Russell's many talents was his ability to see auras. He could see auras everywhere, perceptible as a bright colourful glow surrounding all people and objects. A person's aura reflected their state of mind and body: their mood, their health, whether they were truthful, the state of their very soul. He studied his two new friends carefully, their auras were weak and the colours were pale—a reflection of defeat and despair.

Russell stroked his chair's material. It felt like genuine leather. 'We're warm,' he said, still smiling, 'we're comfortable, and you say there's plenty of delicious food in the fridge. Right at this moment, what's the problem?'

'Now look here,' said John, irritated by Russell's nonchalance. 'This isn't a school boy vacation. Ugly green bugs with claws instead of hands run this place. Soon after we got here, they took us to some sort of surgery and probed our minds. Made a damned thorough job of it too—how else could they reproduce our house and furnishing so accurately if they haven't read our minds like a picture book?'

John pointed a finger at Russell, his bald head glistened. 'That mind-probing business wasn't a picnic, and it'll be your turn next. They'd love to know the secret behind your *Cloud* contraption.'

'Well I'd like to know the secret behind their food-making contraption,' said Russell. 'We could do with that on the *Cloud*.'

Both astronauts sighed.

Sam leaned forward in her chair. 'You look intelligent and very fit, and you look as happy as a boy on the first day of his school holiday. Listen, and try to accept our futile situation. We are never going to breathe pure fresh air again; never going to enjoy the scent of apple blossom and honeysuckle; never going to enjoy the support and company of family and friends; never going to walk along green country lanes, with bird song and insect bustle and dappled sunlight; we are

never going home again, don't you understand? Never...' Her eyes watered and a tear rolled into her lap.

'How old are you, Russell?' asked John.

'Eighteen.'

'And you don't mind spending the rest of your life here?'

'Oh, we'll be out in a jiffy, there's always a way out, just relax and go with the flow. Keep an open mind and a solution will pop up. In the meantime, I haven't had a decent meal in ages, so do you mind if I borrow your kitchen?'

'Yes, of course,' said John, giving up, slapping his hands on his knees, 'what could more natural in a situation like this? You go right ahead, never mind us. There's beer in the fridge too. Help yourself, be our guest.'

Russell couldn't believe his eyes. The kitchen was big, ultra modern and had every conceivable gadget. A massive walk-in fridge bulged with provisions, and two chest freezers were crammed with meat and fish. He gulped a large glass of milk and smacked his lips, it was cold, fresh and sweet, the best he had tasted.

Deciding the dining room table was much too austere and formal, he laid the kitchen table for three people. A fresh linen tablecloth brightened his mood, and solid steak cutlery held the promise of wholesome food. A single candle cast a welcoming glow of homeliness.

'Dinner is served,' he called, forty-five minutes later. 'T-bone steak, roast potatoes, vegetables and gallons of gravy.'

'Well would you look at that,' said Sam, standing behind a chair. 'I should've put some make-up on and changed into a dress. The aroma has been making my mouth water for the last twenty minutes. Where did you learn to cook like this?'

'It's a hobby,' said Russell, pulling the cork from a bottle of red wine. 'Most English food is boiled and cooked till death. But some of us understand the art. I hope it tastes as good as it looks.'

As they ate, Russell's care-free chatter soon had them laughing. He proposed a toast for Trevor and the day they would come together and share a meal. Sam proposed a toast for her kids; and John proposed a toast for a safe return to their home—planet Earth.

With the meal over, and the kitchen tidy, the two astronauts' gloomy mood returned. Before they had the sense to offer Russell the spare bedroom, Russell picked a fat book from a well-stocked bookshelf, threw himself down on a thick floor rug, placed the book under his head, and fell sound asleep.

A noise from the hall jolted him awake. He glanced at his watch, two hours of slumber, perfect. He rose nimbly to his feet, stretched, noticed he was alone, and went into the entrance hall to investigate the commotion.

Four Mantis, each the size of a large dog, stood with their backs to the open entrance door. The two astronauts stood with their backs against the opposite wall, stiff with apprehension.

'Do we have guests?' said Russell, approaching the Mantis, hiding his own fear behind a crooked smile. 'Good morning. Pleased to meet you.'

He stopped in front of the leader insect and bowed respectfully. 'I'm not a diplomat,' he said, 'but it gives me great pleasure to represent the planet Earth, and on behalf of the entire human race, I greet you with peace and friendship.'

John groaned in the background. 'Give me strength,' he murmured.

No clothes covered the insect's shiny green body. Two green eyes dominated its head, and Russell wondered where the brain was hidden in such a small skull. One beady black pupil

gleamed at Russell, the other stared into the pupil of his alien neighbour, and rising from a spot above either eye, antennae swayed and twitched.

Russell made a sudden movement with his arm, and the alien's antennae trembled. He changed the movement into a palm-open gesture of greeting and said, 'I expect you would like to speak with me? Would you like to make yourselves comfortable here, or shall I have the pleasure of accompanying you?'

Russell thought they seemed uncertain as they rocked on their four spindly legs, swaying in synchronisation like seaweed in a gentle current. The top half of their thin elongated bodies supported two spiked forearms, folded in prayer, with a set of hideous claws instead of hands. Their aura was bright, clear, and colourful, but Russell couldn't decide whether the sight of a human repulsed them, or if they wanted to eat him.

The leader insect made a clicking sound with its triangular beak, hinged below the eye. The beak opened to reveal two rows of needle-sharp teeth, and the stench of rotting meat oozed out.

'I have a good toothpaste I could recommend,' said Russell.

Two insects came forward and grabbed Russell by the arm. Their grip was firm but not painful. Russell didn't resist, but as they drew him close, the smell of rotting meat made him gag, and the memory of his frightful vision filled him with dread.

With growing pain in the back of his throat, Russell let himself be guided through the entrance door. 'Yes, of course,' he said, a quiver in his voice, 'it will be my pleasure to accompany you. Where are we going?'

They were in a corridor. Russell glanced left and right and vaguely noticed it had a green fluorescence glow and was shaped like an oval tube with smooth walls curving away into the distance in both directions.

'By the way,' said Russell, on the verge of panic, 'as a representative of the planet Earth, I am commissioned to ask why you need so much water.'

They turned neither left nor right, but crossed the corridor and passed into a room resembling a dentist's surgery. He was pushed onto a low bench and made to lie down. Clamps sprang around his arms and legs.

'Is this really necessary?' Russell swallowed twice and heard his heart beat pounding in his ear. 'You creatures have an awful lot to answer for.'

From a side table, one of the insects picked up something shaped like a pudding basin.

'What's that for?' asked Russell, the tremble in his voice distorting his words.

The pudding basin was pushed onto his head and secured with a strap under his chin.

'You're going to read my mind—is that it?'

From within the basin a hundred needle-sharp thorns pierced his scalp and drove through his skull to penetrate his soft brain.

The insects were excited now, and they clicked like a Geiger counter exposed to high radiation.

Russell panted, short, fast, shallow gulps. Sweat streaked with blood trickled down his forehead and stung his eyes. He wanted to scream, but knew he would lose sanity if he did.

This is no time for panic, he thought, and closed his eyes. With practised expertise, he channelled his awareness away from his surroundings and into the tranquillity of a higher consciousness. A mask suddenly covered his mouth and nose, and the first taint of gas instantly made him dizzy. He held his breath a second, refusing to inhale, then exhaled slowly, squeezing the air from his lungs.

He eased into meditation and his consciousness floated away from his body, a sensation, he guessed, akin to a life-after-death experience.

From a point above the bench, Russell's spirit saw the muscles in his body jerk and jitter as the gas filled his lungs. He watched his body thrash and strain against the clamps, then settle as the gas numbed his body's nervous system.

The four insects crouched over him, waiting, eager to read his mind. Two minutes passed. One insect suspected a malfunction and tapped an instrument panel. Another fiddled with measuring equipment on a nearby table.

But Russell still had charge of his own destiny. He was body, mind and soul. Body and mind slept, dormant, paralysed, separated from the soul that was his higher consciousness. Cautiously, he eased his way back, fully aware of the treacherous stimulus his body endured.

He focused on his body and felt its energy; he focused on his mind and conjured an image: he was on the platform of an old steam engine with colossal levers and wheels and steam and heat and dials and the smell of hot ash and grease and thundering vibration and dials indicating temperature and pressure and speed.

He was a simple stoker, shovelling coal and tending the furnace. The engineer, who possessed knowledge and know how, stood by his side.

The Mantis clicked at each other in satisfaction. Their specimen hadn't died as they first thought, and now the information flowed freely. They knew Russell's mind patterns were corrupt, but they put it down to the pathetic workings of an unintelligent moron, his mind too simple to read with accuracy.

But the message was clear; this specimen was a low-grade worker, a mere slave without knowledge. His master was still at the controls of the strange indestructible vessel that had caused them so much trouble. They also noticed the comradeship between master and slave, something they would use to their advantage.

~*~

Russell heard himself moan; a low-pitched sound flowing with anguish and bewilderment. He was waking, but something was desperately wrong and his mind screamed in confusion. There was discord between what his sub-consciousness comprehended and what his mind perceived, and a fierce battle raged between spirit and flesh.

Fighting for sanity, he demanded order. *There is a phantom in my mind that needs identifying and understanding*, he thought. *What phantom? Define it. Face it. What emotion am I feeling? Fear—I feel overwhelming fear.*

Ignoring the conflicting thoughts and messages that tumbled in his mind he let the emotion of fear expand, experiencing it fully, but not becoming part of it. Brought into the light of his consciousness, the emotion of fear faded. Without emotion to feed on, his destructive thoughts calmed and vanished. He slowed his heartbeat, gained control of his breathing, and became fully aware of the energy in his body.

He drew a deep breath, held it a second, then let it escape, breathing all the way out, imagining the poison in his system being carried away on the breath. He took several more deep breaths, then paid attention to his senses. In the distance, yet right by his side, he heard voices.

'Poor lad,' said Sam, 'I hope they haven't damaged his mind.'

'He'll wake up to a new reality now,' said John. 'This'll put a damper on his enthusiasm. He's had an emotional shock all right. It may have long-lasting psychological effects. Shame really, I enjoyed his optimism, I even started to believe him.'

A long moan shuddered between Russell's trembling lips.

'Perhaps we should turn him on his side,' said John, 'in case he vomits. You go look for a bucket and I'll roll him over.'

Russell recognized the sound of a bucket rattle under his bed and a chair pulled closer. 'I'll sit with him,' he heard Sam say. 'You go and rest. I kinda like the young buck myself.'

Silence for a while, then a person snoring and the rich aroma of coffee. Russell lay on a comfortable bed; he felt exhausted, too exhausted to open his eyes. Just too exhausted to open his eyes...

'You've been asleep for twenty-four hours,' droned John, as he lifted Russell's head and put a cup of water to his lips. 'Hurts, don't it? Took me and Sam days to recover. The most damnable hangover I ever had...'

Grasping the cup, Russell gulped water, burped, smiled, apologised, and sat up. 'Never felt better,' he said, swinging his legs to the floor. 'But I need more water and a good hearty English breakfast.' A wave of dizziness made him wobble. 'Okay,' he admitted, 'I have felt better, but I'm sure a solid breakfast will put things right.'

'You're a tough guy,' John nodded in admiration. 'Tell you what; I'll go fix breakfast, you lie down until it's ready.'

Breakfast was a silent affair with Russell eating and the two astronauts watching as if it was feeding time at the zoo. Six eggs, ten rashers of bacon, five sausages, three thick slices of blood pudding, baked beans, mushrooms, two tomatoes, and half a loaf of bread disappeared in minutes.

'Ahhh! That's better,' sighed Russell, rubbing his stomach. 'It's a shame we can't invite Trevor for breakfast. You two been okay while I've been away?'

'Would you listen to this guy,' chuckled Sam, relieved to see her new friend in such good spirits. 'We're the ones supposed to be asking if you're okay. I can't believe you look so fresh.'

Russell pushed his greasy plate away and folded his arms on the table. A frown creased his brow. 'It wasn't pleasant. I could feel their probes squeezing my brain for information...'

'What?' cried John. 'Were you conscious?'

'In a way, yes. I could feel the probing, but there was no pain. It was like they were looking inside my skull with a dirty great magnifying glass, with a colossal green eye behind it, and that beady little pupil of theirs burrowing here and there. And they stimulated my brain to induce specific scenes. They were devilishly clever. Oh man, I can tell you, I've never been so confused and frightened in my whole life—those overgrown pests nearly killed me.'

Sam placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Well I'm mighty glad you're still alive. Perhaps they'll leave us alone now. What do you think, John?'

'I'm mighty glad you're alive too, but don't be so sure they'll leave us alone. Can you remember anything else—anything at all?'

'Not really, I didn't get to see much, only a long corridor which probably goes round the whole sphere. I saw the operating surgery too, and I really hope I never see it again.'

'Okay, forget that,' said John. 'Anything else?'

'No. I'm sorry. But I do wonder if those four insects are the only ones here. This place must be an outpost, some kind of beacon or receiver, and those four insects are all that's required to run it. Like you said, we're only some kind of amusement to ease their boredom.'

John cleared the table and poured three steaming cups of coffee from the percolator. 'I think you're more than a pet,' he said, lifting the cup to his lips. 'Me and Sam might be nothing more than fresh meat being fattened for a feast, but you and your brother may be the first people ever to survive an attack—just think of that, buddy. Don't you think they'll do all they can to discover your secret? Supposing you got away and warned the whole universe...'

Russell scratched his head and grunted. 'That's exactly what I plan to do.'

'Yes, right,' chuckled Sam. 'I'm glad they haven't squelched your optimism. But I think they're keeping you alive as a hostage, They obviously haven't found the secret to your *Cloud* or you wouldn't be alive now.'

'My thoughts exactly,' said Russell. 'They need to read Trevor's mind, not mine. If they killed me, who knows what Trevor might be capable of? The Mantis certainly don't know, and they aren't take a chance.'

'How do they know Trevor knows you're still alive?' asked John.

'They don't,' said Sam. 'But they can't take that chance. And of course, they assume Trevor won't attack as long as his "comrade" is alive here.'

Russell finished his coffee and pushed the cup away. He stood up, stretched and yawned.

'Not very promising, is it?' said John. 'Or do you still have the illusion we can get home?'

'Ho-ho! That's no illusion, we'll soon be home,' said Russell. Then a frown creased his forehead and he sat down again.

'Looks like you better get back to bed,' said Sam. 'You came over all pale. How do you feel?'

'I'm sorry,' said Russell, drumming the table with his fingers. 'I'm okay. Something John just said put a new idea in my mind. I'll have to think about it—yes, it would explain a lot.'

The two astronauts waited patiently. Eventually John asked: 'What have I said?'

A charming smile banished the tiredness from Russell's face. 'I'll let you know when I've tested a few things. In the meantime, let's consider these alien insects. They remind me of our own praying mantis, except a lot bigger of course.'

'Precisely what I've been thinking,' said Sam.

'We copy some of their characteristics in kung fu.'

'Kung fu?' said Sam.

'Yes, I dabble in the martial arts. Anyway, the praying mantis are ambush predators. They wait for prey to stray too near then lash out at incredible speed.' Russell's arm flashed out and snatched John's half full coffee cup from his hand. Not a drop spilled.

'Hey, man! How'd you do that?' said John, jumping to his feet.

'The praying mantis strikes,' said Russell, handing the cup back. John took it with a new look of respect.

'Also,' said Russell, continuing in his calm pleasant voice, 'they're experts in camouflage, both to avoid predators, and to snare victims. And those specially adapted arms of theirs can both seize and slash with fatal efficiency.'

'Yuck!' said Sam. 'I hate bugs. If I remember right, the praying mantis is related to termites and cockroaches—pests and vermin. What else do you know about them? Any weak points?'

'I noticed a certain nervousness in our alien bugs,' said Russell. 'They're afraid of us, like we might be afraid of a rabid dog. That's to our advantage, and we can use it against them.'

John shook his head. 'How?'

'Their bite isn't venomous,' said Russell, 'and like all insects, they're cold blooded and mostly active during the day. Put the three of us and the four of them in a ring, and I'm certain we could squash them.'

'Trouble is,' said John, 'we're not in a ring, we're in their territory, locked up in their prison. And besides, these crawlies have a lot higher intelligence than us. Who knows what kind of restraint they could put on us if we caused trouble.'

'Really, John,' said Russell, jumping up, 'you speak like a true defeatist. Let's give our concerns a rest for a while. What I need now is a thorough workout in a gym.'

'I'm being realistic,' drawled John, then sat up straight as he remembered something. 'By the way, I think your living quarters have turned up, why don't you have a look, see if they read your mind properly.'

John led the way, out into the hall.

Sure enough, a new door had appeared in the entrance hall's third wall. Russell swung the door wide and entered his own apartment. 'Ha, ha! Look at that, my dojo. By the time I've given you two a few lessons we'll have no trouble overpowering those insects.'

'What do you mean, dojo?' asked Sam, close on his heel. 'Do you live in a gym?'

'As I told you, I'm a master of martial arts, and yes, I do spend a considerable part of my life in my dojo. I say, this is all rather exciting, let's see if my kitchen is how I planned it.'

'Planned it?' said the astronauts in unison.

'Yes, the lounge and bedroom too, plus a few other goodies I've ordered.'

'Ordered?' repeated the astronauts.

'Yes, a small matter of thought control. I only let them see what I wanted them to see.'

The two astronauts looked at each other in disbelief, then hurried after Russell to the other end of the dojo and through a door.

'Ah yes, here it is, the swimming pool and sauna.' Russell dipped his hand into the gleaming blue water of the twelve-metre pool. 'Just the right temperature. Not too hot and not too cold.'

They trooped back through the dojo and entered his lounge through yet another door. The furniture was soft and warm, their feet sunk into a deep carpet, one wall was completely covered by books, and from the large bay windows they could see the grand imposing grounds of a large country estate.

'These are for recreation,' said Russell, indicating a large massage chair in one corner of the lounge, and a full size snooker table in another.

The kitchen was well equipped and practical, a chef's dream. The dining area was integrated with the kitchen, snug and homely. 'The kitchen and dining room are the soul of a house,' commented Russell. 'I like making food—and sharing it with good friends.'

'We've noticed,' said Sam.

Russell gave the astronauts a tour of his dojo, touching each piece of equipment as they passed. 'Here's a running machine, and here's a rowing machine; and over here are weights, a sparing ring, punch bag, and a cupboard full of training clothes and boxing equipment.'

The end wall was covered in a formidable array of weapons: swords, spears, knives, staffs, bows and arrows, whips, battleaxes, and shields.

'You could start a war with all this,' said John, picking out a slim sword and swished it through the air.

'Yes. Couldn't I?' grinned Russell.

In pride of place, nestled in its own cradle, hung a Samurai Sword. Russell lifted it down with reverence, drew the sword from its sheath and tested the sharpness. 'Yes,' he said. 'This will do nicely. Very nicely indeed.'

Sam burst out laughing. 'Hey, man. Why didn't you order a machine gun—or a ray gun?'

~*~

Russell attacked his new training equipment with a vengeance, testing his body to the limit against every piece of apparatus. He found it unusually hard, more out of condition than he expected. At the end of his session, exhausted but exhilarated, he dived into the swimming pool and floated on his back.

He wondered what had frightened him so much the day before—his mind and his consciousness had disagreed on something. Even now they were at dispute, squabbling like two cantankerous turkeys.

He took a sauna, showered, changed into crispy fresh shorts and tee shirt, and relaxed on his bed. He placed one pillow under his knees and another under his head. Now he was ready to sort out his disarranged mind.

The Zip-Linq still hung around his neck. He unclipped it and studied it closely. What was it Trevor had told him? Press the blue button when he was ready for picking up. Yes, the blue button was there all right, close to the top of the tool. Tool? Trevor had called it an electronic multifunction pen knife.

Strange the insects hadn't seized it, he thought.

What else could it do, he wondered. There was a pin-prick camera lens, a torch, and several other buttons of various size and colour, but he didn't have a clue what they were meant for. Trevor said something about it being a communication device. Perhaps the Mantis wanted him to use it, so Trevor would know he was still alive?

He stroked the contour of the tiny blue button, but refrained from pressing it. He clasped the Zip-Linq lightly between fingertips, held it at arm's length and looked for its aura. A fuzzy white halo materialised, one centimetre wide. Dropping the Zip-Linq he picked up a pen from the bedside table and held it the same way. No matter how hard he concentrated, he couldn't see an aura.

He tried the same experiment with a glass and the bath towel, but failed to see their auras either. He tried the Zip-Linq again, then his own watch, and both auras shone clearly. In his mind, the squabbling turkeys hushed.

Dressing as quickly as possible, Russell went in search of John and Sam. He found them in his lounge, playing snooker.

'Hi!' they said in unison.

'Hope you don't mind us borrowing your pool table,' said Sam. 'Takes a bit of getting used to, these stiff snooker rules, but it's just as much fun as billiards.'

'Be my guests. That's the reason why I ordered this stuff. But hold up a minute, I'd like to ask you something.'

John hit the white ball. It clicked, then clicked again as it collided with a yellow ball sending it into a side pocket. Satisfied, he stretched his back and smiled at Russell.

'How much of this is real?' asked Russell, sweeping his arm in the air. 'Hasn't it occurred strange to you that all this "stuff" simply springs up from nothing and no where? The swimming pool, the furniture, the wood fire; where does the smoke go, where does the wood come from? Where does all this wonderful food come from?'

The two astronauts looked at each and shrugged.

'What's your point?' asked John.

'Where does all the water in the swimming pool come from? Isn't water supposed to be a precious resource for the Mantis?'

'What's your point?' repeated John, with growing interest.

'You mentioned the word "illusion" earlier. Remember, you asked if I still had the illusion we could get home? Well, perhaps all this around us is an illusion, a figment of our imagination.'

'Doesn't seem very feasible,' said John. 'What brought you to that conclusion?'

'I'm convinced. Turn the television on.'

'There's no picture,' said Sam. 'Just fuzz and snow, like the antenna has blown down.'

'Okay then,' said Russell, 'you have lots of books in your bookshelves, are there any amongst them you haven't read before you came here?'

'I haven't studied them very closely, but I don't think so.'

'Pick one of my books, something you haven't read and leaf through the pages.'

'We haven't exactly been in the mood for reading books,' said Sam, casting a gaze over the neat row of book titles in the nearest shelf. She selected a cowboy novel in the "Morgen Kane" series. 'This is no good,' she exclaimed. 'There's no print in them. Just blank pages.'

'Exactly. And why not?'

'I think I see your point,' said John. 'All this is reconstructed from our memories. If we haven't read a book, well, obviously there's no memory of it.'

'Yes,' said Russell. 'And we can't watch the latest news and shows on television for the same reason.'

John chalked the end of his cue. 'Perhaps these insects are doing something improper? Perhaps they're not supposed to keep pets. Perhaps none of their Mantis buddies know about us?' He bent over the snooker table and struck the white ball. It bounced from cushion to cushion and rolled into a corner pocket. 'Everything seems so real. I don't believe it's an illusion. How can it be?'

'I don't know,' admitted Russell. 'Parapsychology! I think they have a talent for extrasensory perception and manipulation. Did you notice how they keep one eye on each other at all times? That must be how they communicate—telepathically. Somehow or another they have a hold over our minds. Perhaps they use a combination of drugs in our food and telekinetic mentally induced suggestion.'

'Fancy words,' said John. 'Where did you learn them?'

'Paranormal activity is another hobby of mine. Our lives here are nothing but delusion, hallucination, and distorted perception of reality.'

'I don't buy it,' said John, turning his back and closing the conversation.

With a sigh, Russell strode to his dojo and returned with the Samurai sword. He picked four apples from the fruit bowl and threw them above his head. The sword flashed as it twisted through the air. As each apple hit the floor, it rolled into two neat halves. Juice ran from clean-cut white flesh and filled the air with sweet aroma. 'Aren't they worried we might use some of this weaponry against them?' he asked, wiping the razor sharp blade with a serviette.

'Obviously not,' muttered Sam, staring wide eyed at the halved apples.

Russell drew his shoulders back, stretched his long body to its full height, looked up to the ceiling, and said softly: 'I know you can see us, but I doubt you understand us. We might be in a bit of a fix, but I'm starting to understand you, and before you know it, we're out of here.'

CHAPTER 7 Aid Me

Trevor screamed and swore until he thought his vocal chords were torn to shreds.

'You damned bugs,' he tried to shout, only managing to croak like a frog. 'What have you done with my brother?'

He pressed his palms against the side of his head and shook it slowly. He couldn't believe how dumb he'd been, acting calm and unconcerned, pretending to explore and examine other spaceships. The Mantis knew exactly what was happening and where to find Russell.

An idea formed amongst his destructive thoughts, and with trembling fingers he typed an instruction into the computer. A picture like a radar screen popped open. He studied it closely,

searching for an echo of Russell's Zip-Linq. A bright point of light winked, moving steadily towards the insects' sphere.

'Got you,' he rasped, and typed another instruction, hurrying before the Mantis shuttle reached the sphere. The radar screen blinked out, and a list of Russell's monitored body functions blinked in. 'Yes,' he shouted, corroborating Russell's heartbeat was irregular, and his body temperature was a bit low—but he was alive.

Trevor's fingers hammered at the computer keys, resetting the joysticks to normal mode, his lips muttering as he worked. 'I should never have let you go alone... I just didn't see them coming... I haven't got any detectors... They're playing cat and mouse...'

He grabbed the joysticks and sent the *Cloud* hurtling in pursuit of the fleeing Mantis vehicle.

'I'll get you back, brother. I don't know how—but I'll get you back.'

The insects' shuttle docked alongside the sphere, and Trevor placed the *Cloud* directly above the shuttle. He opened the radar screen on his computer and searched for the Zip-Linq, hoping its signal wasn't cloaked within the sphere. He found it, faint but unmistakably winking, moving further inside the sphere.

'Now then, you ugly vermin.' His voice grew stronger, charged with anger. 'You might be irritated, but I'm pissed off.'

He manoeuvred the *Cloud* until it touched the shuttle. Then he screwed his eyes shut and nudged the *Cloud* even further. Powerless to stop the *Cloud's* passage, the Mantis shuttle buckled and burst as easily as an empty can of coke. The Mantis shuttle detonated, engulfing the *Cloud* in an orange ball of smoky flame. Trevor ducked and threw his arms over his head, but the explosion extinguished as fast as it ignited, and the *Cloud* had countered the volatile force without so much as vibrating. A gapping black hole in the sphere had replaced the Mantis shuttle and docking station.

'Wipe out!' shouted Trevor and waved his fist. 'And if my brother dies, I'll ram a hole right through your sphere. Not one of you will live. Do you hear? Not one of you.'

Trevor forced himself to calm down and think clearly. He flew around the sphere, noticing for the first time that it glowed with a soft green shade like the first leaves of spring. It reminded him of home and added to his anger.

He counted four docking ports spaced equally around the sphere's circumference. Shuttles were docked at the remaining three ports, each shuttle an exact copy of the one he had destroyed. Without hesitation, he guided the *Cloud* on a collision course and three brilliant flashes marked each shuttle's extermination.

Trevor pulled away and watched. The sphere hung there, four black holes where the shuttles had been, otherwise unperturbed and aloof. It was a hollow victory and could never compensate for his missing brother. He closed his eyes and waited for his heart to stop palpitating.

'I will get you back, Russell—I promise.'

A message blinked across his computer screen, warning the battery needed charging again. He ran to the training bicycle, peddled ten minutes, then collapsed across the handlebars gasping for breath. How Russell could peddle for two hours at a time amazed him. Trevor pushed on for another half an hour, fell off exhausted, and crawled on hands and knees back to the control room.

He picked up a pencil and chewed the end off, then tapped the fibrous end on his desk, then snapped it in half. It was in his nature to solve problems. With the Mantis shuttles destroyed, he knew they couldn't chase him, and the best thing he could do in the breathing space was to explore the *Hollywood*. The Mantis would go all out to destroy Trevor when they recovered,

maybe they would deploy a war ship. Trevor didn't fancy the idea of exploring the *Hollywood*, but felt certain he would find something to his advantage and could see no other alternative.

He eased the *Cloud* into *Hollywood's* expansive hold, like an inquisitive gnat gracefully manoeuvring its way into a sleeping person's open mouth. A weak "parking-light" illuminate his way, it was all the electricity he could spare. He passed countless parked vehicles, they came and went in the feeble light, but it was too dark to determine their use. The end wall crept into view and he found the door with Russell's string still tied to the railing.

The remaining spacesuit was a poor fit. Trevor was a fraction too short, and a fraction too wide. But there was no other choice. He had to squeeze in. Without help, it took forty-five minutes to dress. His stomach and chest were painfully constricted and his fingers and toes didn't quite reach the ends of gloves and boots—but he was ready.

Hollywood's lack of gravity made him feel sick, but he swallowed a few times and concentrated on reaching the door without floating away into the hanger. With his hands grasping the handrail, he felt safer and let the string guide him into the corridor. He jumped when he saw the clothed skeleton but forced himself to look closer. It reminded him of skeletons he'd squinted at between his fingers many years ago in old horror movies. 'Hallo, pal,' he muttered. 'I'm no expert, but your skull looks human enough. Don't worry, I'm not going to touch you.' He hurried on as best he could in weightlessness and followed the string to the elevator shaft, deciding to go down rather than up. He tied his own ball of string to a door handle and drifted into *Hollywood's* depths.

There were many floor levels; he ignored them all and kept going right to the bottom. He left the elevator shaft and drifted into a large circular hall at least forty metres across. Seven glass tubes dominated the hall's centre, each tube was about five metres in diameter and stretched from floor to ceiling. The inside of each tube was discoloured like tempered steel and blemished with sooty blotches.

Trevor assumed he'd found the main power room, and the tubes had been damaged by a massive power surge. His torch flashed around the hall, piercing dust like car lights on a foggy night. A low control plinth and a chair were stationed in front of each tube, and in each chair sat a clothed skeleton.

It only took a moment to realise there was nothing here he could use, and made a plan to search each floor on the way up until he found something useful. He had drifted away from the elevator shaft entrance, and with nothing to stop his flight, he floated unheeded across the room. When he reached the far wall, he pushed away again, aiming himself back to the elevator shaft.

A twinge of dizziness passed as quick as it came, but made him check his air supply and systems—everything was working normally. He thought the tight suit was probably to blame and, keeping his breathing shallow, moved slower.

As he floated towards the elevator shaft, he swept the hall with his torch. The clothed skeletons were tangled in their chairs, exterminated where they sat, manning their post to the end. Without power, the *Hollywood* had perished, and every living creature within its magnificent structure had also died.

'Shine your torch over here please.'

'Arrgh!' shouted Trevor, expanding his chest so abruptly he almost split his spacesuit.

'Over here please,' repeated the thin monotone voice.

'Arrgh!'

'Over here please.'

Trevor ran, but his legs only spun in space. 'Tell me this is a nightmare,' he screamed, sure he was about to die.

'Shine your torch over here please.'

'I give up! I'll come peacefully. Don't shoot.' Trevor stopped running and raised his arms.

'Here, please... here, please... here, please...'

Curiosity liberated fear, and Trevor lowered his arms. Somehow, the faint tinny voice didn't seem life threatening; if anything, it sounded like a pitiful plea for help.

'I can't turn just yet,' said Trevor, not sure he even wanted to. 'Wait until I grab on to something.' He stuck his boot out and bumped it against a chair back. A clothed skeleton rolled out of the chair and floated away.

'Here, please...'

This time Trevor localised the voice and his torch beam found a pale-grey football, partially hidden behind a plinth on the far side.

'Come closer, please.'

'Thank God you're not a giant green creepy-crawly.' Trevor shook his head and wondered if he was suffering from oxygen starvation—why else would a football talk to him—why else would he talk to a football? He pushed away, reached another chair, pushed away, and stopped at the next chair. Now his torch shone directly on the ball.

'Ready for merging...' said the thin voice.

Resisting the urge to kick it, Trevor floated nearer still and steadied himself against a plinth. 'Um, are you speaking to me?'

'Yes. Please acknowledge merging.'

'I'm sorry, but I don't know what you mean.' He had the urge to scratch his head. 'What sort of merging? What do you want me to do?'

'I am...an... "AI-DME". Production number five, ready for merging. Please place your hands on me.'

'Now wait a minute,' said Trevor. 'Number one: what is an AI-DME? Number two: what is merging?'

'AI-DME is an abbreviation: Artificial Intelligence – Direct Mind Embedded. For ultimate functionality, we must merge. Please place your hands on me.'

'Yes, I see,' said Trevor, even though he didn't. 'This merging thing, can I leave my gloves on, or must I use bare hands?'

'Bare hands.'

'Well, I can't take my gloves off in this vacuum, so what do you suggest I do?'

'Suggestion is prohibited.'

Trevor checked the dials on his spacesuit again. He wondered if he really was suffering from lack of oxygen. Everything was working fine.

'Okay then,' he said, as if talking to a garden gnome, 'here's a simple question: how can you speak my language?'

'I read your mind.'

'What! How? That's an intrusion of privacy.' He soon calmed, too amazed to feel upset, thinking the invasion probably explained his dizzy spell. The itch on his head had started to drive him crazy and he cursed the helmet. 'Why merge with me?'

'You are the only acceptable living organism within range. You possess minor intelligence, but our psychological mechanisms are compatible. I detect a further ten living organisms; three of which are compatible but possess inferior intelligence; the other seven are incompatible.'

'You mean Russell? My brother? On the Mantis sphere?'

'Yes, one is named Russell, and he names you Trevor.'

'Is he all right? I mean, is he well?'

'His mind is confused.'

'Can you talk to him—put ideas in his head? I don't know—communicate with him?'

'No.'

'Oh,' said Trevor, disappointed. 'What can you do then, apart from nosing around in a person's mind?'

'I merge, comprehend, control, and store knowledge.'

'Hmm. I can understand "store knowledge", but what is it you "merge, comprehend and control"?''

'Yes.'

'Yes what?'

'Anything merge-able, comprehensible, or controllable.'

Trevor reached out, seized the ball between his gloved hands, and held it up to his visor. It was much harder than a football, more like a cannonball, but he still had a compulsion to kick it.

'Do you mean, for example, that you can control my mind?'

'That is forbidden.'

'What then, electronic equipment?'

'Yes.'

'No matter how complicated it is?'

'Yes.'

'Hmm. That sounds remarkable. How do you do that, must you plug in somehow?'

'I fuse telemetrically. I adapt and embed with any circuitry or software. The more complicated the structure, the easier it is to control.'

'Hmm,' said Trevor. He thought about it. A light operated by a mechanical switch can only be turned on or off by physically pressing the switch; whereas a light regulated by an electronic circuit could, feasibly, be fiddled with, especially if it were a sophisticated remote controlled switch. 'And why should you want to control a piece of electronic equipment?'

'That is the discretion of the person I am merged with.'

Trevor sighed. 'Sounds wonderful, what is my commitment to you if we merge?'

'None. I am only a tool.'

'What is your commitment to me?'

'Unconditional loyalty.'

'Hmm,' said Trevor. He absently checked his dials. 'How does this merge thing work in practice? What does it entail?'

'During the process of merging I learn your genetic make up and open a channel between us for extrasensory psychic communication. Words become unnecessary—I interpret your intentions. My senses become yours—your senses become mine. You will also have telepathic access to my memory. Merging is a fast and painless process.'

'How fast is fast?'

'That depends on your mental reaction and collaboration.'

Trevor wriggled inside his spacesuit, inching his stomach and chest into a more comfortable position. He groaned. Weightlessness made him feel queasy and disorientated, and the clumsy spacesuit made him feel awkward and vulnerable.

'I came here looking for a source of energy and food,' said Trevor. 'I'm in a desperate hurry to get back to the *Cloud*; and then I bump into you—whatever you are. Let's discuss this merging thing later. If you've no objections, I'll take you back with me—we can't do anything here.'

Ignoring the claustrophobia that threatened to engulf him, Trevor closed his eyes and gathered his

thoughts. 'In the meantime, will you help me? Can you tell me if there is a portable generator on board this spaceship?'

'Yes. There are several units. What are your requirements?'

'Can't you read my requirements directly from my mind?'

'Your thoughts are muddled and undisciplined.'

'I'm stressed out of my mind, that's the trouble. Specifically, I need something that can deliver twenty kilowatts, that's more than enough to cover the *Cloud's* energy needs.'

'The smallest generators supply enough energy to support the entire domestic needs of this spaceship.'

'Nothing smaller?'

'No.'

Trevor cursed. 'What is the physical size of this generator then? How much does it weigh?'

'Its dimension's are approximately twenty-five centimetres, by twenty centimetres, by fifteen centimetres. Seven-thousand, five-hundred cubic centimetres. It weighs approximately two kilograms.'

A mental picture formed in Trevor's mind. 'But that's only about the size of a toaster. Okay, what's the hitch? What kind of fuel does it use?'

'Water. One litre of water is sufficient for one year's operation with maximum load.'

'Water! Water? Oh man, that's fantastic. Take me to it... I love it.'

'Please carry me.'

Trevor tucked the ball under his arm and straightened up. 'Which way?'

'Through the door to your left, and turn left.'

Launching himself carefully, Trevor soon reached the door.

'Turn left and continue ten metres...'

Twenty minutes later, they drifted into a large storeroom. Tools and equipment floated everywhere, leaving most shelves empty. Some tools were recognisable, but Trevor couldn't even begin to guess the purpose of most.

'Oh boy,' whispered Trevor, wishing he wasn't trussed up in a spacesuit. It was like finding Aladdin's cave and he wanted to examine and investigate everything, but simply didn't have time. He sighed, and promised himself to return later.

He addressed the ball under his arm. 'What did you say you were called? AIDME? Yes, that was it, Aidme. Okay, Aidme, lead me to the generator.'

They pushed their way through the bedlam of equipment and Aidme indicated the generator. Trevor tucked the shinny block under his other arm, and fumbled his way back to the door.

'How do I connect it?'

'Energy is radiated as angular momentum and each piece of equipment draws energy as required.'

Trevor groaned. 'That's the hitch then, I can't use it... Listen, in the *Cloud*, I use good old-fashioned wires to carry electrical energy. How can I transform "angular momentum" to work for my system?'

'I cannot tell you.'

'What do you mean, you can't tell me? Don't you know, or is it a secret?'

'I cannot suggest, advise, counsel, or give an opinion. These things are your prerogative—I am merely a tool.'

'Okay, tool, is there some kind of motor in here; some kind of machine that can utilise the generator's power and transform it into kinetic rotating movement?'

'Yes.'

They ventured deeper into the storeroom, and Aidme guided him to something that resembled a cotton reel.

'What's this?' demanded Trevor. 'I need a motor that can deliver twenty kilowatts, not twenty peanuts.'

'This will deliver approximately forty-six times your requirements.'

Trevor gasped. 'You're joking? How can I control it?'

'There are two ways to configure its parameters. Either by utilising a remote control unit, or, once we have merged, through me.'

Trevor glanced at the clock on his sleeve and slipped the cotton reel motor into a spacesuit pouch. 'We have to hurry. My air is getting low. Lead the way out of here. I must get back to the *Cloud*.'

With Aidme tucked under one arm, and the generator tucked under the other, it took Trevor one hour and forty minutes to stumble back to the *Cloud*. He was so pleased to see it, still in place and unmolested, that he put Aidme against his helmet and blew a kiss.

'I have to go in first and configure the *Cloud* to accept you. Quickly now, what is your weight, size and density?'

Trevor memorised the details. He was frantic to get out of the spacesuit and left Aidme, the generator, and the motor floating inside Hollywood's long corridor where he could find them later.

Without help, he struggled to remove the spacesuit and uttered a few well-chosen swear words. For a fleeting moment, he considered leaving Aidme rather than don the bulky spacesuit once more; unfortunately, his need for the generator and motor left him with no choice. So, after configuring the computer to accept Aidme, and enjoying a moment of normal gravity, fresh air, and the luxury of rubbing his bruised ribs, he battled his way back into the spacesuit. He had been gone for one and a half hours.

'This might hurt,' said Trevor, making ready to fling Aidme into the *Cloud*. 'You gave me very precise measurements, so it shouldn't be too bad. However, I do have a slight problem getting the parameters one hundred percent correct.' Finding it impossible to cross his fingers in the bulky spacesuit, he bit his lip instead. 'Let's just hope you pass through safely. Ready?'

The moment Aidme entered the *Cloud*, static electricity erupted around its circumference. Trevor followed Aidme into the *Cloud* and watched in horror as the traces of static fizzed and spluttered in a brilliant green haze.

Gradually, the haze cleared.

'Can you still hear me?' Trevor picked up Aidme and shook it. 'Are you all right?'

Aidme answered immediately. 'I have absorbed electrical power and my level of energy is restored to normal.'

'Thank God, I was sure you'd been damaged.' Trevor closed the port, flipped his helmet latches, and drew his helmet off. With relief came fatigue. Excessive physical and mental activity caught up with him, and all he could think of was food and rest. 'What about the generator and motor, will they be damaged by the static?'

'Yes.'

'Then they'll have to wait until I figure out something.' He removed the spacesuit, taking less time now with practice. 'Come on,' he said, reaching for Aidme, 'I'll take you to my control room.'

'No need to carry me, I'm fully operational.'

Trevor watched wide eyed as Aidme floated to a position close to his right shoulder.

'I must be hallucinating,' said Trevor. A new thought occurred to him. 'You say you can control any piece of electronic equipment by fusing telemetrically. Does that mean you can

configure my computer program so the *Cloud* will accept the generator and motor? I mean accurately, so they won't suffer damage when I bring them aboard?'

'First, we must merge.'

'Yes, I thought you'd say that.'

Trevor felt too tired to think about anything other than food and sleep. He found a tray of *Wayfarer* food and gulped the contents. Then he leaned back and put his feet on the desk. 'Let's discuss this merging business later. At the moment I'm doing pretty well, I'm safe, I've eaten, I'm comfortable, I'm tired...'

Five hours later, painfully stiff legs and a torturous neck-ache wrenched him from sleep. He squinted at the monitor—everything okay, he glanced outside—nothing changed, he patted Aidme as if it was a sleeping baby; then went to bed where he slept for another seven hours.

'Okay, Mr Aidme,' said Trevor, taking his place by the desk and scanning the monitors on his computer. Battery power was low, he sighed, it needed charging again. 'I've decided to merge. You seem harmless enough and I can't see any other way out of this. How long does it take?'

'Your mind must be calm. Your body must be relaxed. At present, you are not ready.'

With a determined nod, Trevor marched to the trim-bike and peddled fifteen minutes. That would have to do. Then, with Aidme floating behind, he tramped to Russell's apartment, ate breakfast, selected soft music, and lay on the settee.

Aidme took up a position above Trevor's forehead. Trevor placed his hands on each side of the ball. Now he noticed the fine velvety surface, neither warm nor cold. His palms tingled. Aidme was lifeless, yet, for some inexplicable reason, vibrant.

'What should I think about?' asked Trevor.

'Nothing.'

'Just be calm and relaxed?'

'Yes.'

'Well that's not so easy, I'm nervous. How do I know I can trust you, and what will I feel?'

'We unite to form a single entity, but my presence will be totally inconspicuous, you will feel nothing.'

'Okay, I'll try to meditate. Russell has taught me, I'll do the best I can.'

He pictured Russell and went through the routine he'd taught him: *my feet, my toes, my thighs are warm and comfortable; my fingers, hands, and arms are warm and comfortable; my whole body is deeply relaxed. Take a deep breath—take another—and another. With every breath I take, I feel myself falling deeper and deeper into a relaxed state. My limbs are floating away, my torso, my chest, my head...my whole body is floating away...*

His palms tingled with pleasure; the sensation crept along his arms and mingled with a soft prickling in his body and brow. He drifted through time and space, aware only of well-being and peace. Then it all came back to him; his body, gravity, the sofa, and Aidme resting on his forehead.

'It is done,' said Aidme, rising away from Trevor's grasp.

'Have we merged?' asked Trevor.

'Yes.'

Trevor rubbed the top of his head with his fingertips, then placed his palms over his eyes. 'Well, I don't feel any different, but that meditation stuff was great. I've never experienced it like that before.'

He swung his feet to the floor, stood up, and made his way to the control room. 'Why are you still speaking to me if we're supposed to be telepathically merged?'

'Merging is subtle,' said Aidme, floating close behind. 'Your brain is underdeveloped. Our fusion will grow with practice.'

'This is it,' said Trevor, seating himself at his computer, realising how antiquated it must seem to Aidme. 'With this computer I control everything in the *Cloud*. What do you think?'

'I do not think.'

'Okay then. Leave the thinking to me. I want you to set the co-ordinates so I can bring the Hollywood generator and motor in here without damaging them. Do you understand what I am saying?'

'It is done.'

Trevor's jaw dropped. 'Already! Do you mean I can go and fetch them?'

'It is done.'

'How?'

'I read the intention in your mind, words alone are inadequate.'

'Yes, but how?'

'I cannot explain.'

'Well, let's see what you've done to my program.' Trevor's fingers flew across the keyboard as he searched for the modification. 'Ah! Here it is.' He read through the added parameters and smiled. 'It's exactly how I would have written it—more or less!'

Trevor put his hands in his lap and turned to study Aidme. The ball floated level with his right shoulder, within eyesight but constantly moving so as not to obstruct his vision. Right at this moment Aidme didn't move out of sight, obviously realising Trevor wanted to address him.

'This is where I find out whether you're a big bluff or not,' said Trevor. 'This is your chance to impress me, let's see how well it works.' He jumped to his feet and headed for the airlock. Aidme followed, floating one metre behind.

Surely I can come up with something better than this, thought Trevor, forcing himself back into the spacesuit. His ribs still ached from the previous day, and the tight spacesuit dug into his bruised chest like a carpenter's vice. As soon as he was entombed, he floated through the porthole into the *Hollywood*, grasped the generator and motor, and floated back. This time, there was no display of static around the new objects as he entered the *Cloud*, not even the slightest spark or crackle.

'Now that was hard to believe,' muttered Trevor. 'That was just too good to be true.'

He returned to the *Hollywood*, grabbed the first piece of debris he came across and flung it at the *Cloud*'s porthole, expecting it to pass straight through. It struck the invisible barrier and bounced away, the shield as selective and impenetrable as always.

Trevor hurried out of the spacesuit and went directly to his workshop in the *Cloud*'s basement. He placed the generator and motor on a workbench and checked the *Cloud*'s battery—it was almost flat again; but he was too excited to bother charging it.

In case of emergencies, Trevor had a diesel-driven generator in the workshop. It could never be used inside the *Cloud* because of the deadly exhaust fumes, but it was an excellent piece of equipment for outdoor use. It was shiny blue, had chunky rubber wheels, and had never been used.

He dragged the twenty-eight kilowatt generator to the room's centre and dismantled the covers. He was a skilful mechanic, and had equipped the *Cloud* with a comprehensive selection of hand and workshop tools. Within fifteen minutes, he had removed the generator's bulky diesel engine. The *Hollywood* cotton-reel motor was designed to fit on a square shaft. Trevor found a piece of square rod and filed it to size. After cutting the rod to length, he turned the ends in a mini lathe so

they fitted mountable bearings. With his new axel and motor in place, he fitted pulleys and connected the *Hollywood* motor to his blue generator with a taught fan belt.

That was it. His part was finished. The lathe had been a heavy electrical load and the battery was so run-down that the lights were reduced to a dim glow. He placed the *Hollywood* generator on a bench and turned to Aidme. 'Quickly now, where do I fill water?'

'The water container is beneath the black cap on top.'

Trevor poured in a cup of water and told Aidme to get it all working. Without delay, the new cotton-reel motor turned, and the fan belt squeaked as it picked up speed. Electric energy flooded into the *Cloud* and swamped the workshop with light. He reconnected the main batteries and heard the shiny blue generator whine under the load. He tidied away his tools, grinned ear-to-ear, and skipped back to the control room.

'Do you know what I'm going to do now?' said Trevor, speaking to Aidme as if it was a pet. 'I'm going to boil the kettle and make myself a hot cup of tea. And then I'm going to put some of that astronaut food in the microwave and eat a warm meal.'

First things first, he checked his computer monitor. The readings showed Russell's body temperature and heartbeat were normal. That was good, but it reminded him his situation was far from satisfactory. Russell was captive on the insects' sphere, and now he had to plan his rescue.

He turned his attention back to Aidme. 'Do you have any recollection of what happened to your spaceship before it was attacked and dumped here?'

'No.'

'Can you tell me anything about your people?'

'You are my person.'

'Yes, but do you know anything about the people who built you?'

'No.'

'Do you know anything at all of your past?'

'Only that which is stored in my non-volatile primary memory.'

'But you knew all about the generator and cotton-reel motor aboard the *Hollywood*. You understood my requirements and led me to them.'

'I sensed them.'

Trevor paused as he considered the implications. 'Didn't you sense the insects before they attacked the *Hollywood*?'

'I have no recollection.'

'No! No, of course you don't. Can you sense them now?'

There was a pause. 'Yes.'

'Could you warn me if they approached?'

'Yes.'

'Could you warn me of their intention?'

'Yes.'

'Can you sense anything through a forcefield?'

'I have insufficient data to reply.'

'Could you sense anything in the *Cloud* before you entered?'

'No.'

Trevor walked across the control room, turned, scratched his bristly chin, and shambled back to his desk. Aidme floated close by. 'How do you control electronic circuits and computer programs and whatever super advanced systems there are, when you don't know anything about them?'

'I consist of two entirely separate parts. One part controls, the other part stores data.'

'And your data memory is empty?'

'Yes.'

'Hmm!' Trevor continued his strolling, scratching his dirty lank hair. 'Let's see if I can interpret what happened to the *Hollywood*. Those sneaky Mantis attacked you by surprise. Perhaps you gave a warning, perhaps your masters had too little time to react, or perhaps they chose to be diplomatic and didn't take sufficient precautions, we'll never know. The insects drained your spaceship of all power, including you. You were, in effect, reset to factory settings.'

Aidme remained silent.

'The Mantis transported your spaceship here and drained all forms of moisture. You came back to life when my torchlight shone on you, giving you a glimmer of energy, much the same as the *Cloud*.'

Aidme still remained silent.

A thought occurred to Trevor. 'Is it possible you could operate the *Hollywood*?'

'Yes.'

'Make it fully functional again?'

'The main power source is damaged, but all life support and instruments can be made functional again.'

'Which parts can't be made functional then?'

'The drive, tractor beams and defence systems.'

'Defence systems? But thousands of your people lost their lives. The *Hollywood* is nothing more than a tomb now.' A new thought occurred to him. All that dust floating about in the *Hollywood* was crematoria ash. 'Oh man! What went wrong?'

Aidme hung motionless, silent. Trevor shook his head. 'I don't suppose we'll ever know. Let's forget the past and concentrate on the future. We'll need to find something aboard the *Hollywood* that can produce food. But before we think about food, we need to rescue Russell.'

He changed the subject. 'What about the Mantis' sphere, can you control that?'

'The Mantis' sphere is protected by a weak forcefield. My functionality is restricted.'

'If we get inside, can you cripple the sphere somehow?'

'To harm, damage or kill any living creature is prohibited. It is also prohibited to damage or permanently adapt equipment.'

'What if my life was in danger?'

'Your survival takes priority over other living creatures. I would comply with your instructions within certain incorruptible parameters.'

Trevor glanced at Aidme and grinned. He wasn't sure of the full implications yet, but he was certain his life had taken a bizarre and incredible turn. Aidme promised allegiance, for better or worse, and somehow or other was bonded to him for life.

'Can you read Russell's mind?' asked Trevor.

'He is too far away. I can only sense his presence and mood.'

Trevor nodded, waited for more information, then said, 'Aidme, you promise to be an extremely useful ally, and I wait excitedly for the day we can communicate without words. Until then, could you please answer me more thoroughly. Tell me what Russell's mood is—surely I shouldn't need to ask.'

'Russell is happy but confused.'

'Yes! Yes! Come on, tell me more, you're still not anticipating what I need to know—what is Russell confused about?'

'His surroundings.'

Trevor gave up, he was getting nowhere. If the thinking is up to him he'd better get on with it. He couldn't make the *Cloud* invisible, the Mantis would think he had departed and most probably kill Russell. Poor Russell, he wondered what he was doing and why he was confused about his surroundings.

Trevor pulled open a drawer and took out a Zip-Linq. 'Russell has one of these gadgets,' he said, holding it in the palm of his outstretched hand. 'Can you locate it, or are we too far away?'

'I have located it.' said Aidme.

'Can you communicate with it and display sound and pictures on my computer screen—without the signal being intercepted by the Mantis?'

Instantly, the computer screen showed a green ceiling, and the sound of gentle snoring rasped from the tinny computer speakers.

Trevor almost fell out of chair with excitement. 'Russell's asleep,' he said, tilting the computer screen slightly. 'Oh boy, this is great. Now then, Aidme, since the Mantis located Russell so easily on the *Hollywood*, I expect they know all about the Zip-Linq. But now I want privacy. Can you fix it so I can talk to Russell without the insects monitoring the signal?'

'It is done.'

'Russell. Russell,' whispered Trevor. 'Wake up, can you hear me?'

The sound of sleep ended in an abrupt snort.

'It's me, Trevor. Can you hear me, in the Zip-Linq?'

The picture blurred as Russell grabbed his Zip-Linq and held it to his ear.

'Is that you, Trevor? Or is this another sneaky trick?'

'Yes, it's me, your brother, up in the *Cloud*. Are you all right? Where are you? What's happening?'

'We're very comfortable, thank you very much, living in luxury. Glad to hear your voice again. How are you?'

'We!' exclaimed Trevor, 'What do you mean by "we"?''

'The two astronauts from the *Wayfarer* are here. John and Sam are their names. They're healthy, but not very happy. They want to go home. So do I. What shape are you in?'

'Well, I've had a little victory. I've destroyed all four of the insects' space shuttles, tell the men that, it might cheer them up. Apart from that, I've managed to get the *Cloud* fully functional again. I've reinstated full power.' He chose to keep Aidme a secret, in case the Mantis were listening.

'Great! We're almost home then, and for your information Sam is a woman and she's married to John. What time can you pick us up?'

Trevor laughed. It was good to hear his brother's light-hearted optimism again. 'Perhaps you're living so luxuriously you don't want to come home. Perhaps I should come and live with you. Move the camera around, let me see your luxury.'

The picture blurred as Russell jumped up and swung the camera into a suitable position.

'This is my dojo,' said Russell, he walked slowly, directing the camera this way and that. 'And this is my swimming pool...'

Trevor laughed out loud.

'What's so funny?' asked Russell, already suspecting the answer.

'You are. Your jokes.'

'Is the swimming pool too small for your liking?'

'Russell. All I can see are empty rooms and bright green walls.'

CHAPTER 8 Despair

Russell smiled and dropped his tense shoulders. It felt like he had removed a heavy rucksack from his back. He knew it. His suspicions were confirmed. Everything around him was a gigantic illusion. No wonder his mind had been so confused.

'Just exactly what can you see?' he asked.

'Bare floors, bare rooms, and everything painted green.'

'What about room size?' Russell placed his hand on the wall by his left side. 'This is one wall.' He marched across to the opposite wall. 'This is another. And this is another...'

'Yes,' said Trevor. 'Nice big rooms, they match up with what you see. Ah! Over there. A metal table, three metal stools and three metal mugs. All green.'

Russell sat on a stool. 'This is my mahogany dining table, and I'm sitting in a fine upholstered carver chair.'

'Sorry to disillusion you, but all I can see is bare green metal.'

'Funny thing is,' said Russell, 'I believe you. But it doesn't help, everything I see and feel around me is pure luxury.'

'I can see the temperature is twenty-eight degrees, nice and warm at least. What's that room on your left?'

Russell strolled to the door and passed through. 'This is the reception hall where we came in and where they take us out for interrogation. All our apartments lead off from here.'

'Interrogation! What have they done to you?'

'Never mind for now, I'll tell you all about it when we meet. What else can you see?'

Before answering, Trevor drew a deep breath to control his rising anger. 'I can see your spacesuit in the corner, but otherwise it's as empty as all the other rooms. You do realise there's not a single door anywhere, only open arches?'

'I can see fine mahogany doors with shining brass handles,' said Russell.

'Just walk though! Go on. There's nothing there, just an open hole.'

Standing in front of John's apartment, Russell closed his eyes, stepped forward, and bumped into the unyielding door. He opened his eyes and thumped the door with his fist. 'It's solid,' he shouted, 'can't you hear it?'

'I can't hear anything, Russell. You're knocking against thin air.'

Russell thumped harder.

Suddenly, the door swung inwards.

'Have you gone mad?' demanded John. 'What's the matter with you? You know it's never locked. Come in before you bust it off its hinges.'

'Say hallo to John,' said Russell, aiming the Zip-Linq at John's face.

'What the devil's gotten into you?' asked John, then called over his shoulder. 'Sam. Come here. Russell has cracked up!'

Russell couldn't help but chuckle. 'I'm talking to my brother, Trevor, and hopefully, he can see and hear you?'

'Yes,' said Trevor, in his pip-squeaky Zip-Linq voice. 'Hallo, John. My name is Trevor, Russell's brother, calling from what we call the *Cloud*. Pleased to meet you.'

'Well I'll be darned,' said John, rubbing his bald head. 'What kind of wacko people are you guys...?'

Sam crept up behind John and peeked over his shoulder. 'What...?'

'Our new buddy has flipped at long last,' said John.

'In what way?' Sam studied Russell for a moment. 'He looks a mite more excited than normal, but he's smiling just as easy. Same old happy-go-lucky kid. How do you feel, Russell, what's the problem?'

'I'm talking to my brother on the *Cloud*, and Johnny boy here thinks I've turned mad. Do me a favour. Go and make us a cup of tea or coffee, and find something to eat; I want Trevor to follow our actions.'

From his desk in the *Cloud*, comfortable and safe, Trevor watched the three move around, their actions mimicked perfectly the process of preparing morning coffee. The absurdity of grown adults holding imaginary cups to their mouths and eating imaginary cake would have made him choke with laughter if their physical condition wasn't so painfully haggard.

'I'll have to leave you to it,' said Trevor. 'The Zip-Linq's batteries won't last forever. I wish you luck in explaining the situation to John and Sam. I'll call you back later. By the way, here's something important: there are only seven Mantis on the sphere. Don't ask me how I know, just trust me. Bye for now.'

The coffee tasted delicious. All three prisoners on the insects' sphere sat in silence, sipped their coffee, and chewed their cake with thoughts elsewhere. They sat like that until John took the last piece of cake, licked his finger tip, dabbed at the remaining few crumbs, and refilled their cups.

'Perhaps you'd like to "explain the situation",' he said, gazing directly at Russell like a strict headmaster.

Sam fidgeted like an excited schoolgirl, hoping to hear good news.

'My brother says the *Cloud* is fully operational again. I knew he'd fix it.' He gazed from one to the other. 'This next part is difficult to explain...'

The two astronauts waited patiently while Russell pursed his lips and tapped his fingers on the oak coffee table. He turned to Sam and smiled.

'Wasn't that Dundee cake delicious?'

Sam raised her eyebrows at the unexpected question. 'Well, yes!'

'We ate every last crumb.'

'Yes.'

'We spend most of our time eating, don't we? It's amazing we're not as fat as beer barrels. Look at you two, I've never seen you exercise, but you've got bodies like Barbie and Schwarzenegger. Tell me, how would you describe the taste of the cake?'

'Hey, man,' said Sam. 'Perfect. Heavenly.'

'Yes, but what did it taste like?'

'Nice and sweet, just how I like it. And those cherries tasted fresh and juicy...'

'Cherries?' said John. 'I detest cherries. I don't like too much fruit in a cake and I certainly don't like it too sweet. Cherries? I didn't find any. I thought it tasted moist and buttery. A soft sponge cake with only an odd raisin here and there. Just how I like it.'

'Well mine was full of jelly babies,' said Russell, and licked his finger.

'Okay,' said John, placing his hands on his knees. 'What's your point?'

'The point is...everything here is a figment of our imagination. None of it exists. We haven't been eating cake and drinking coffee, we're not sitting at a...'

'Damn!' shouted John. He hit the table with a clenched fist and jumped to his feet. Coffee cups bounced into the air and his chair tipped over backward. 'Damn it! You're crazy. A certifiable loony. A...'

'Take it easy, John,' said Sam, picking up the chair. She fetched a dishcloth from the kitchen and wiped spilt coffee.

John stood with his face to the wall, repeatedly clenching and opening his fists, his backbone rigid as a flagpole.

'Come and sit at the table,' said Sam. 'Let's hear him out. I've been wondering about all this myself—and so have you.'

'If he's got that stupid grin on his face I swear I'll knock it off. He won't have a face left to grin with.'

'Come on, John. You're not angry with Russell. You're angry because he might just be right.'

John slumped his shoulders. 'Okay,' he sighed, and turned to face them. 'You're right Sam, I have been wondering but I just can't believe it. Ever since that conversation by the billiard table I've tried my darnedest to find some kind of indication that all this is an illusion. It's too damn real. One of us is mad and I don't think it's me. Nothing personal, Russell, I apologise.'

He walked back to the table and held out his hand. Russell shook it and grinned wider than ever.

'That's it,' said John, 'keep smiling, sonny boy. Forget the things I said. You just keep smiling and talking—I'll listen.'

'Thanks,' said Russell, and patted John's arm. 'Now then, as I said, we are living in a figment of our own imagination. I find it difficult to believe too, John, but Trevor could see our surroundings from the camera in the Zip-Linq,' he held up the gadget, 'and all he could see was green walls and bare essentials. We don't even experience exactly the same things, as the example with the cake shows.'

'It makes sense to me,' said Sam, nodding. 'All this luxury is too good to be true. Is there anything we can do to get back to reality?'

'The best thing we can do at the moment,' said Russell, 'is to carry on as we are. The gourmet food and delicious cakes are scrumptious, why spoil the illusion? But what we can do is make a plan to get out of here. You heard what Trevor said, there are only seven of them.'

'I reckon they weigh less than fifty kilos,' said John, 'and each of us weigh closer to a hundred; twice their weight. I'd like to get my hands on those ugly brutes. I'd pluck their legs out and pop their eyes.'

'Okay! Okay!' said Sam, stroking John's forearm. 'Supposing we did overpower them. What then? We can't get out of these rooms, and even if we could, what do you propose we do? Suppose they call for help, you know, call in the cavalry. And they certainly have weapons, what could we do about that?'

'Once we overpower them,' said Russell, 'all we need is enough time for my brother to pick us up. When I call him on the Zip-Linq he could manoeuvre the *Cloud* alongside and we could jump across.'

'Without spacesuits?' said John, shaking his head. 'Without spacesuits you wouldn't live for more than ten seconds.'

'Now, John, don't exaggerate,' said Sam. 'We can stay conscious for about ten seconds; it won't be very pleasant, but ten seconds are more than enough time to leap across, and we won't suffer any permanent damage—nothing long lasting.'

'It might be more unpleasant than you think,' said Russell, remembering the pain he endured the first time he entered the *Cloud*. 'But I expect Trevor can bring the *Cloud* right up close, touching even. That's how I boarded the Hollywood, it takes less than two seconds to cross.'

They looked at each other for a moment, each of them searching for a better solution. Russell smiled, Sam fidgeted, and John frowned like a grumpy chess player deciding his next move.

'There's bound to be fighting,' said Russell, 'leave that to me, I know a trick or two.'

'All seven of them?' asked Sam, her eyebrows rose so high they almost reached her hairline.

'They may not be big,' said Russell, 'but they have incredible speed in their claw arm; and their claws are as powerful as bolt cutters. Because none of it exists, we can't use my weaponry, we can't even throw a plate at them. So we'll have to use our bare hands, and in hand-to-claw combat you two wouldn't stand a chance.'

'And you would?'

'Yes!' said Russell, 'I would. But I'll have to work at this hallucination puzzle or we'll never get out of here.' He thanked the two of them for coffee and cake and wandered into the reception hall. He pressed the blue button on his Zip-Linq and waited for his brother to answer.

'Yes, Russell, I'm here.'

'One quick question,' he said, pointing the camera at the main entrance door. 'Is this door open or shut?'

'Shut. Move closer so I can see if there's a way of opening it. Yes, it looks like a... It opened! Russell, it's a sliding door and it opened when you approached. Can't you see it?'

'Nothing happened as far as I can see.' Russell tried the handle. 'It's closed and locked solid.'

'But you could walk through if you wanted. Step away again. There, it closed. Step closer. Yes, it opened. If you can't see it, dear brother, you must be totally brainwashed.'

'Okay, Trevor, thanks. I've got some work to do with my perception of things. Bye for now, we'll be in touch.'

~*~

Most western Caucasians find it impossible to sit in the lotus position. Their knee and hip joints aren't built for torture. Russell easily slid into the posture. He closed his eyes, breathed calmly, and drifted into deep meditation where his consciousness was liberated from the limitations of flesh, and from the pitfalls of thought, and from the delusions of senses.

In this state of semi-conscious awareness, Russell directed his attention to his third eye. He had used this technique many times before, and although his eyes were closed, he could see his true surroundings clearly. Rising to his feet, and moving with a sensation like sleepwalking, he faced the main door. His third eye watched it open. Acknowledging the reality, he walked through into the corridor beyond.

The door closed behind him, smooth and soundless, fitting so precisely it vanished into the wall. Away from their lodgings, the insects' mentally controlled hallucination ended abruptly, and the peace which engulfed Russell's mind, like a piercing siren finally turned off, made him gasp with relief.

He slid out of meditation and opened his eyes. The first thing he noticed was his hunger. His stomach cried out for food and his tongue was dry as kitchen towel. The stench of stale sweat from his own body made him wrinkle his nose with disgust. Then he looked down at himself and noticed blotchy blood stains on his dirty shorts and tee-shirt. He touched his raw, bruised scalp and felt his hair was stiff and matted with dry blood.

This is revolting, he thought. *We're living like pigs—undernourished pigs*. He pulled his tee-shirt off and laid it on the floor to mark the door's position. The sight of his skinny body made his stomach churn. He yanked at his baggy shorts and hoped they wouldn't fall down.

Seconds passed and his well-trained senses watched for danger. The walls and ceiling glowed a shade of green he found pleasant, and his taut nerves eased. He breathed softly and stood motionless for five minutes, alert for alarms or the patter of insect claws.

He recalled the last time he had seen the corridor, on his way to the interrogation surgery, and a little quiver ran along his spine. No doors were open this time and he found it impossible to guess where they might be in the smooth surface. Careful to avoid activating hidden doors and giving himself away, he chose to go left and tiptoed along the middle of the corridor.

Judging from the curve in the walls, Russell estimated its circumference was something like an athletics' running track. He felt exposed and vulnerable, and creeping along at tiptoe speed made the corridor seem endless. Clicking insect sounds came from somewhere ahead and he halted, ready to retreat, but the sounds drew no closer so he inched forward. A broad open archway in the inside wall came into view. He stretched out along the floor and wriggled forward until his head peeped around the bottom edge.

The room was as large as a circus tent, and perfectly round with a flat floor and high-domed ceiling. In the centre was a glass dome, like a large-scale upside-down pudding basin filled with swirling green mist. Three insects were spaced equally around the glass dome; each insect swayed on its spindly legs and clicked at irregular intervals, so occupied in their mysterious activity that Russell went unnoticed.

Russell had seen enough and pulled back from the entrance. So far, he had been lucky, but there were another four insects somewhere that could appear at any time. He made his way back as stealthily as he had come, found his tee-shirt, and pulled it over his head. The door to his reception hall slid open, and he braced himself for the mind control. *I'll do this with my eyes closed*, he decided, and stepped across the threshold. *I refuse to play their game. I refuse to let my mind be manipulated. I shall hold on to reality...*

He blinked twice then screwed his eyes shut for a moment. Fine mahogany doors and a plush carpet welcomed him. His tee-shirt and shorts were immaculately clean, and his body was well fed and healthy. A pair of soft slippers waited outside the door to his apartment. He slipped them on and flopped to his kitchen where he poured a glass of fresh grapefruit juice and gulped it down. *This tastes good*, he thought, *very good. But the Mantis have control of my mind, and that is bad, extremely bad. I don't know how they do it, but one thing is certain—I will put a stop to it.*

~*~

'What's up, brother?' asked Trevor, answering his Zip-Linq early next morning. 'Have you come up with something?'

'Not yet, but we're trying to work out a plan and need some advice.'

'I'm listening,' said Trevor.

'I managed to have a little scout about yesterday, but I couldn't find a way into any of the docking ports. John doesn't think the doors will open with so much damage on the other side. So we need to know how badly damaged they are, and whether you can open them from the outside.'

'I'll need to take a closer look,' said Trevor. 'Give me a few hours and I'll get back to you.'

'Okay, good. But be careful, remember: these insects are sneaky. They don't ask questions, they simply attack.'

Trevor turned away from his computer and rubbed his eyes. The sight of so much blood and bruising on his brother's thin and scruffy body alarmed him. But now a plan was in the air and his brother would soon be back. Glad to get on and do something positive, he turned to Aidme and asked: 'Can you operate the inside doors in those ports?'

'Only if they are not damaged.'

'And we are too far away from the Mantis' sphere for your sensors to penetrate their forcefield, so you can't tell me for certain?'

'Correct.'

Trevor blew dust from his computer screen, fiddled with his pencils and papers, then sat back in his chair and studied Aidme. 'I've sat here like a useless slob far too long. Those three people in the insects' sphere are undernourished and weak, and they'll die of hunger and thirst unless we do something fast.'

Trevor swung away from his desk and folded his arms. 'All right, Aidme, I'm giving you control of the *Cloud*, and this is what I want you to do: move towards the sphere and stop as soon as we are close enough for your senses to penetrate their forcefield. If you can't penetrate their forcefield before we get there, stop directly in front of the nearest port. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

With Aidme at the controls, the *Cloud* moved so fast that Trevor didn't have time to register their flight. The sphere suddenly appeared as if it had been there in the darkness all the time, and someone had turned the searchlights on.

'Is it possible?' said Trevor, eyes wide. 'Are you really that adept?'

'We are close enough.'

'Close enough to answer my question? Can you operate those inside port doors?'

'Two are damaged. Two are operational.'

Trevor picked up his binoculars and studied the Mantis' sphere. His hands shook, the lenses steamed, and the sphere was still too far away to make out details. He laid the binoculars down and turned to face Aidme.

'How do you move about?'

'I follow you.'

'But what propels you? What makes you float and move?'

'The technical details are not stored in my data bank.'

Trevor had to accept the answer and assumed Aidme moved as unconsciously as Trevor moved his own legs when he walked. 'If we leave the *Cloud*, with me in my spacesuit, can you pull me over to the alien sphere?'

'Yes.'

'Good!' said Trevor, and rubbed his chin. 'Do you think they'll notice us?'

'I cannot advise you.'

'No. Of course. I forgot.' He rubbed his chin harder. 'I know you can't damage or harm them in any way, but can you make us invisible on their radar, or tracking system, or camera or whatever. Do you understand? I want to get inside their docking ports, and I don't want them to know we're there.'

'I understand.'

Trevor forced himself back into the tight spacesuit. It only took him twenty minutes to dress this time. He groaned, his ribs were still bruised and sore. He made a final air and battery check; the readings were low, he should have recharged them, but there was plenty left for this short mission.

He positioned himself on the *Cloud's* threshold and looked out into space. The sphere was directly in front, small and distant. 'Are you sure you can pull me all the way there and back?'

'Yes.'

'You've got plenty of power?'

'Yes.'

'And they won't see us coming?'

'No.'

He turned and looked back into the *Cloud* as if he might never see it again. 'I hope this isn't the last thing I ever do—lost in space on the edge of the universe, floating about in a clumsy primitive spacesuit.' He drew a deep breath, bent his knees as far as he could in the stiff spacesuit, and launched himself from the *Cloud's* safety.

Aidme moved into a position above Trevor's head, and Trevor grabbed hold.

'Okay, start pulling!' His voice shook, and his heart beat faster than a cricket's chirp. 'And as soon as you can, make us invisible to their instruments.'

'We are invisible,' said Aidme.

They accelerated towards the sphere and Trevor hung on behind Aidme with all his strength. As they decelerated during the second half of the journey, Trevor's body swung around so his feet pointed towards the sphere and his arms threatened to pop out of their sockets.

They stopped inside the nearest docking port. Trevor squinted back to the *Cloud*; from this distance it was no bigger than a golf ball. The problem with golf balls, he thought, is that they are so easily lost! 'Have you left a channel open for yourself,' he asked Aidme. 'So you can control the *Cloud*—even from here?'

'Yes.'

'Good thinking.'

'It was your idea.'

'I never told you to do that.'

'I read the intention in your mind.'

'Oh! Is that how it works?'

'Yes.'

Trevor felt his confidence rise. With Aidme on his side he really thought he had a chance of success. 'Is this one of the docking ports with an undamaged interior door?'

'Yes.'

Trevor glanced around. The port looked like a crude empty cave, bare after sudden exposure to vacuum had drawn everything out. Both the outside port and part of the wall were missing, torn away with the destroyed shuttle. Twisted remains of the shuttle had melted and welded to the hole's jagged edge.

The interior door appeared whole and undamaged. The door was all that stood between them and the sphere's inner secrets. It was all that stood between them and salvation for the other three. 'Can you operate it?'

'No!'

Trevor understood. 'Do you mean "no" because you can't, or do you mean "no" because you didn't ought to?'

'Opening this door will cause decompression of the dwelling within. All life forms will be annihilated.'

'Yes, yes. That's what I thought. But does it still work—can you operate it?'

'Yes.'

'Then all I need to do is find a way to seal off that gaping outside hole. Perhaps I could...'

Aidme's thin voice interrupted.

'ATTENTION! DANGER! A spacecraft has materialised in the near vicinity.'

'What! Where? What kind of spacecraft?'

'It is inhabited by the same organisms as those who inhabit this sphere. They are positioned close to the *Cloud*.'

'Damn! Take us back to the *Cloud*.' Trevor launched himself backwards into space with Aidme tucked firmly into the pit of his stomach. 'Get us there as quick as you can. What are they doing?'

'A robust forcefield has been erected around the spaceship. My senses are blocked. The forcefield also encompasses the *Cloud*.'

'What! What are you saying?'

'A robust forcefield is now encompassing the new spaceship and the *Cloud*.'

'Can't you turn it off? We have to get back into the *Cloud*.'

'The forcefield is impenetrable.'

'Oh damn!' Trevor closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. 'What can we do then?'

'I cannot advise you.'

'Damn! damn! damn! Take us back to the sphere. No, not there, I can't do anything from there. I have to get away. Take us to the *Hollywood*. Can they see us from that new spaceship? No. Don't bother to answer—you don't know.'

Aidme pressed so hard into Trevor's stomach the gravitational force made him light headed. After forty-five minutes they swung around and began to decelerate. After another forty-five minutes they floated into Hollywood's open port.

'Have they followed us?'

'No.'

'I almost wish they had,' said Trevor, despair polluting his thinking. In the far distance he could make out the oval shape of a green opalescent forcefield, like a jellyfish without tentacles. 'They'll start digging at the *Cloud* now, find some way of getting in.' He read his spacesuit instruments. 'Not that it matters much, I've only got half an hour of air left...'

'The forcefield is waning,' said Aidme.

Trevor strained to see. The forcefield blinked out and he saw the *Cloud*, no larger than a frogspawn at this distance. Next to it, hung the new alien spaceship, as large as a frog. Three pin-pricks of light drifted away from the frog and headed towards the Mantis sphere. Then the forcefield flashed back into place and the *Cloud* was lost.

'What did you find out while their forcefield was down?' asked Trevor.

'There are no life forms left on board the battleship.'

'A battleship, is it? They're not playing cat and mouse any more... Is that all you can tell me?'

'It is the only question I read in your confused mind.'

'Yes, I was a bit slow there. Well what are they planning to do now? Can you read the minds of those insects on the shuttles?'

'They have a repair crew with them.'

'Yes, anything else?'

'When the iMantis' sphere is fully operational they will concentrate on entering the *Cloud*.'

Trevor sighed. The lumbering *Wayfarer* spacesuit would soon be his coffin. He sighed again and wriggled into a new position, seeking to take pressure off his ribs and belly. 'So this is my fate, this is where it all ends,' he said. 'I'm so sorry, Russell, I'm afraid I've let you down. Live in peace aboard the sphere, and may God be with you...'

'Russell is calling from his Zip-Linq,' said Aidme.

'Don't answer,' said Trevor. 'Let him live in hope. Let him live happily until the Mantis manage to board the *Cloud*...'

~*~

Unaware of Trevor's predicament, the two men and one woman imprisoned on the Mantis' sphere sat around a kitchen table nibbling crisps and drinking coffee.

'He isn't answering.' Russell frowned. 'I hope he's all right.'

'The guy's sleeping.' Sam wiped her greasy fingers on a paper napkin, then dabbed her mouth. 'Try again later.'

'We're in agreement then,' said John. 'We rush them. Surprise them. It's the same tactic they use. They'll never suspect we'll try to overpower them by brute force. It isn't much of a plan, but it's all we can do.'

The three humans sat in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, none of them especially enthusiastic about their prospects.

'Presuming we escape,' said John, putting words to his thoughts, 'how long do you think we can survive in the *Cloud* without food?'

Russell shrugged. 'We'll sort something out.'

'Well, from what Russell tells us,' said Sam, 'the *Cloud* is at least as comfortable as this place. If nothing else, we could spend the rest of our lives exploring the universe. Maybe we'll never find our own planet Earth, or ever see our families again...but there must be millions of other planets we could settle on.'

'I know you want to get back home,' said Russell. 'So do I. It's harder for you though—you've got kids.'

'If they're still alive.'

John stared long at Sam and nodded. 'You're worried about what these Goddam insects are doing to our planet?'

'There might not be anything worth going back for,' said Sam. She broke John's stare and studied her empty coffee cup as if reading tea leaves. 'We've been away so long, the whole planet could be dead by now—dead as Mars.'

'Now then,' said John, and placed his hand on Sam's forearm. 'It hasn't been much over a fortnight yet. Our family is quite safe. It's too early to give up hope.'

'I don't know how fast the *Cloud* can travel.' Russell poured hot coffee into Sam's cup from a shiny chrome flask. 'I don't want to sound pessimistic, but Trevor says we might never reach a hospitable planet in our lifetimes. But then again, Trevor is an extraordinarily clever chap, he has never let me down, he always comes up with something.'

'Yes! You're both right.' Sam tried to smile. 'We have to get away from here whatever happens. I don't think any of us are the type to sit around in prison, however comfortable it might be.'

'And don't forget,' said Russell, 'all this luxury is only a figment of our imagination. Who knows what kind of food we're really eating; perhaps nothing, perhaps they're gradually starving us to death.'

'Okay!' John poured himself another coffee. 'We agree we want to get out of here.' He turned his attention to Russell. 'Let's be honest about this, they are going to come for you again; and when they do—we'll rush them.'

They raised their coffee cups, clinked them together, and drank a toast.

'Let God be with us,' said John.

'Amen,' said Sam.

'So be it,' said Russell.

Their smiles faded away, their prospects still looked grim.

'John,' said Sam, 'what makes you think they'll come for Russell again?'

'Because they will want to interrogate him further. Can you imagine how riled they must be with that *Cloud* contrivance, and the damage they've suffered, and his brother gallivanting about as he pleases? You mark my words, they haven't finished with Russell yet, they'll pick his brains until they find the secret.'

'All the more reason for getting away from here,' said Sam.

'I don't think it'll be long before they come for him either. They're hacked off and want revenge.' John came around the table and laid his hand on Russell's shoulder. 'Even though you don't know how the *Cloud* works, there might be some clue they can latch onto, something you heard your brother talking about which'll give them enough information to figure out the rest. I know you resisted them last time and led them a song and dance, but they won't give up—not until they kill you in the process.'

Russell smiled unruffled. 'When they come, we fight back.'

The others nodded.

'I'll try Trevor again. He'll need to act fast when the fighting starts.' He pressed the blue button and waited for Trevor to answer. His smile faded and a crease in his brow deepened. 'No answer,' he said.

'Perhaps it's broken, suggested Sam, 'or the insects are blocking the signal?'

'Yeah. Or maybe you've simply run out of battery,' said John.

'So what do we do now when the insects come for you?' asked Sam. 'It won't do us much good capturing the sphere if we can't contact your brother.'

'Let's hope he's sleeping,' said Russell and jumped to his feet. 'It's past bedtime, let's get some sleep ourselves. See you folks later.'

~*~

Russell stirred and woke. A menacing sound had roused him from a restless sleep and he wondered what was wrong. He wanted to sleep longer, but now he rolled on his back and listened.

A faint insect clicking noise came from the reception hall and Russell climbed out of bed to investigate. After rubbing his eyes, shaking his limbs out, and stretching, he padded bare feet into the hall. As he suspected, a small committee of Mantis were assembled there.

'We've got company,' he called to John and Sam. 'Four of our green friends are in the hall and they've all got a very agitated twitch in their antennae. I think you'd better hurry up and get here.' Then, with a broad friendly smile, he turned to the Mantis and said: 'Would you be kind enough to step into my dojo?'

Without waiting for an answer or giving the insects time to react, he strode to the centre of his dojo and turned to face them.

Two followed.

An open claw streaked towards Russell's arm. He was ready. With a languid twist, he swept the claw to one side, and in the same agile movement chopped the insect across the back of its spindly neck. It fell limp.

The second insect flashed both claws at Russell's throat, but was a fraction too slow. Russell gathered both of the insect's arms under his own right arm and lifted the insect into the air. It weighed less than he had expected.

A third insect rushed forward, moving swiftly on four spindly legs. Russell pivoted on his left heel and, using the insect trapped under his arm as a club, swept the third insect aside.

An insect leg snapped, making a sound like a broken twig.

'Sorry!' said Russell. 'You're more fragile than I thought.'

The fourth insect grew rigid, its antennae gyrating like worms held by their tail. Its spindly legs tensed, uncertain whether to spring forward and fight or spring back into the corridor to fetch reinforcements. Choosing the latter, it took a jerky step backwards into the hall.

Unseen in the commotion, Sam had picked up the spacesuit helmet. With a howling scream, she swung the helmet in a wide arc and hit the insect directly between its eyes. With a sickening thud, the Mantis crashed to the ground, its body laying halfway across the threshold.

'Come on!' Russell jumped over the inert insect into the corridor beyond.

The astronauts followed. As soon as they were all in the corridor, Russell kicked the lifeless Mantis into their reception hall. The door slid shut and disappeared into the wall. With a powerful karate kick, Russell buckled the door inwards, jamming it securely.

Both astronauts grabbed their heads as if a crown of thorns had been lifted. They coughed and groaned and sobbed with relief.

'Welcome to the real world,' said Russell.

John sniffed and rested his arms around Russell and Sam's shoulders. 'But look at the state of us,' he said, looking down at his own body, then at Sam's. 'Is this reality? My God, Russell, you were right, we look like scarecrows with half the stuffing missing.' He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and rallied them like a football coach. 'Let's get the last three! The three of them against the three of us, come on, we're almost home.'

The floor thudded like a kettledrum as they ran, and the walls reverberated as if terrified by the hysterical war cries of three wild humans. They plunged into the control room and froze. At least twelve Mantis were huddled in a group, crouching behind the glass dome for safety. Only Russell sprinted forward without hesitating.

At the last instant, Russell threw himself to the floor and slid into the insects, bowling them over like skittles. He rolled to his feet and faced them. Two remained standing, the others jerked and jabbered in a tangled mess.

In the corner of his eye, Russell noticed another small group of Mantis standing by the far wall, fumbling with something in their claws. Russell looked for something to throw, anything would do, a knife would have been perfect, but nothing fell to hand.

Sam and John saw the danger and charged forward. Russell joined them. A lone Mantis lifted a weapon its claw, and a fraction before the three humans reached the insect, a wave of throbbing pressure hit them.

Russell was seized in an earthquake. His bones rattled in their joints, his vision blurred, and his teeth clattered together as if he was caught in a freezing blizzard. His muscles locked in tension and threatened to tear his body apart. His heart stopped beating and his lungs refused to pump. After fifteen agonising seconds he lost balance and crumpled unconscious to the ground.

~*~

Giddy perception returned. Russell felt the cold interrogation bench against his back, he felt the clamps, he felt the helmet jammed on his head, and he saw one insect creature crouching over him on either side. Finally, he saw a long hypodermic syringe and felt it pressed into his jugular artery. The pain was unbearable.

~*~

'Are you awake?

Far away, almost inaudible, Russell imagined he heard a voice. The cold was real; he shivered, and the shivering reminded him of the earthquake. He fell asleep.

~*~

'Can you hear me?'

Yes, I can hear you, thought Russell. *But my head is full of treacle and I can also hear water dripping and splashing and gurgling. I can hear you and I can smell decay and sewage. I can hear you but you're so far away...* He fell asleep.

'Russell, wake up!'

John?

'I can hear you,' Russell heard his own voice say, 'but I can't open my eyes. I'm so tired. So tired...'

'We're in a dungeon, for God's sake!' said John. 'Hanging by chains...and the water keeps rising!'

Russell heard the words and felt the rough metal bracelets around his wrists. He hung by his arms, and a jagged stone wall tore into his back. Ice-cold water washed around his thighs and paralysed his legs.

'There are damned rats swimming about in here. And snakes!' cried Sam. 'God help us, we'll be eaten alive before we drown.'

'Arghh!' screamed John, 'something on my leg. A leech...'

~*~

Russell slept, then opened his eyes. He floated in water up to his neck with chains around his ankles holding him down, preventing him from floating higher. Two rats swam close, staring fixedly with beady hungry eyes.

'That's better,' said Russell. 'I'm awake now. There's nothing like a little nap and a pleasant dip in cool water for refreshing oneself.'

John started to laugh. 'You're a wacko!'

Sam joined in the laughter, and then Russell. Soon, all three laughed manically. The startled rats and snakes pulled away to a safe distance. They laughed until water spilled into Sam's mouth and made her choke. Then they fell silent, and in the gloom, the rats and snakes closed in again.

CHAPTER 9 Chain Break

Trevor peered into *Hollywood's* dark and cheerless docking bay.

'Do you have shuttles aboard the Hollywood?' he asked.

'Yes,' replied Aidme in his monotonous voice.

'Are there any fighter vessels, something small and fast and bristling with weapons?'

'There are no weapons aboard the Hollywood.'

'No wonder you were taken captive.' Trevor sighed. His air tasted bad now and he breathed deeper to compensate for the low oxygen content. He forced himself to stay alert. Time was running out. 'Tell me what kind of shuttles there are then?'

'Maintenance craft, small personnel craft, and large transport craft.'

'What are the small personnel craft used for?'

Aidme was silent for a millisecond while he searched for the right expression. 'Exploration, visiting and joyriding.'

'Can they be used in any situation? You know, taken anywhere, down to an inhospitable planet, one that might be intolerably harsh?'

'The vessel has a forcefield and is safe in any environment.'

'Take me to it,' Trevor said immediately.

To his surprise, Aidme pushed him out through the open port and around *Hollywood's* exterior. They passed another gaping port, then a smaller port, then turned into the next and stopped beside a sleek space shuttle. In a way, it reminded Trevor of the astronaut's *Wayfarer*, but this shuttle had smaller wings and no visible rockets. Unlike the *Wayfarer*, it certainly didn't look as if it had been knocked together from old dustbins and beer cans.

The shuttle nestled in a cradle with stairs leading up to a platform in front of the open doorway. Trevor gave the outside a quick glance before he floated in, the surface was glassy and without screws, rivet heads or visible joins.

A narrow gangway stretched across the shuttle's width to another exterior door. Ten small rucksacks hung on the wall, a door on his left led to a room filled with neat lockers, and a double glass door on his right led into a spacious passenger compartment.

Eight recliners furnished the compartment, four on each side, with a broad aisle down the centre leading to a pilot and co-pilot seat at the front.

Trevor struggled to think clearly. All he wanted was to lay back in one of the comfortable looking seats and sleep. 'Is it possible to close the outside doors?'

'Only mechanically,' answered Aidme.

Trevor waited, he knew the answer was incomplete but his mind was like sludge. 'Tell me,' he gasped. 'How?'

'There is an emergency handle under a small hatch in the wall to your right. Wind the handle anti-clockwise, and the doors will close.'

New hope filled Trevor and his mind cleared. He looked at his watch, only ten minutes of stale air left. The handle was small, and the thick, long-fingered spacesuit glove made it difficult to grip. His fingers trembled as he fumbled, but with jerky motions, the handle turned.

The door was thin and flexible, more like a roller blind, and moving in jerks and starts it slid down from the ceiling. After ten minutes winding it was still half open and his fingers ached so bad he had to rest. A new surge of dizziness made him close his eyes, but he fought to hold them open, he knew if he fell asleep now he would never wake.

'Must have nimble fingers, these *Hollywood* aliens,' he slurred. 'Long and bony with suction cups on the ends...' *I'm drifting*, he thought. *Snap out of it.*

Ignoring the pain in his fingers and lungs Trevor turned the handle. 'What are you going to do when the door is closed?' he asked himself, then answered: 'It'll keep the noise and draught out...'

'No! Don't sleep...' he shouted.

'Keep turning...

Wake up!'

Ten minutes later, the doors closed with a barely audible click.

'Now,' gasped Trevor, almost blinded by black bubbles floating inside his eyes, 'I need pressure and oxygen. Don't give me any half answers this time or in less than two minutes you'll be by yourself again.'

Aidme pushed Trevor into the locker room and floated up against a long narrow wall cupboard. 'In here is a yellow lever. Rotate it a quarter turn until it points to the symbol like an upside down G.'

With strength he didn't possess, Trevor opened the cupboard and found the yellow lever. He grasped and twisted; it didn't move. He tried the other direction and felt it shift, but his eyes were closed so he couldn't see an upside down G. And even if he could see, the light on his spacesuit had practically extinguished. Guessing he had moved the handle a quarter of a turn he asked weakly: 'Is that it?'

'Yes.'

'How long?'

'Fifteen seconds, fourteen seconds, thirteen seconds...'

Trevor fumbled with his helmet. His oxygen-starved brain couldn't remember how the latches worked. 'Gently,' he said. 'Don't go to pieces now... Oh yes, pull here, twist there.'

'... three seconds, two seconds, one second. The atmosphere is now safe.'

The helmet flew off and Trevor sucked air like a pearl diver rising to the surface. He sucked in another lungful of air, followed by another, and another, until he started laughing, and crying, and choking.

The bubbles in his eyes and the popping in his ears eased, and he saw the yellow lever pointing to an upside down G, and Aidme floating patiently at his side. 'Thank you, Aidme. Why can't you talk to me like that all the time, without me having to spell out every single question?'

'I cannot base my responses on presumption. Words alone are inadequate. Telepathic communication between us is difficult but improving.'

Still panting, Trevor nodded and chuckled. 'Well, never mind that for now—I'm alive! They nearly had me. Those damned insects nearly got the better of me. But I'm alive. Do you hear me? I'm alive. And now I'm really pissed off...'

He sniffed the air. 'Ah! This is so sweet. I almost feel drunk—must be a slightly higher oxygen content than Earth's. But we're not out of trouble yet. Does this shuttle also run on water?'

'Yes.'

'Does it matter if the water's a bit polluted?'

'Impurities are filtered and ejected.'

For the first time, Trevor noticed the compact technical room where they floated. It reminded him of the kitchen area on a passenger aeroplane with neat cupboards and a few trivial instruments. 'Okay. Where do I fill water?'

'There is a generator unit under the floor.'

'Under here?' asked Trevor, pointing to a hatch in the floor.

'Yes.'

The hatch opened without effort and beneath was a generator like the one they took to the *Cloud*. He unscrewed the filling cap, swore at the Mantis, spat into the tank and replaced the cap.

'Is that enough?'

'The generator is now operational. Life support will operate for approximately four years and three months with the present load.'

'Is this shuttle capable of producing gravity?'

'Yes. Energy will then be exhausted after approximately four weeks.'

'Turn it on. And some heating, and turn some lights on so we can see properly in here.'

Their surroundings immediately glowed in soft light, and warm air touched Trevor's cheeks, driving away the steam from his breath. A faint vibration filled the air and gravity pulled him gently to the floor.

'The Mantis must have noticed us.' Trevor sat up and undid the fastenings on his spacesuit. 'They'll come to investigate and blow us to scrambled eggs like they did with the *Wayfarer*. Can you sense them coming?'

Aidme remained silent for a moment. He was confused by Trevor's obscure question. 'I sense no vehicles approaching.' Then, after searching Trevor's mind for further clues, 'There is no electromagnetic disturbance transmitted from this module.'

Trevor shook off the last spacesuit piece and danced a little jig. His lungs ached and his chest was bruised, but life was suddenly a party.

'Oh! This is wonderful,' he said. 'Wonderful. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to relieve myself.'

Standing astride the generator, he opened his fly and pissed into the generator's tank. 'That's better. Must be at least half a litre there. How long will that last?'

Aidme probed Trevor's mind, qualifying his cryptic question. 'The vessel can be fully operational under maximum load for a period of approximately four years and three months.'

'Well, let me know when it's getting low. Now let's see if we can fly this thing.'

Trevor made himself comfortable in the pilot's seat and examined the controls. A joystick for each hand, the same as in the *Cloud*. He relaxed into the well-upholstered seat and marvelled at how well the contours suited him. 'I don't know anything about you *Hollywood* aliens,' he said aloud, 'but you are my friends and I love and respect you.'

Unable to move a muscle, Trevor closed his eyes and fell asleep. He dreamt of Russell's predicament, which made him stir and look at his watch. 'Twenty minutes,' he groaned. 'Feels like I need twenty hours.' He blinked, rubbed his eyes and stretched. He'd have to save respite for

later. 'It's okay,' he said to Aidme. 'I won't touch anything, but it's time for action—you're in control. Please take us out.'

They rose away from the clamps and drifted through the open port into space beyond. The Mantis' sphere and battleship were hidden from view behind *Hollywood's* bulk, but something else caught Trevor's eye—a small object spinning and tumbling amongst the other space rubble. 'Can you get a picture of that on a screen somehow,' he asked, 'and magnify it so I can see it properly?'

Integrated as he was into Trevor's mind, Aidme understood exactly which object he meant. The view through the broad front screen flickered and changed. Stretched from one side of the screen to the other, was an enlarged image of the vanished atom bomb.

'Ha ha!' A grin full of mischief creased Trevor's lips. 'Isn't that a pretty sight. Tell me, Mr Aidme... is it still operational?'

'Yes.'

'Oh goody!'

Trevor rubbed his hands together. An idea was forming. The Mantis must have transported the atom bomb without bothering to give it a second look. In their arrogance, they had disregarded the atom bomb as nothing worse than a wooden club.

'Tell me something else. Can you detonate the bomb?'

'Yes.'

His mischievous grin grew wider. Even wooden clubs had their use.

CHAPTER 10 Ready for the Fight

Trevor bounced on his toes. 'Things are looking better and better. Let's see if we can turn the tables on those ugly bugs. Are there tractor beams, or whatever the term is, on this *Carriage*?' he asked Aidme. 'I mean, can we move the bomb about, take it with us, that sort of thing?'

'Yes'

'Good! Now, this is important. The Mantis have a sort of "reverse" weapon. They suck all the energy from their opponents' vessel, even a forcefield is no hindrance, they suck the energy out of that too. Do you understand?'

'There is no record of such a device in my data bank.'

'Well make a record now.'

Aidme remained silent and Trevor turned to scrutinise the sooty-grey ball. It was the most peculiar gadget. Somehow, Trevor felt an overpowering attachment, a feeling he didn't understand, as if the ball was part of his own body, like an extra finger or arm. He put his hand out and patted Aidme, fully expecting to feel the sensation through his new body part. He felt nothing, shrugged his shoulders, and concentrated on his plan.

'I noticed the Mantis had to close their forcefield to let their own shuttles pass through. Is our forcefield the same?'

'An aperture opens in our forcefield to facilitate a passage.'

Trevor nodded, leaned back in the chair, and took a deep breath. He felt incredibly safe and secure. 'Okay. Grab that atom bomb and let's go. Can you cloak our forcefield around the bomb like the Mantis have cloaked theirs around the *Cloud*?'

'Yes.'

'Then do it. Whose forcefield is the strongest, do you think? Their battleship's or ours?'

'I have insufficient data to form a conclusion.'

'Well, everything so far indicates that the insects have an inferior technology to you *Hollywood* aliens—let's find out. Ram their forcefield. I want to pierce it, or pry it apart, or burst it, or get inside, whatever.'

The *Carriage* drifted silently around the *Hollywood* until the Mantis battleship came into view, then shot forward and slammed into the forcefield like an axe head cleaving a log of wood. The *Carriage* wedged fast. Green waves rippled along the insects' smitten forcefield and the *Carriage* generator whined as it struggled to deliver enough energy to hold the breach open.

'Keep pushing!' said Trevor. 'How deep are we? Can we get through?'

'The Mantis' forcefield is fortifying around us. Our forcefield is inferior and will collapse in sixteen seconds.'

'Keep pushing. Give it all you've got.'

The *Carriage* pressed forward, creeping deeper.

'Collapse in ten seconds.'

'Keep pushing.' Trevor's mind worked feverishly. The Mantis' forcefield was impenetrable from both the outside and the inside, he thought. Why else did the insects need to turn it off before they could fly through in their shuttles? Right now, their forcefield was trying to press the *Carriage* out. Surely there must be a fulcrum point where their forcefield would press them in?

'Are we halfway through yet?'

'I cannot tell—collapse in seven seconds.'

The generator screamed in the background and a foreboding vibration made Trevor's skin tingle.

'Release the atom bomb at the point where our forcefield has penetrated the deepest, and set it to detonate in five seconds.'

'I cannot kill a living creature or cause material damage. It is forbidden. Collapse in three seconds.'

'Don't start giving me lip,' groaned Trevor. 'I give you permission. Release the bomb, set it to detonate after five seconds, and get us out of here.'

Aidme released the atom bomb and Trevor's speculation proved correct. The *Carriage* had indeed managed to burrow almost completely through the Mantis' forcefield, and the liberated atom bomb was grabbed and ejected inwards like a champagne cork exploding free.

The *Carriage* backed out and returned to the *Hollywood* in less than a second.

Trapped inside the insects' forcefield, humankind's ultimate weapon of destruction detonated. The thermonuclear device released a shattering blast of energy equivalent to fifteen megatons of TNT.

Nonetheless, the forcefield contained the tremendous explosion with ease. It lit up like a mammoth light bulb, radiating light and heat like a miniature sun. The *Hollywood* absorbed the energy, and every gaping door in its fuselage slammed shut.

But the light bulb had a very short life. Trapped inside its own forcefield, the unprotected battleship atomised. Its forcefield imploded, sending a shockwave of released energy in every direction. All around, defenceless space wrecks disintegrated in the blast and their remains were flung into space. Further away, other space wrecks were pushed on new trajectories and the whole junkyard erupted into a chaotic shamble.

The *Carriage* rocked slightly but shrugged the blast off as if it was nothing worse than a gentle breeze. Behind them, the *Hollywood* greedily absorbed the blast's energy and honoured the occasion by turning on its outside lights in an amazing display of self-esteem.

'What happened to the *Cloud*?' asked Trevor, hardly daring to hear the answer.

'The *Cloud* is in precisely the same position and fully functional,' said Aidme.

'Hah!' shouted Trevor. 'I knew a mere atom bomb couldn't harm the *Cloud*. Let's get over there. Can you open the *Cloud*'s big bay doors and park this *Carriage* inside? I think there's plenty of room.'

'Yes.'

Part of the *Cloud*'s basement was reserved for cars or tractors or even a small lorry. In a trillionth of a second, Aidme completed the computations for the *Cloud* to accept them, and they glided in.

Trevor burst out laughing. Relief overwhelmed him; the relief of being back in the *Cloud*, the defeat of the Mantis battleship, the incredible boost to his ego. He laughed out loud, he laughed until tears ran down his cheeks, he laughed until his stomach cramped, he laughed all the way back to his precious chair in the control room.

He stopped laughing when he looked at the monitor indicating Russell's state of health. His body temperature had sunk below a critical level and his heartbeat was slow and erratic.

'Russell!' he called on the Zip-Linq. 'Russell! Can you hear me? What's wrong?'

'Trevor?' said Russell, between short gasps. 'So the Zip-Linq works—even under water?'

'Under water? What are you talking about? I can't see any water. You're lying on your back in one of those bare green rooms. Pull yourself together, man.'

'I'm drowning...'

'No you're not. You're hallucinating, like before. Snap out of it.'

'Hallucinating? Am I hallucinating ...? Yes, of course...'

Russell chuckled; a soft sound spiced with blessed comprehension, and with comprehension came liberation. The drug in his vein had muddled his mind, but now he remembered; everything was suggestion and mind games. The imaginary water was up to his chin, he glanced at the other two and they also struggled to keep their mouths above the water line.

The vision of water softened. It was only a dream, a lie. The sound of splashing water faded. Unrestrained by real chains and metal clamps, his hands and legs stretched out. He still sensed all these things, but only as a film playing in some isolated part of his mind. Now he saw the truth; he lay on his back, sprawled across the floor in an untidy heap where the insects had dumped him.

Take it slowly, he told himself. Get on your feet.

He wobbled precariously.

Take a deep breath, he told himself. Take another. Good, and another, now stretch your limbs and muscles... The dizziness passed but his muscles and joints complained miserably.

John and Sam lay partly on top of each other, and their bodies twitched and jerked. Soon they would die, convinced they had drowned, killed by the power of their own false imagination.

'Here.' Russell ignored his own discomfort. 'Let me make you more comfortable.' He separated the married couple and turned them on their side. 'Don't drown just yet,' he urged them. 'Hang on a moment longer. I'm coming back and we're going to have some fun.'

Russell made himself comfortable in the lotus position and drifted into meditation. He entered the part of his mind where the film played and he was back in the dungeon, fighting for his life.

'I've done it,' he shouted to John and Sam. 'Look! I've broken the chains on my feet.' As he spoke, his feet floated to the surface and he waved his toes.

'Don't make waves, you idiot,' shouted Sam. She gurgled and spat water from her half submerged mouth. 'You'll drown us.'

'Sorry. Bear with me a moment.' Russell put both feet against the wall and pushed away with all his might. 'Let's see how tough the wall chains are.' His shoulder and arm muscles bulged as

they joined the tug-of-war. First one chain, and then the other snapped with an explosive pop. He was free, and his sudden freedom sent water surging in all directions.

'Hang on,' he said, as his head surfaced. 'Hold your breath and I'll soon have you free, the chains are easy to break.' He took a deep breath and dived. He went to Sam's feet first and pretended to struggle with her ankle chains. They tore from the wall, then he did the same with John's. Their bodies floated to the surface and they pulled on their arm chains to lift their head and shoulders above water. The immediate danger of drowning had passed.

How real all this seems, thought Russell. *How easy to forget it's all a dream, yet once you comprehend—how easy to manipulate.* 'Pull the chains from the wall like I did,' he said to John and Sam.

The astronauts had seen how effortlessly Russell snapped his chains and copied his actions. They put their feet against the wall and pulled. One of John's chains snapped. 'Hah! Must be made of cheap plastic,' he sneered.

'Mine won't break,' said Sam, between gritted teeth.

John's other chain snapped, he slid under water and surfaced again almost immediately. 'Come on, Sam, use your leg muscles—put your weight behind it.'

Both chains broke simultaneously and Sam surged backwards, sending a wake in all directions.

'Well done,' said Russell. They were responding to his suggestions, and the game was proceeding well. The water level still rose, and their heads almost touched the ceiling. 'Down on the right side is a valve with a big wheel on the top.' He indicated through the water in one direction. 'And down on the other side is a sluice with a big wheel on the side. We have to dive down and close the valve and open the sluice. You two take the valve, I'll take the sluice.'

All three dived. Russell spun the sluice wheel open and turned to watch as John and Sam grappled with the wheel on the valve top, he swam across to help them. After five turns, the water stopped flowing and they swam to the surface.

'Well done,' congratulated Russell. 'Look how fast the water's draining out.'

Within ten minutes, their feet touched the floor. After another five minutes, the room was empty. Sam clapped her hands and kicked out at the rats, and the rats and snakes splashed and slithered away amongst the remaining puddles.

Sam slumped forward with exhaustion, resting her chin against her chest.

John stared at Russell and shook his head. 'I'll be damned,' he said. 'Where did you come from? What kind of a person are you? If we ever get out of this place and back to Earth, I'm going to take you to the most expensive restaurant in Washington and order you the biggest steak on the menu. You never cease to amaze me.'

'And I'll buy the best Champagne in the house,' mumbled Sam into her chest.

'I'll remember that,' said Russell, with a broad grin.

'But how did you manage it?' John wanted to know. 'I thought you were done for, and then you suddenly do a Superman stunt.'

'Yes,' admitted Russell, 'I'd almost given up, but then Trevor spoke to me on the Zip-Linq and reminded me all this is an hallucination. None of this is real. Those Mantis set the scene in our minds and our own imagination does the rest.'

Sam coughed and spat but still didn't find the strength to lift her head. 'Sounds to me like you've already had too much to drink,' she said. 'Think I'll drop that offer of Champagne.'

'In reality, this room is totally bare,' continued Russell. 'In reality, I'm sitting in the lotus position in the middle of the floor and you two are curled up on your sides.'

Shivering with cold, John reached out and felt the hard stone wall. 'I don't know who's mad— you, or us.'

Suddenly, a large square stone block receded into the wall. A gigantic green crocodile with a long row of razor-sharp teeth waddled into the room. Saliva dribbled and splashed as its head swung towards each person in turn, its pea-sized brain striving to decide who to eat first.

'Look here,' said Russell, unperturbed. 'They know we haven't drowned so now they're planting a new scene in our minds.'

Sam raised her head, stifled a scream, and shuffled away on her backside to the wall.

John joined her there, placed his arm around her shoulder, and drew her close. 'Sorry, Russell,' he said. 'Looks like you're going to be the croc's first course.'

'The Mantis expect to crack the *Cloud's* shield at any time,' said Russell, 'so they don't care if we die. In fact, they want us to die in pain and fear.' He strolled forward and put his foot in the crocodile's mouth.

The jaws snapped shut. Sam and John cried out, but Russell only laughed—the crocodile's jaws formed themselves around his foot as if they were made of soft rubber. Russell reached down to the crocodile's neck and pulled out a plastic nipple. He flipped the stopper off, air whistled out, and the crocodile collapsed like a giant rubber balloon.

'It's up to us,' explained Russell, 'to play the scene how we see fit. It's all an illusion.'

Fire sprang up around Russell, engulfing him in white-hot flames.

'There's a fire extinguisher on the wall behind you,' said Russell, from the midst of the inferno.

The astronauts threw their arms up to cover their face, and the smell of burning flesh stung their noses. Without questioning where the extinguishers had come from, they jumped up, grabbed one each, and emptied them into the blaze. In thirty seconds the fire was extinguished and Russell stepped forward unscathed.

'Do you see?' asked Russell. The other two looked on with mouths wide open. 'It's just a game, we can play it any way we want. All you have to do is believe, don't doubt for a second, just believe.'

Two opposite walls suddenly lurched forward, creeping and groaning towards each other, intent on crushing the three occupants.

'You said I do a Superman act,' laughed Russell. 'Okay, I'll be Superman and stop this wall, you two choose another superhero and stop the other wall.'

Russell's appearance wavered and changed. His fair hair turned jet black and a new outfit replaced his white shorts and Tee shirt. He was clothed in the famous Superman suit, complete with cloak, brazen S printed across a broad chest, and underpants on the outside. He leant with one hand against the nearest wall and stifled a yawn with the other. Gears behind the wall screamed in protest and exploded. Using one finger, he pushed the wall back in place.

'Come on, you two,' he encouraged. 'This is fun, try it. You, Sam, how about pitting your strength against the wall? This is all a dream and you can do anything you want.'

The muscles on Sam's arms and legs bulged. With a roar, she transformed into a behemoth. She hurled her goliath body against the other wall and sent it thudding back into place. In a spasm of anger, she ripped a handful of stones from the wall and crushed them between her palms as if they were made from sticky lumps of sand.

The walls faded away, the blocks of grey stone dwindled to nothing, the illusion of the dungeon diminished until everything, including the three allies, disappeared into darkness.

~*~

Russell opened his eyes. He still sat in the lotus position. He grabbed the Zip-Linq and shouted into it: 'I don't know if you can still hear me, brother, but you better come quick. The Mantis have given up on us. I expect they'll kill us now...'

'I hear you and I'm on my way,' came the reply. 'Hang on, it might get a bit cold in there...'

~*~

On board the *Cloud*, Trevor turned to Aidme. 'Get us over to the sphere quickly,' he ordered. The sphere appeared as if by magic and Trevor jumped at its suddenness. 'Do you call that quick?' he muttered.

The sphere had taken a beating. Its weak forcefield had been designed to protect it against the occasional piece of scrap falling from the junkyard, and had barely been strong enough to shield it from the exploding atom bomb. One side was left as smooth as a marble, and the new shuttles on that side had been blown away. The *Cloud* had stopped opposite the jagged opening of a damaged port.

'Is your "control" function able to penetrate their forcefield from here?' asked Trevor.

'Yes.'

'Can you turn off their forcefield?'

'Yes. It is done.'

'Good! You're learning. I expect the Mantis are squirming all over their instruments, wondering what the heck is going on. Now, I'm not going to ask you to hurt those insects in there, but I want you to turn the temperature down to freezing point. Those creatures are cold blooded and they'll become torpid in such a low temperature. They'll be as harmless and slow as slugs.'

'Estimated time until freezing point is seven minutes,' said Aidme.

'Good. Now, can you locate Russell, John and Sam?'

'Yes.'

'We have to protect them some how; I don't know... lock the doors so the Mantis can't get in... make sure the Mantis can't turn the air off...or gas them...or electrocute them?'

'I have isolated their quarters.'

'Good. That's exactly what I meant.' Trevor nodded, things were going well, he picked up a pencil and rolled it between his palms. Somehow or another he needed to board the Mantis' sphere and his spacesuit was still laying in an untidy heap where he had cast it—with empty air tanks and a flat battery. 'Is the *Carriage* equipped with spacesuits?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Come on. Answer me properly. Where?'

'Hanging in the gangway.'

'Good! Good! Good,' said Trevor, hurrying down to the *Cloud's* basement where the *Carriage* was parked. 'Show me where these spacesuits are.'

The only objects in the gangway were the ten small rucksacks hanging along one wall. Russell grabbed one and examined it carefully. It was the size of a sealed-shut sandwich box.

'What's this?' he asked, slipping the sack on his back.

'A spacesuit.'

He slipped the sack off again for another inspection. 'Is the spacesuit in the sack?' he asked. 'How do I open it? How does it function?'

'Replace the rucksack on your shoulders and adjust the straps firmly.'

'Then what?' asked Trevor.

'It is ready.'

Trevor scratched his head. 'I'm sorry, but I don't understand. The only thing I've put on is a rucksack. How does it work?'

'A protective film of ethereal substance envelopes you automatically as required.'

'Ah! So if I step outside, this thing will automatically enclose me in a protective suit?'

'Yes.'

'Can I breathe?'

'Yes'

'For how long?'

'Approximately thirty hours.'

'I can breathe but can't eat or drink. Is that it?'

'The substance is impenetrable.'

Trevor grabbed three more rucksacks and made his way to the *Cloud's* port. He wondered what would happen if he sneezed inside the suit, but refrained from asking, certain that such situations were suitably catered for.

'You're sure this spacesuit will work?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Okay then. I put my trust in you. Close the airlock and open the porthole.'

The door behind him closed and air pressure leaked away. A friendly "peep" sounded from the rucksack, and his body was engulfed in a layer of something warm and clammy. The porthole opened and he stood in the vacuum of outer space, breathing sweet, fresh air.

'This is wonderful,' he said. 'I've lost a bit of sensation with my touch, but otherwise I'm free as a fart.'

'The suit is operating normally,' said Aidme.

Trevor measured the distance between the *Cloud* and the sphere, guessing it to be about a foot. 'Here we go then,' he said. Holding his breath, he leaped across.

He shot into the sphere's docking room, bounced against the smooth rear wall, then against the ceiling, and finally grabbed a jagged piece of metal attached to the floor to bring himself to a standstill. A new bruise marked each collision but the spacesuit suffered no damage.

Ignoring his clumsy entrance he glanced at his watch, the seven minutes were up. 'Are they frozen stiff yet?'

'Yes.'

'Then bring the *Cloud* in close enough to plug the hole, and let's find Russell and the astronauts. You lead the way.'

The *Cloud* pressed against the jagged hole until it made an airtight seal. Aidme established air pressure and gravity in the airlock, and opened the inner door to the sphere.

~*~

Sam was the first to rouse. A long deep groan followed her from sleep into wakefulness.

'Hallo, Sam.' Russell helped her sit up. 'Had any good dreams lately?'

'Where are we?' Sam rubbed her eyes and squinted at the dull green room, then she twisted and stared up at Russell. 'I've been dreaming I was a muscle bound freak.' She rubbed her brow and drew in her legs. 'Good grief, Russell, what a dream I've just had. You wouldn't believe it. You were there—John too.'

John opened his eyes and blinked. 'Christ almighty!' he said. 'What the hell is going on?'

'It's okay,' said Russell, and helped John into a sitting position. 'Nightmare?'

'I've got a hangover worse than a nightmare. Where are we?'

'Try to understand,' said Russell. 'All of us have had the same dream. Our experience was pure hallucination; it is the Mantis' trick of mind games—so realistic it would have killed us. We would have drowned in the certain conviction of our own false reality.'

Sam nodded and staggered to her feet. 'I realised at the end,' she said. 'Come on, John, stand up, try to move.'

John picked himself up and stretched. He hobbled a few steps, limping on his left foot. 'They want us dead,' he said, 'and they want us to die in agony.'

Russell offered John a supporting shoulder and together they shuffled forward.

'This has been a different kind of hallucination,' said Russell, 'to the one we were exposed to in our apartments. There we moved about in a kind of daydream, imagining everything we did and saw and ate as if it were real. This last trance was pure fantasy. That's why we could manipulate it so effectively. What we see around us now is reality.'

'Not much to look at, is it?' John tramped his feet and walked around the bare green room unaided. 'I guess I owe you an apology again, I'm sorry.'

'We're not much to look at either,' said Sam, straightening her soiled shorts. 'I suppose they'll simply put an end to us now, we're nothing but a dangerous nuisance to them.'

'All we can do is sit and wait,' said Russell. 'Trevor is on his way.'

They fell into silence, waiting either for salvation or execution. The minutes ticked by. Sam sat on the floor with her knees tucked into her chest. John shuffled backward and forwards, gazing at his feet. Russell leant against a wall, studying his fingernails.

Without warning, a segment of arch opened, and there stood Trevor with a huge smile on his face, three sandwich boxes swinging from his hand, and a strange grey ball hovering around his left shoulder.

The two brothers embraced, laughing and rocking while tears ran down their cheeks. John and Sam crowded close, and the brothers pulled them into their hug. No words or introduction were necessary.

'Here,' said Trevor at last, disengaging himself. 'Put these rucksacks on. They're little trinkets I picked up in the *Hollywood*.'

They slipped the rucksacks on.

'It's a spacesuit,' said Trevor, before they had a chance to ask. 'When we step out of this room, you'll be automatically cloaked in a skin as thin as cling film, as tough as diamonds, and as flexible as silk. Don't ask me how it works because I don't know—but it does work.' He pointed to Aidme. 'This here is my new buddy and I'm not sure who found who. His name is Aidme and we're still in the process of getting used to each other.'

'Buddy?' said Russell, squinting at the ball. He prodded it with a finger, found he couldn't move it, and peered closer. 'Solid as rock. What does it do?'

'Amongst other things, it says my mind is an undisciplined jumble of unintelligent thoughts. But without his help I wouldn't be standing here now. He's a real gem, a guardian angel...'

'Hey,' said John, 'let's not hang around here chatting, let's leave.'

Despite their eagerness to escape, curiosity sent the four humans to the sphere's control dome. In the below freezing temperatures, their suits sprung to life and engulfed them in a warm, clammy skin, invisible to the eye and in no way hindering their movements. They crept along the curved corridor. Confident there was no danger, Trevor led the way, and walked straight into the control dome without hesitation. At least twenty Mantis were gathered there, some had fallen, others were still on their feet—all were motionless and frozen stiff.

'I have disarmed an automatic defence system,' said Aidme.

'They must have set it before they froze to the spot,' said Russell, coming alongside Trevor. 'How did Aidme know about it?'

'Like I said, he's a real gem. He's far superior to any alarm or sensor I could have built into the *Cloud*. He's a fantastic, wonderful, clever little chum and I'm hoping he can get us home'

somehow or another.' Trevor patted Aidme and asked, 'Can you search the Mantis' databank and find out where we are in the universe?'

Aidme replied instantly. 'They have a map of the universe. I have identified our location and where your planet Earth is situated.'

'Can you store that data for future reference?' asked Trevor.

'Yes. Done.'

'Is it possible for us to be transported back to Earth using their equipment?'

'No. This sphere is only a receiving outpost.'

'Then let's get out of here before the cavalry turns up.'

Aidme instructed the *Cloud* to accept John and Sam, and the two astronauts, too exhausted to register their surroundings, stumbled their way to Trevor's apartment. They showered and collapsed into bed.

Russell joined his brother in the control room.

'Aren't you going to catch up on sleep?' asked Trevor, patting his brother on the back. 'It's good to have you back, that was a close shave.'

'I never doubted you once,' said Russell. 'I knew you'd find a way of rescuing us. I am tired, but I need a minute to enjoy the luxury of feeling safe before I can sleep.'

'I repeat,' said Trevor, rubbing his tired and swollen eyes. 'It was a close shave. Let's make a big pot of strong tea, and then you can tell me your story.'

Russell recounted his adventures in a dreamy voice, and Trevor nodded as he listened. He smiled, he shook his head, he clenched his fists, and every so often he asked a question. When the story was finished, he recounted his own adventures. Silence filled the control room. Both young men wanted to say more, but for now, they were as empty as the teapot. Within thirty seconds, the air was filled with the sound of gentle snoring.

~*~

One by one, the little group gathered around the kitchen table in Trevor's apartment. Breakfast consisted of the last remains of food salvaged from the *Wayfarer* space shuttle. They picked at the food in melancholy silence.

'Look at us,' said Russell. 'The four glum chums!' He pinched crumbs from his lap and put them in his mouth. 'The Mantis will be after us in force now. Do we simply run away and lose ourselves in space, or do we make a stand here and fight to the death, or do we try to get back to Earth?'

'I vote we go home,' said John. 'I know we'll be taking the fight back with us, but don't forget, the earth is under siege and is doomed to die anyway.'

'I also vote we go home,' said Sam.

'Me too,' said Trevor.

'That's why we're so gloomy,' said Russell, looking at each of them in turn. 'We all want to go home, but none of us think it's possible.'

'I don't know how fast this contraption can fly,' said John. 'But here's a few facts to chew on: light travels fantastically fast, at something like three hundred thousand kilometres per second. If we could move at that speed it would take us four and a half years to fly from Earth to our nearest star. To the nearest galaxy, Andromeda, it would take two point four million years. Gives you some idea of the distances we're talking about.' He looked pensively at the distant stars. 'It'd take us immeasurably longer time just to reach those!'

Trevor shrugged his shoulders. 'It didn't take the blink of an eye to get here. Why should it take any longer to get home?'

'Do you have that sort of technology?' asked John.

Trevor turned to Aidme. 'Do you have that sort of technology?'

'There is no record in my databank.'

'What about the Mantis? They're the ones with the know-how. Is there any knowledge to be gained from the sphere?'

'No information is stored in their data system.'

'I wonder,' said Trevor. 'Some degree of power was restored to the Hollywood when the atom bomb detonated. Aidme, do you have access to her databanks now?'

'Full access.'

'From here?'

'Yes.'

'Well load it down then. Or is there too much for your memory? If so, just download what you can find about space travel.'

'It will take approximately three milliseconds to download the entire databank. Approximately zero point two percent of my memory will be utilised.'

The four looked at each other and gasped.

'It is done,' announced Aidme.

'Well?' urged Trevor. 'Perhaps you can now tell us what you know about space travel.'

'You do not possess the understanding, the knowledge, the vocabulary, the calculus, or even the concept for me to relay the details.'

'This is getting more and more frustrating,' said John. 'We're not complete half-witted idiots—can't it tell us anything?' He snatched his half-eaten tray of food and carried it to the kitchen bench. 'I'll eat the rest later, when my guts settle down.'

'We can transport from one point of nothingness to another point of nothingness instantly,' muttered Trevor.

John returned to the table and leaned close to Trevor. 'What did you say?'

'We can transport from one point of nothingness to another point of nothingness instantly.'

'Right,' said John, sitting. 'I like the sound of that. But we don't want to go from nowhere to nowhere. We want to go from here to Earth!'

'Well hey, John,' said Sam, placing her hand on John's forearm. 'Do we need to know how it works? Many people drive cars but don't have a clue how they work. Can't this Aidme gadget simply fix things for us and take us home?'

John patted her hand and faced Trevor. 'Can it?'

Trevor squinted and his brow creased. 'I'm not sure. I don't think it's that simple...'

'Are you all right?' asked Russell, noticing the change in his brother's expression. 'Have you thought of something?'

'Ideas are forming in my mind,' he said, closing his eyes and pressing his fingers to his temples. 'Just give me a moment.'

Aidme floated so close to the top of Trevor's head, he ruffled his hair. The others gazed at them and waited.

'This much you can understand,' began Trevor, eyes still closed, speaking almost in a trance. 'Everything in the material world is actually 99.99% empty space. Everything is composed of atoms. Atoms are the basic particle of matter, the fundamental component of the whole universe. And 99.99% empty space is how vast the space is between the atoms compared to their size.'

'Yes,' agreed John, 'basic physics.'

'There is as much space again within each atom,' continued Trevor. 'Likewise, between all the heavenly bodies in the universe there is 99.99% empty space. But the cosmos is an orderly and

harmonious system and all we need to know is what part of the cosmological arrangement we are in and which part we want to be in.'

John nodded. 'Go on.'

'Our very bodies are microcosmic versions of the universe—99.99% empty space.'

'Yes.'

'Every single atom comprising the *Cloud* and its contents must be categorised and charted; even that of our bodies; even that of the dust.'

'And what would you do with that knowledge?' asked John, frowning as deeply as Trevor.

'A "limit border" or "cloaking device",' said Trevor, struggling to find the right description, 'can contain this knowledge, encompass the *Cloud*, and give it the physical property of nothing. We don't move the *Cloud*, we change the constellation around us. One part of nothing is exactly like another part of nothing. Nothing is nothing. How can you move in nothing? Movement has no meaning in nothing. The only thing that gives nothing meaning is when you put something in it. We simply change the constellation of stars and planets around us.'

'Well, we all understood that, didn't we, guys?' said Russell, with an amiable grin. 'Sounded more like the teachings of Buddha than a physics lecture.'

'Where do you get this stuff from?' asked John, ignoring Russell. 'And how will it help us?'

Trevor opened his eyes, stared at Aidme, and smiled. 'Ideas formed in my mind and I tried to express them with clumsy words. The *Hollywood* has a device we can avail, and Aidme can do all the necessary calculations.'

'Which means we can go home?' said Sam, holding her breath.

'Yes. That's what it means.'

Sam, Russell and John exploded to their feet.

'Yahoo!' said Sam. 'Let's go!'

They held hands and danced around the table, patting Trevor's back each time they passed. Trevor raised his arms and wriggled a jig where he sat. After a long moment of jubilation, he sunk his arms and indicated the others to calm. John fetched his tray from the kitchen and carried on eating, smiling so broadly he had trouble chewing.

'But first,' said Trevor, 'I need to go over to the *Hollywood* and find one of these devices. I'll go alone, and I'll go right now. Russell, why don't you give John and Sam a tour of the *Cloud* while I'm gone? I shan't be long.' Without waiting for an answer, he bounced to his feet and left the others to it.

The changes on board the *Hollywood* amazed Trevor; all the doors were now closed, gravity was normal, lights guided their way, elevators and transport systems functioned, and everything was tidy, even the clothed skeletons were gone. Trevor and Aidme made their way to the engine room. To ensure the *Hollywood* would continue functioning normally, Trevor emptied a five-litre can of water into an auxiliary power generator.

'Configure the defence system to withstand the Mantis' energy-draining weapon,' instructed Trevor.

'It is done,' came the immediate reply.

Trevor hoped the Mantis would leave the *Hollywood* alone. He vowed to come back one day and explore her properly. Right now, though, they needed to return to Earth, to recuperate and make some sort of plan to save their planet. 'Lead us to the cloaking device,' he said.

The cloaking device turned out to be no bigger than a box of matches. Hundreds of them were stacked neatly on shelves.

'Why so many?' asked Trevor.

'The device can only be used once. Nothing remains...'

Back on the *Cloud*, Russell and the two astronauts had finished their excursion of the *Cloud* and waited in the control room. John and Sam had been left speechless. Gravity, comfort, luxury living quarters, speed of light travel, indestructible, what could they say? Two young men had accomplished something new and unique, something the combined brains of NASA and the entire international scientific space vehicle community could only dream of. The *Cloud* was an unbelievable triumph of technology, and there was nothing they could do but accept it as fact.

They stalked up and down in silence, amazed the *Cloud* now sat inside a large hanger, presumably within the *Hollywood*. During their tour of the *Cloud*, they had felt no sensation of movement, nor any sound, and the undetectable manoeuvre had elevated their admiration of the *Cloud* to even greater heights. They stopped their stalking occasionally to study the vast hanger with all its fantastic vehicles, but mostly kept one eye on a nearby door, impatient for Trevor to return.

'Here he comes,' said Sam. The others spun to see.

Trevor carried an armful of small boxes. Before entering, he attached one box to the *Cloud's* outside wall. 'I'll just put these in the storeroom,' he called from the *Cloud's* port. Instead, he burst into the control room and threw the boxes in a corner. 'I couldn't wait,' he said, and dropped into his chair. At the same time, the *Cloud* drifted across the hanger, through the port, and shot away from the *Hollywood* to a safe distance.

Russell sat in his recliner and the two astronauts shared the settee. Aidme spent six full seconds calculating and configuring the cloaking device.

'Are we ready?' asked Trevor, gazing toward the distant stars.

The others followed his gaze and held their breath.

'Take us home, Aidme,' said Trevor.

A blaze of stars abruptly filled the sky in every direction. The full moon was directly in front. Above and behind, the brilliant sun radiated its life giving light. Beneath their feet, serene and exquisitely beautiful, was the blue and green curve of the planet Earth.

CHAPTER 11 Confrontation

Sam inhaled deeply. 'I can smell the fresh air from here.'

'I don't know about fresh air,' said John, 'but I sure could do with an ice cold beer.'

'A big slab of beef would do for me,' said Russell, patting his concave stomach.

Trevor licked his lips. He was hungry for chocolate and thirsty for milk. 'Get me Professor Maurice Masterson on the Zip-Linq please,' he instructed.

Aidme made the connection.

'...the heck is this? Eh, yes, hallo. Is that you, Trevor? Can you hear me?'

'Trevor and Russell here. We wondered if you could meet us for dinner somewhere.

Somewhere very private. We have important information for you.'

'Hello, boys,' said the professor, 'You had me worried sick. Where the hell have you been the last few days?'

'Oh, here and there,' said Trevor, winking at Russell. 'Make a reservation for five people; we've got two of your friends here—John and Sam.'

The two astronauts leaned closer. 'Hallo, Professor.'

A rattling sound came through the speakers, the sound of a chair falling over backwards. 'Damn!' swore the professor. 'Sorry, I dropped the Zip-Linq. John and Sam? My God, get here as soon as you can. My office.'

'Give us fifteen minutes,' said Trevor. 'Make sure you've got plenty of food for us. Real food, not any of that processed junk.'

'I'll send out for a Chinese takeaway, and some pizza. Just get here quickly!'

~*~

The professor met them in the foyer.

'It's only been five minutes,' he barked. 'We agreed on fifteen. You look like shit—all of you. Couldn't you spend ten minutes cleaning up?' He pointed at Trevor's football. 'What's that under your arm? Never mind, explain later. Don't just stand there, come on up to my office before you stink the whole place out.'

'Pleased to see you too,' said John, and brushed past into the elevator.

'You look like undernourished vagrants,' said the professor as he closed his office door. 'What on earth has happened? Brief me!'

The four voyagers took their time. John dropped into an easy chair spread his arms out wide across the armrests. 'Oh, how good it feels to be home,' he said. 'How good it feels to walk on Earth and breath fresh air. Life is precious, life is holy, life is for living.'

'For heaven's sake,' said the professor, fists clenched by his sides. 'Explain what happened.'

'If the others don't have anything against it, I'll go first.' said John.

Trevor dropped the football. Instead of falling, it rose in the air and hovered thirty centimetres from his shoulder. 'Okay by me,' he said, and the others nodded their consent. The professor stood with his mouth open, unable to take his eyes off Aidme.

Greasy food arrived and the four weary travellers leaped at it like starved dogs. The impatient professor strolled up and down, still none the wiser.

As soon as they finished eating, the professor scooped the plastic trays and cutlery into a rubbish bin. In its place, he laid out tea, coffee, and cake. He poured himself tea, gazed at his friends, and forced a smile. 'Before you start, John, let me apologise for my behaviour. I am really, deeply pleased to see all of you. You've obviously endured a great deal of suffering.' His fingers briefly drummed the table. 'Our planet is also suffering; worse, our planet is dying and I can't do a damned thing about it... Sorry! Please go on, John, I shan't interrupt.'

John gave a precise account, free from emotion, judgement, or opinion. Sam had little to add, mostly praising the efforts and accomplishments of Trevor and Russell. The two brothers were modest, but added colour to John's debriefing.

The professor sat still for a moment, then jumped up and stretched. 'Fantastic!' he said. 'Fantastic! The question now is: what do we do about it?' He picked up his phone and gave instructions. He wanted a van loaded with food parked in Trevor's woods. 'I would love to help you more, but I can't think how,' he said. 'Load your *Cloud* with provisions and get back up there.'

Sam groaned and sat forward. 'But my family!' She rubbed her temples and pleaded. 'I have to see my family. I can't go back.'

'I'm sorry,' said the professor. 'I can assure you that your family is safe and well. But understand this: our planet is dying fast and there is nothing the combined efforts of every nation can do about it. Many thousands have already died, and the rest of us sit here timidly waiting for the end.'

John nodded. 'The iceberg up there in space has grown considerably, it's as big as a continent now.'

'Yes, the ocean level has fallen by two metres,' said the professor. 'You have to act immediately. You say the *Hollywood* has no armaments—but there must be other alien cultures that are capable of hitting back. These are my orders, return to the junkyard on the edge of the

universe and see if you can find a decent weapon system from one of the other spaceships. Never mind the boxing gloves—find the knuckle-dusters! I'm counting on you. The whole world is counting on you.'

The professor walked the length of his office several times then stopped in front of the four. He rubbed an eye and straightened his bow-tie. 'I'm past caring about world leaders and generals, I'll keep this our personal secret. It's between the five of us. You're the only four people on this planet who understand the full situation, so get back up there and sort them out. If there is anything you need, anything I can do, just give the word.'

'The Mantis don't know we've returned to Earth,' said Trevor. 'Give us a couple of days to rest and gain our strength.'

'I'll give you a couple of hours!'

~*~

The Mantis' sphere had been repaired and new shuttles were parked at each port. Off to one side floated a group of battleships. Trevor kept the cloud invisible.

'Only five battleships,' said John. 'Still don't take us seriously, do they? Are they the same type of battleship you destroyed with the atom bomb?'

Trevor studied the vessels. 'Yes, they look formidable! But look over there at the *Hollywood*, now that's what I call an astounding sight!'

Composed and more beautiful than ever, with spotlights highlighting its majestic contours, and cheerful lights gleaming from a million windows, the *Hollywood* glowed with dazzling life. But the *Hollywood* was not alone in its glory, scattered across the junkyard, other alien vessels had absorbed energy from the atom bomb and showed signs of life.

'Check them out, Aidme,' said Trevor. 'We're searching for weapons. I know you don't approve of violence, well neither do we, but we need something to defend our planet Earth.'

Under Aidme's direction, the *Cloud* flitted from one potential vessel to the next. This was nothing like Trevor's earlier clumsy search when he discovered the *Hollywood*. Now they moved at phenomenal speed and wrecks blurred past so fast it dazed him.

'Both Sam and me are jet fighter pilots,' said John. 'If we can find something that resembles a jet plane—well, what could be better?'

The whirligig ride slowed and the *Hollywood* loomed back into view. 'Twenty-seven thousand, four hundred and ninety-eight vessels are compatible with human beings,' said Aidme. He brought the *Cloud* to rest beside the *Hollywood*. 'Three of those vessels are undamaged and functional after absorbing the atom bomb's energy. Only one of those three carries weapons.'

'That must be the one for us,' said John. 'Can we take a look?'

Before Trevor had time to give the order, the *Cloud* catapulted away.

'Looks like a beer barrel,' said Sam, as they slowed.

'Yes. But it's vast,' said Trevor. 'Almost as big as the *Hollywood*.'

As they drew close, the Barrel flattened and expanded. Its ruffled surface resembled colourful layers of pleated cloth. The *Cloud* stopped.

'Is this the place?' asked Trevor.

'Yes,' said Aidme.

Trevor sucked in a mouthful of air and blew it out again. 'For goodness sake, Aidme, loosen up. Tell me about the weapons. If you don't start answering me properly I'm going to kick you all around the *Cloud*.'

'Directly below us,' said Aidme, in his same monotone voice, 'are one hundred and twenty robot fighter units.'

'That's better,' said Trevor. 'What powers them?'

'Water.'

'Yes, it seems everyone understands the power in water—except us. No wonder the Mantis want it so much. How do the fighter units operate?'

'By a combination of remote control and inbuilt intelligence.'

'And you can control them?'

'Yes, but not as an offensive weapon. It is forbidden.'

The four men looked at each other. 'Damn!' said John. 'Here at long last is something we can use—but can't control.'

'Perhaps we should go in and look at these fighters?' said Sam. 'See if we can figure something out.'

'Hmm! No, we can't do that,' said Trevor, shaking his head as if Sam's suggestion was an obvious impossibility.

'What do you mean?' said Sam, eyebrows raised. 'Why not?'

'Because it would give us away.' Trevor shrugged his shoulders. 'I'd like to have a look at those units too, but I don't think that would be wise. We're invisible at the moment, but as soon as we start to investigate this "*Barrel*" and its contents the Mantis will come charging.'

'Perhaps we should take a peek at those Mantis battleships instead,' said Russell. 'See what we're up against?'

Trevor nodded, and once again, before he had time to give Aidme the command, the *Cloud* sped away. They stopped in full view of the insects' sphere and battleships. Each battleship was shrouded in a hazy forcefield, looking like the full moon on a misty night. Trevor ignored them. He stared at Aidme with suspicion, wondering why he moved the *Cloud* before he had given the order.

'What we need is a decoy,' said John. 'We need to divert their attention long enough for us to get one of those *Barrel* fighter units into the *Cloud*.'

'How about sending the *Carriage* to pester them?' said Sam.

They turned away from the battleships and faced Trevor, waiting for a comment. Trevor turned away from Aidme and faced the battleships. He thought the *Carriage* would make a good decoy, but he remembered Aidme saying the Mantis battleship's forcefield was stronger than the *Carriage's*. A weapons strike from one of the battleships would most likely destroy the *Carriage*.

'Can you control the *Carriage* from here, Aidme?' asked Trevor.

'Yes.'

'I don't want it damaged,' said Trevor, snatching his gaze back to Aidme. 'You mustn't let them damage it.'

'It is prohibited for me to —'

'Yes! Yes!' interrupted Trevor. 'I expect you'll look after it. Go and annoy them then.'

The *Cloud's* large port opened and the *Carriage* scurried out. Unprotected by the *Cloud's* invisibility, the Mantis battleships seemed to detect it immediately and grouped tighter. The *Carriage* flitted between them like an agitated horsefly. One battleship hurled a frightful rod of destructive energy. The *Carriage's* forcefield glowed brilliant red as it deflected the glancing blow.

'That was close!' said Russell.

Trevor flushed, and his eyes pierced into Aidme. 'A direct hit would have been disastrous,' he muttered. 'The *Carriage* is not designed for combat. But I learnt something important.'

'What?' Russell turned to look at his brother and knew he wouldn't get an answer. He had seen his brother totally engrossed in his work many a time, and he had that same distant attitude now.

The brave little *Carriage* dashed and darted between the battleships until it stopped unexpectedly. Two battleships opened fire, and two concentrated rods of annihilation swatted the *Carriage* point blank. The *Carriage* forcefield blazed like molten metal—but the onslaught only lasted a millisecond. The death rays swung away from the *Carriage* and struck a third battleship.

The third battleship's forcefield throbbed under the assault. It pulsated a brilliant green, turned yellow, then white, and finally collapsed. The death rays ceased in the same instant, leaving the battleship undamaged but crippled.

The crippled battleship joined forces with its two attackers and all three lashed out at the remaining two. Their forcefields erupted and crumbled. In the same split second, the death rays closed down.

In the short space of forty seconds, all five battleships had been rendered helpless. The victorious *Carriage* strutted back to the *Cloud* and parked in its bay.

'Oh my God!' whispered John. 'What happened?'

'The Mantis had control of your minds,' breathed Trevor, 'but I have control of their vessels. Their battleships are under my command.'

'What?' Russell spun round and stared at his brother. 'What are you saying? Are you feeling all right?'

Trevor snapped out of his trance. 'Aidme!' he shouted. His voice trembled, and in an effort to clear his muddled mind he shook his head. He jumped to his feet, snatched Aidme from the air, and held him at arm's length. 'What are you doing? Did you do this on your own accord? You said you could do nothing by yourself. You said you could only act on my command.'

'I apologise for taking so long to disable the Mantis battleships. If your mind was more coherent I would have been much faster.'

Trevor gaped. 'Do you mean you have been inside my mind to find a solution?'

'I followed your thoughts, yes. The tactical solution was all yours.'

'I felt nothing.' Trevor released Aidme, sank back into his chair, and rubbed his temples. 'I wasn't aware of you.'

'No physical or mental entity is aware of my probing. I become integrated and embedded.'

'Does that mean I have no private thoughts? That you are constantly monitoring me?'

'Yes. We have merged.'

Sam spoke, 'Can somebody explain what's happening here?'

Trevor buried his face in his open palms. Russell pulled his chair close and put his arm around Trevor's shoulder. 'What is it? What's happening?'

Both astronauts stepped around the desk and waited. John leaned forward and spoke softly. 'Was it Aidme—or was it you who defeated the battleships?'

'Both— it was both of us,' said Trevor. He lowered his hands and looked at each person in turn, his eyes rested on Aidme. 'In the first attack, when the battleship fired on the *Carriage*, I learnt that the Mantis' battleships must drop their forcefield in order to use their weapons.'

He paused.

'I'm confused... Try to understand... Whatever I thought of—happened! I thought the *Carriage* should stand still to entice the battleships to open fire—and the *Carriage* did stand still. As soon as they dropped their forcefields to fire, I—Aidme—I don't know who, took command of their battleships. Then I thought the captured battleships should redirect their weapons on each other—and they did.'

'Why, that's beautiful!' said Sam. 'You are the conductor and Aidme is the orchestra.'

'No insect has been killed,' said Trevor, 'not even injured, and nothing is damaged, Aidme made certain of that...'

'How does it feel?' asked Russell, tightening his grip on Trevor's shoulder. 'You're not turning mad, are you?'

Trevor jumped up and hopped from one foot to the other. 'I don't feel anything. That's why I'm confused. It's as though I've attained thought control. I'm excited—yes, that's how I feel—excited!'

John slumped down on the settee. 'Well I'll be damned.' He shook his head. 'This gets more and more crazy by the minute. I'm the only sane person here. Trevor's got a genie in his football, Russell acts like superman, and Sam is turning soft.' He sighed, stood, laughed out loud, and strolled to the side of the desk. 'We're a group of misfits, but why should we worry? The important thing is that we're making excellent progress. Take us back to the *Barrel*, Trevor, and let's finish up here.'

~*~

The *Barrel's* weapon units looked like overgrown hedgehogs the size of a dog kennel. Their bodies were covered in long prickly spikes and a stunted snout stuck out at the front.

'They don't look very impressive,' said John. 'Are we supposed to save the world with these?'

Trevor turned to Aidme. 'What can you tell us about them?'

'They are lifeless... It is done.'

'What's going on?' said John. 'What's done?'

'I thought Aidme should divert some power into the lifeless hedgehogs,' smiled Trevor, and he did.'

'Okay. Sounds crazy, but go on. Can you tell us anything about them now?'

Trevor took a breath and creased his brow: 'The spikes improve the effectiveness of its forcefield,' he said, and drew another slow breath. 'By comparison, its forcefield is tougher than anything aboard the *Hollywood*. It discharges weapons from the snout at the front.' A small cylinder popped out at the rear. 'That is a battery element. To reactivate it, immerse it in water. The element will absorb water like a sponge and takes approximately forty-eight hours to charge.'

Russell grabbed his brother's shoulders and turned him face to face. 'Where did you get all that information from?' he asked.

Trevor shrugged. 'I can only surmise that it comes from Aidme. It's as if I've always known about the hedgehogs, and the knowledge just came to me because I needed it.'

Russell held on to Trevor's shoulders. 'I don't know where or what this is leading to, but I'll be keeping a close eye on you. This could be bliss—or it could be utter misery. I'm not saying there is anything wrong with Aidme, but I'm hoping your mind is capable of handling him. Can you cope without going off your rocker?'

'Listen, Russell!' Trevor shook Russell's hands away and spoke as convincingly as his own uncertainty allowed. 'I don't feel any different. Aidme has absolutely no influence over me. He utilises the intellectual ability of my physical brain and responds to my mental processes of concrete thinking and reasoning.'

'Sounds like mumbo-jumbo!'

'Try to think of it this way then: my ego, my emotions, my feelings, my philosophical and theoretical ideas are all meaningless to him. He says they cause much confusion and that my mental activity is highly undisciplined.'

Russell nodded. 'Isn't that what I always say?'

'Hey, you guys!' said Sam. 'All this is fascinating, but aren't we wasting time? I'm starting to feel nervous. Can't we get on and get back to the *Cloud*?'

'How much do the Hedgehogs weigh?' asked John.

'In normal gravity, fully armed: approximately ten kilos.'

John grabbed the nearest Hedgehog. 'Come on then, let's see how many we can make room for on the *Cloud*.'

Trevor opened the lid of a box the size of a tea chest. It was full of what looked like walnuts. 'Here is the ammunition,' he said.

John picked up a walnut between finger and thumb. 'What sort of bullet is this?'

'Photonic Neutron Diffraction bomb,' said Trevor, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "'PND", immensely powerful! There is no record in Aidme's data bank of any known or conceivable material or substance that could resist or impede a detonation without total annihilation. They are ejected in rapid succession like a machine gun.'

'I'm starting to like the sound of these things,' said John. 'All we have to do is find a way of operating them. Come on. Let's finish off so we can get out of here.'

They found room for five Hedgehogs in the *Cloud*'s hold, and loaded five tea-chests of PND into the *Carriage* gangway. Pleased with themselves, they returned to Earth.

~*~

For two leisurely days the invisible *Cloud* floated unnoticed alongside the Mantis' giant iceberg. Their thieving factory spaceship still drew moisture from Earth and secreted ice crystals from its side, and the four frustrated humans could do nothing but bite their nails and count the hours while the Hedgehogs' power packs recharged.

'Their factory isn't protected by a forcefield,' Trevor had said when they first returned. 'I—Aidme—could easily throw a spanner in their works.'

'Better not try anything until we have control of the Hedgehogs,' John had said. 'Let's not start a battle until we have something to fight with.'

With no option other than to wait, the *Clouds*' occupants collapsed in mental and physical exhaustion. Grateful for the time to rest in luxurious accommodation they ate heartily, slept often, and watched their misused bodies put on weight and regain a semblance of health.

At the end of the second day, Trevor finally announced the Hedgehogs were ready. 'Let's contact the professor and inform him of our status,' he said. 'It'll cheer him up no end when he hears about the Hedgehogs.'

The expectant group crowded around Trevor's computer and waited for Professor Maurice Masterson's face to fill the screen.

'At long last!' barked the professor. 'What the hell is going on up there?' His features were wild and unruly, his eyes were red and swollen, bags like stuffed hammocks hung below them.

'We returned from the junkyard two days ago,' said Trevor, 'with some incredibly phenomenal weaponry—when we get them to work...'

'Stop picking your noses and get your feet down from the coffee table. Have I got to come up there to whip you into action, you lily-livered lot of brainless morons?'

Russell chuckled; the others reddened in anger.

'Hallo, Prof.' Russell pushed his brother aside and sat in front of the camera. 'We're looking into the problem.'

'Looking into your backside is more like it. Don't play games with me. People are dying like flies down here. It's minus fifty at night and plus fifty during the day. For God's sake get your finger out and do something.'

John pushed Russell aside and sat before the camera. 'Good evening, sir. We've had to wait for some energy cells to recharge. They're just about ready, and now we need to figure out how to control the five fighter units we've brought back with us.' He refrained from calling them Hedgehogs. 'And with all due respect, sir, it doesn't help if you start harassing us. Russell has

recommended we stay calm, he says inner calmness is the most essential part of any combat. He says we need to control our emotions.'

'You haven't even got control of your trouser flies... You boys are pissing me off. Russell is a namby-pamby infant who needs his nose punched. A nitwit sissy! Don't you understand, the whole ecological balance of our planet is about to collapse; you don't need to be an environmentalist, or a biologist, or even a flower-power hippy to understand; it's only a group of delinquents like you four who think the problem will go away by itself as long as you keep your heads buried in the sand long enough...!' He paused to breathe. 'Why did you bring those armaments if you can't use them?'

'We had no choice!' screamed Sam over John's shoulder. John jerked his ear away and dug his elbow into Sam's ribs.

'We had no choice, sir,' repeated John. 'There is nothing else. And if I hear another piece of garbage from you I'll forget about these insects and come down there to ram some respect down your cantankerous old throat.'

The professor opened his mouth to reply, but his anger distorted face disappeared from the screen.

'I have removed the cause of aggravation,' said Aidme. 'Your brain patterns are so disordered I virtually lost contact with Trevor.'

'Bravo!' said Russell. 'I was about to break the connection myself. That man was causing an incredible amount of friction. But let us not to be angry with him. He's under an awful lot of pressure. Thank goodness he hasn't given up and still has his fighting spirit.'

Trevor marched backwards and forwards with his head low and his hands clasped behind his back. Sam sat down heavily and rubbed her bruised ribs. John turned away from the computer and looked at each person in turn. His gaze went back to Russell and rested there; Russell's relaxed features and gentle smile calmed his rampant emotions like balsam.

'Okay!' said John. 'The professor is right. We need to get our finger out. I'm the senior officer here and I'm taking command.' He paused, but there were no objections. 'Let's get to work on these Hedgehogs. What do we know about them?'

'Only that Aidme is the only one who can operate them,' said Sam, 'and he refuses to use them in combat.'

'This is what we do then,' said John. 'We return to the *Barrel* and fetch a remote control unit or something.'

Trevor stopped tramping up and down and faced Aidme, looking as though he wanted to head-butt it. 'You said these things were compatible with our race,' he shouted. 'In what way are they compatible? How can we operate them?'

'They are controlled by thought,' replied Aidme.

'Oh yeah, great! That tells me practically nothing. Are we supposed to sit in a booth, wear a helmet, or have our temples wired up?'

'The creator race use a helmet.'

Trevor groaned. 'Why didn't you say so before? I keep telling you to make your answers more complete, perhaps now you comprehend why.' He put his hands on his hips and tapped his toe. 'I suppose we have to go back and fetch some.'

'The helmets are shaped to their own heads. They will not fit yours.'

'Can't we modify them?'

'The creator race have heads the size and shape of a kitten.'

'Damn!' said Trevor and started marching again. 'There's something you're not telling me, Aidme. How are these Hedgehogs compatible with us if our heads are too fat to fit the control helmet?'

'Dear brother,' soothed Russell. 'If you calm down, perhaps Aidme could better anticipate the information you need.'

Trevor threw himself into his office chair, put his feet on the desk, and pushed the chair into reclining position. 'Does this help?' he mocked, and forced his eyes shut.

Russell kneaded the tightly packed muscles in Trevor's shoulders until the knots loosened. Trevor sighed and began speaking. 'Our human mind does not require a helmet,' he said. 'Aidme can tune the Hedgehog to respond to our thoughts directly. But the quality of our undisciplined thoughts will be confusing to the Hedgehogs, just as they are to Aidme.'

Russell made room to sit on the desk. 'Interesting,' he said. 'But you need to explain more—what do we do? How can we establish a link?'

'Concentrate on the image of a kitten's head. When the image is in our mind, the link with the Hedgehog is established and control will be feasible. Further explanation is not possible because Aidme does not understand the process himself. He controls an object by becoming embedded and integrated, we must do the same with the Hedgehogs.'

Trevor opened his eyes and sat up straight; he stretched his hands high then drew them in to rub his neck. 'Phew!' he gasped. 'That's exactly what I needed. Thanks, Russell.'

'Very well!' said John. 'Trevor, you will have nothing to do with the Hedgehogs. Your job is to fly the *Cloud*.' His expression softened. 'You have the exact and insatiable brain of a research scientist, and if your mind was ruled solely by your brain you'd be a robot. This is good for Aidme but bad for us. Thankfully, like the rest of us, you're full of human emotion.' He paused and rubbed his nose. 'Apart from Russell!' He looked at Russell and shook his head. 'Russell obviously has emotions too, but he doesn't let them bother him...'

'I'm more of a philosopher,' said Russell. 'I seek wisdom—not knowledge.'

John directed his full attention to Russell. 'Your primary job is to gain control of the Hedgehogs, and you will do nothing else until you succeed. The fact is, you are the only person amongst us who has a chance of managing these Hedgehogs. Perhaps Sam can also learn; after all, she did manage that Hulk trick on the insects' sphere, but you'll need to show her it's possible.'

'This is what I suggest then,' said Russell. 'I'll take Sam to my apartment where we can work in peace while you and Trevor stay here to run operations. I don't mind you taking command, John. I think it's a good idea.'

Nobody moved for a moment. At present, they were whole and healthy, but their next move meant war and risking their lives. John embraced Sam, the two brothers nodded at each other. Russell focused on their auras. Seen as one, they bristled with trepidation.

'Just look at our home, the earth,' said Sam. The others followed her gaze. 'Have you ever seen a more beautiful sight?' She casually drew the back of her hand across her moist eyes. 'Our planet needs rescuing, our race needs saving, our families need protection, and we are the only people who can do anything about it. Let us pray to God for His grace, and let us never falter as guardians of His magnificent gift.'

They bowed their heads.

'Come along,' said Russell, breaking the spell. 'We need to exterminate a few pesky insects.'

~*~

'Let me lull you into a deep trance,' said Russell. 'Listen to my voice and relax.'

'Supposing I fall asleep?' said Sam.

'Concentrate. Meditation is not like sleeping, think of it more as self-hypnosis. As you relax, your consciousness will be released. Are you ready?'

'Yes.'

'Close your eyes and take a deep breath; slowly, breath all the way out. Again, breathe in, and slowly out. Imagine you are standing on a beach of pure yellow sand. Feel the warm sand under your toes—feel the clear warm sea as it washes over your feet—and now lay down on the soft warm sand. Listen to the sound of the tropical forest behind you, the gentle breeze rustling the palm leaves, the birds greeting the morning sun, the busy insects going about their business. You feel comfortable, you feel at peace with nature, you are nature...'

The image of five cat faces flowed into Russell's mind. They had no whiskers and tiny ears. Their clear round eyes radiated intelligence, and they smiled as he met their gaze. He reached out to touch their light beige fur...

Russell was superman again. A snarling cat replaced the "S" on his chest. Utilising the Hedgehog's sensory system he saw the *Cloud's* garage. Without effort, he gazed through the walls at the planet Earth. He peered at the surface, found England, found London, found his dojo and watched the faces of passers-by. With extrasensory hearing, he eavesdropped on their conversations.

Russell backed out of his hedgehog and became aware of his own body. He spoke to Sam in a whisper. 'Imagine you are visiting a kind old aunt, or your cosy grandmother, or the sweet little lady who lives in the cottage up the road. Smell the sweet scent of roses from her garden, feel the peace and calm and wisdom and love that saturates the atmosphere. See the little kitten curled up in his basket. Pick it up and place it on your lap. Stroke it. Listen to it purr. Notice the small ears and velvet skin. Notice the intelligent eyes. See how it smiles at you. Now step out of your body and into the kitten's, like pulling on a new woollen pullover.'

Sam sighed, her eyes overflowed and a tear rolled down her cheek.

'Yes! Notice how good it feels,' said Russell. 'Now tell me; where are you?'

'I'm at the controls of a jet fighter.'

'Good. Now listen carefully. Check your instruments.'

'Everything in order here,' said Sam. 'In fact, I've never seen such fantastic instruments. My radar and navigation systems are doing things I didn't know were possible.'

'You are now in control of a Hedgehog. You have an impenetrable forcefield and missiles that make an atom bomb look like a Chinese Christmas cracker. Together with the ability to fly in outer space, you have other capabilities you can't even imagine. Let's take them out for a test flight.'

~*~

Trevor watched the *Cloud's* bay doors open. Two Hedgehogs emerged and stopped a short distance away.

'There they are,' said John, sliding to the edge of his seat. 'This is truly fantastic. Those guys are great.'

'Oh no,' said Trevor. 'This isn't a good idea. They're preparing to test their capabili...'

Space was suddenly filled with a blinding glare; a flash of luminous brilliance so intense that people on Earth's surface saw it against the full sunlight. A vast volume of phosphorescent gas flowed away and attached itself to Earth's atmosphere, illuminating the night sky with a fearsome display of Aurora Borealis never seen before.

'What the hell was that?' screamed John, leaping to his feet.

'We have just been bombarded,' said Trevor, a tremble in his voice, 'by a concentration of energy emitted from the iceberg. The two Hedgehogs have been destroyed. The *Cloud* is unscathed.'

Russell and Sam stumbled into the control room, shaky after their rude awakening. John rushed to Sam's side and slipped an arm around her waist.

'Look there,' pointed Trevor.

The other three followed his finger and gazed at the Mantis iceberg. A colossal portion broke free, darkened, and transformed into what only could be described as a Dreadnought of space.

Trevor smacked the top of his head. 'Of course! How stupid we are. They've been hidden on the iceberg all the time, camouflaged. They attacked the Hedgehogs as soon as they detected them.'

John recovered fast. He led Sam to the settee, then asked, 'How much energy was in that blast?'

'Enough to shatter the moon into a haze of dust particles,' said Trevor.

'Imagine the damage they could do if they fired at the earth.' John thought a moment, then made a decision. 'Make us visible, Trevor.'

'Why should we become visible?' said Sam, still rubbing her temples.

'Because they've used up their one surprise attack. They probably don't understand how their battleships were defeated so easily, but they must surely realise defeat happened the moment they dropped their forcefields to fire their weapons. When they see us they won't dare to open fire again.'

'Perhaps the Dreadnought doesn't need to drop its forcefield to fire its weapons,' said Trevor. 'They must be using the best they've got now, and I'm afraid I can't tell you anything about the Dreadnought because their forcefield is impervious to Aidme's probing.'

Russell had recovered enough to smile again. He patted his brother on the back. 'Thank you, Trevor,' he said.

'What for?'

'For building the *Cloud* so strong. Enough to shatter the moon into a haze of dust particles, but not enough to destroy us.'

'My pleasure. Make us visible, Aidme.'

The Dreadnought stopped moving. No shot was fired.

'Ah ha!' said John. 'Like I said, they dare not do anything.'

'It's a kind of stalemate then,' said Sam. 'There's nothing we can do either, those Hedgehogs were blown to smithereens—they're useless.'

'Yes, there is something we can do,' said Russell. 'Let's push the iceberg back to Earth.'

They looked at each other and grinned.

'Yeah! That'll give them something to think about,' said Trevor. 'At the moment there's no forcefield protecting it, and if we move fast, we can be there before they have time to throw one around it.'

'Can we really do it?' asked John. 'Can we push the iceberg back to Earth?'

'It'll be an extremely fine balancing act,' said Trevor, 'pushing it in the right direction against Earth's gravity and dropping it gently somewhere. What do you say, Aidme, can we do it?'

'Yes.'

'Right, do it.'

In the next instance, the *Cloud* found itself resting against the iceberg. Compared to the iceberg, the *Cloud* was no more than a speck of dust on an ice cube. But the *Cloud* pushed, and the iceberg had no option other than to move. The Dreadnought sent out a tractor ray, and all the

colossal forces available to the Mantis were concentrated in that ray. The plane of force struck the *Cloud* and clung.

'What's happening?' asked John, noticing a slight vibration under his feet.

Trevor's fingers punched the computer keys and his keen eyes monitored and interpreted a confusion of readings. 'The Mantis are resisting our manoeuvre and trying to hold us back.' He pointed to his computer screen. 'But these readings are preposterous, absurd. I would have to fly into the sun to see such measurements of energy as these.'

'A tug-of-war!' said Russell, rubbing his hands. 'They don't stand a chance.'

The Dreadnought increased its power, diverting energy from every quarter, and the pale blue tractor ray crackled and flashed as it strove to anchor the *Cloud*. But tug as it may, its stupendous might was completely neutralised by the egg-shaped *Cloud*.

The hair on Trevor's neck rose as a low humming sound grew and permeated the air. The view through the control room's invisible walls turned obscure and milky as veins and arteries within the shield soaked in and utilised the phenomenal magnitude of energy.

But the linkage between the Dreadnought and the *Cloud* held, and both the Iceberg and the Dreadnought were dragged along the same path toward Earth.

'Get two more Hedgehogs ready,' said John. 'Russell, get out there and hit that Dreadnought with a few walnuts. You too, Sam, get out there as soon as you can. Make your attack at the rear, the Dreadnought is using all its power on the tractor beam and its forcefield and weaponry are surely reduced.'

Thought union between Russell and his Hedgehog was completed in less than thirty seconds, and the Hedgehog was in place behind the Dreadnought in less than a further two seconds. Russell released a walnut. It glowed along its lethal path, struck the Dreadnought's forcefield, and detonated. A silent but dreadful explosion erupted.

Despite the walnut's might, it was spent harmlessly on the Dreadnought's impervious barrier. Russell held fire and waited almost another two minutes before Sam joined him. Together they sent an uninterrupted salvage of walnuts cascading into the same area.

The Dreadnought's forcefield reflected and hurled the walnuts away in every direction; but the forcefield weakened and each detonating walnut nibbled its way closer to the bare fuselage. The Dreadnought redirected power away from the tractor ray to reinforce its forcefield, and with the increased energy, the nick in its forcefield straightened out.

Thirty seconds later the Hedgehogs ran out of walnuts, and the tug-of-war between the Dreadnought and the *Cloud* resumed with increased intensity.

Inside the *Cloud*, Trevor and John gritted their teeth and swore.

'Those walnut PNDs are nothing more than small side arms,' said John. 'It's like trying to destroy a Sherman tank with an airgun. I thought you said the walnuts were immensely powerful. Something about no known or conceivable substance that could resist detonation without total annihilation.'

'Yes,' admitted Trevor. 'I don't know. Perhaps I misinterpreted Aidme's thought message. I spoke too soon—and I hadn't reckoned on that Dreadnought... Hang on, Russell's up to something.'

All the while Russell had been emptying the walnuts against the Dreadnought's untouchable forcefield, his mind had been searching for another solution. He might as well hit the Dreadnought with flower petals, he had thought. He wondered why the first two Hedgehogs had exploded so ferociously, they weren't even armed. Perhaps the Hedgehog's ultimate function is a bomb? He wondered what would happen if he rammed the forcefield like a kamikaze.

He set the Hedgehog on auto-pilot, aimed it at the Dreadnought, and drew his consciousness back into his own body.

The Hedgehog screamed into the Dreadnought's forcefield. At first, nothing happened, but gradually, from the point of impact, a bright red bruise grew and spread. The bruise turned orange and yellow through all the rainbow colours until the whole forcefield glowed brilliant white.

Sam understood what Russell had done and sent her own Hedgehog into the Dreadnought's forcefield. When it struck, the weakened forcefield splashed like a stone thrown into a pond. The splash passed through the forcefield and burst inward, sending a lethal spray of flames against the Dreadnought's unprotected fuselage. A portion of vessel erupted in molten metal.

Aidme sensed the breach and entered the Dreadnought's control-mechanism. His subtle probing eased into position. He counted the life forms and concluded none were killed or injured. He noticed the power generators were at bursting point. He determined the hull damage was only superficial.

The breach caused by Sam's Hedgehog lasted no longer than five milliseconds, then the forcefield thudded into place again—but those five milliseconds were long enough for Aidme to secure an untraceable pinpoint channel to work through. His probing continued until he was embedded in every single system within the entire Dreadnought. The forcefield held for one second—then Aidme turned it off and disarmed all weapons.

'Yes,' said Trevor, thumping his desk. 'The good news is: I have control,'

'And the bad?' said John.

'The bad news is: I have obtained knowledge of twenty-five battleships camouflaged on the iceberg.'

'What!' said John. 'And we only have one Hedgehog left. Get me the professor.'

The professor's features filled Trevor's computer screen, he spoke immediately. 'I've seen the show,' he said, 'and you're causing so much static that most electronic systems down here on earth have broken down. Are any of you hurt?'

'Go to red alert,' said John. 'Attack is imminent. I repeat, attack is imminent.'

The professor spread his hands, and his weary head drooped. 'Is there nothing more you can do?'

'We're running out of resources, sir, but we're not finished yet. No time to talk. Over and out.'

Russell and Sam bounced into the control room, grinning broadly. They were just in time to witness the twenty-five battleships break away from the iceberg and head for Earth.

'Oh no!' said Russell. 'What now?'

'Another twenty-five battleships,' said John. 'Take the last Hedgehog and go after them.'

To save time, Russell sank into his chair in the control room and closed his eyes. Thought control came instantaneously. He launched the last Hedgehog and sped after the battleships. Moving at the speed of light, he caught up before they could manoeuvre into attack position. *I'll get a few of you, thought Russell, before you let loose on the earth. Your Dreadnought was a toughie. Let's see how strong you are.*

He sent three walnuts into the closest battleship. The forcefield buckled but held. He sent four more and the fourth walnut broke through and brutally crippled the vessel. *Yes!* thought Russell, *that wasn't so bad, I have plenty of ammunition, enough for all of you, you're sitting ducks...*

The Mantis' battleships spread out in all directions to form an orb. Russell flew amongst them. The battleships held their positions and collectively encircled their orb formation within a forcefield, trapping the Hedgehog inside. Shrouded inside their protective blanket, the battleships opened fire against the Hedgehog.

Concentrated beams of extinction struck the hedgehog squarely. Russell felt the scorching whiplash on his back, and he jumped from his chair in the control room.

'Russell!' shouted Trevor. 'What is it?'

'They hit the Hedgehog,' said Russell. 'I lost control. Their forcefield partially blocked my thoughts and I lost control.' He climbed to his feet and rubbed his back, sweat glistened on his brow. 'I don't think the Hedgehog is damaged. My last sensation was that it went into automatic mode. It curled into a ball to protect itself. It's buzzing around in their forcefield like a fly trapped in a jam jar, and those insects are trying to swat it.'

'Damn!' swore John.

'I'm going to my apartment,' said Russell. 'I need total tranquillity.'

He laid on the sofa, made himself comfortable, and let all strain and tension drain away. He wanted to try a technique he'd previously had little success with—transcendental meditation. Now though, after the experience in his Dojo when he first saw the Mantis, and after his episode while they tried to read his mind under the influence of drugs and stimulus, he felt he had mastered the method. He concentrated on non-existence, and willed his consciousness to flow to a place where material substance and perception of time has no meaning.

Gradually, his consciousness rose above his body. He looked down, his heart pattered imperceptibly and his chest rose and fell in shallow breaths.

He was beyond the universe's physical limitations. He passed through the *Cloud's* wall and through the Mantis' forcefield as if they were non-existent.

The Hedgehog was still on autopilot and curled into a tight ball. It dodged as best it could, but lethal rays struck often and mercilessly, making it sluggish and near collapse.

Okay, my tough Hedgehog friend, thought Russell as he united. For the present, you are my body, and together we will defeat these battleships. Your creators must be agile and stealthy creatures, and they built you well; and I am Russell, master of martial arts.

Russell cringed at the heat surrounding him. Ordinary metal exposed to such a temperature would instantaneously melt and evaporate. *Don't give in yet my friend. Don't be afraid, give me control—now!*

He ignored the Hedgehog's instruments and let intuition guide him through the dazzling maze of searing death rays. He dodged and twisted, and the Hedgehog followed his every whim, pirouetting at the speed of light. Rays of force stabbed and slashed but he avoided them all.

Very good, thought Russell, we dance well together. I wish my own body could move as fast and sprightly as you. The time has come to show our capabilities; your temperature has fallen—uncurl my friend: stick out your snout and give 'em a clout.

His punch was lethal. With the battleships concentrating their power on the orb's forcefield, each individual forcefield was greatly reduced. One walnut was enough to stun the nearest battleship into defenceless surrender. The flashing Hedgehog ducked and swerved between scything death rays, and one battleship after the other lay prone and helpless in its wake.

The battleship orb formation crumbled, the targets became easier, the death rays less intense. The final six battleships made a dash for Earth, spitefully intent on unleashing their mighty weapons on the defenceless humans.

Russell steadied himself and took careful aim. Six groups of four walnuts streaked through space and reached their targets in less than half a second. The forcefields of all six battleships buckled and failed, and Aidme stepped in to claim control and victory.

CHAPTER 12 Resolution

John sat in front of Trevor's computer and waited while the professor's haggard features appeared on the screen. 'You can call off the red alert, sir, it's all over!'

'What do you mean "it's all over"? It has only been five minutes since I called the red alert.'

'I hardly know myself,' said John. 'But it is over, and we have hordes of Mantis prisoners to dispose of.'

A wave of change spread across the professor's face. 'Thank heavens,' he said and closed his eyes. His shoulders sunk and he threw his head back, covering his face with his hands. He sat like that for fifteen seconds, then leant forward and smiled into his Zip-Linq. 'And thanks to you four too!'

He took a pristine handkerchief from his trouser pocket and blew his nose noisily. 'As to those insects; send them home bruised and empty handed. That's the best thing.'

'But surely they'll simply come back with a stronger force,' said John.

'They'll come back anyway. If their spaceships don't return they'll want to know why. If we send a message back with them, perhaps they'll think twice about coming.'

'What sort of a message?'

'A giant placard,' said the professor, 'of an army boot hovering over a wimpy green insect just about ready to squash it flat!'

John nodded. 'As soon as we've rid ourselves of these vermin we'll bring the iceberg back to Earth. Trevor assures me we can do it without causing a tsunami.'

'Good! Put it down in the Antarctic amongst the other icebergs. Most communication systems are knocked out with all the static you've created; all the satellites are dead and most electronic equipment is ruined. I called a red alert—but there isn't a single aircraft capable of flying; there's not a radar system or computer left working anywhere... The only thing the red alert did was give the world's leaders time to crawl underground to save their own skins like frightened moles... Sorry! Bring it on down, nobody will notice.'

~*~

The professor splashed through muddy puddles like a five year old, humming something so out of tune it was impossible to recognise. Trevor, Russell, Sam and John squelched behind in single file. They reached a summer-shelter and lowered their wet umbrellas.

'Sit down.' The professor indicated the circular wooden bench and waited while the group sat. 'There are two subjects I wish to discuss. I'll begin with the easiest. Reports are coming back from the area where you placed the iceberg. It seems that the surrounding sea is turning pink!'

Trevor understood the implications immediately. 'Oh dear, that means the iceberg has been doctored with some kind of chemical. What do you want us to do?'

'Nothing at present. I have scientists analysing a piece of ice taken from the iceberg. I thought you would like to know, that's all.'

A smile spread across the professor's usually stern face, not a smile of joy, but a smile of affection. 'You four have become my favourite people in the whole world. I brought you to this spot because I needed to get away from my office, and Trevor's woods has become my favourite place in the whole world.' He turned away and watched as sheets of rain flapped in the wind. 'Isn't this fantastic?' he said, and filled his lungs with air. 'I hope it rains forever.'

'Typical London weather,' mumbled John.

'It's peaceful here,' said Sam. 'Reminds me of childhood days at home.'

The professor sighed and his frown returned. 'Home. That's the second subject I want to talk about.' He moved closer to John and Sam. 'It's not official of course, but the whole world think

you two are dead.' He brushed a wet patch on the front of his tweed jacket. 'Only your immediate families know the truth.'

'Have you spoken to them?' asked Sam, leaning forward.

'Yes. Your children are healthy and your mother sends her love.' He paused a moment. 'This whole situation is rather awkward. Your mother is the only person who knows you're alive and well.'

Sam shrugged her shoulders at the professor. 'I don't understand. What's the problem?'

'How can we explain you suddenly turning up again? The general public must never know about the alien attack. It would cause unprecedented panic. If the Americans or Russians or Chinese get hold of you they'll bury you twenty miles under rather than risk the truth coming out.'

Sam and John glanced wide-eyed at each other.

'The last time you were seen alive was orbiting Earth in the *Wayfarer* space shuttle,' said the professor, 'and next you walk in at the kitchen door and say "Hallo, I'm Home!" What are you going to tell people? "A couple of guys from London just happened to come past in their home made flying-saucer and gave us a lift home?"'

Rain splattered on the tin roof. Sam sneezed. 'Supposing we tell the truth,' she said. 'Does the world even know for sure we disappeared?'

'Everyone knows,' said the professor. 'You can't simply shoot a NASA space shuttle off into space and keep it a secret.'

'This is damned ridiculous,' said John. 'We're heroes. We've just saved the world and now we have to have plastic surgery, change identity, and make a new life. Is that what you're saying?'

The professor shook rainwater from his umbrella and leaned on the handle like a walking stick. 'There is a top-secret government department in America called the Alien Bond, AB for short. They deal with alien contact. The four of you know the truth of course, aliens do exist; and the truth is, these Mantis are not the first to visit us—but they are the first to cause us harm.'

'Damned bugs!' said John. 'There must be thousands of aliens out there. How much contact has AB had with aliens?'

'Hardly any. They know as much as the general public—plus a mite more. There has never been an official rendezvous with aliens. They would love to hear your story. But like I said, they are a top-secret department and those who work there, live there. They live in exile and have no "official" life outside the department.'

'You think we should join them?' asked Sam. 'Is that what you're hinting at?'

'If you join them you dedicate your life to them. It is what I recommend.'

Silence fell over them. A pair of thrushes squawked past, fighting over a fat worm, insensible to the trivial problems of mere men. The air smelt fresh and damp, and new tufts of grass peeked from the sodden ground, eager to carpet the forest floor in emerald green.

Trevor spoke up. 'I've been thinking,' he said. 'I've been thinking about bringing the *Hollywood* back here. We could hide it on the other side of Jupiter. The *Hollywood* is fully functional, a small world all of its own.'

Only Russell lifted his head to listen.

'Why not let AB use it?' continued Trevor. 'They could live and work there. Think what fun engineers and scientist would have discovering its secrets. Think how safe the world would be with the *Hollywood* to guard and protect us. It could be colonised, whole families could live and work there. *Hollywood's* shuttles would make transportation to and from Earth extremely comfortable. I don't know—but you can see the possibilities?'

'What a fantastic idea,' said the professor. 'Those AB guys would have a shindig if they heard about this. What do you others think?'

'Sounds great,' admitted John. 'But I'll need time to think.'

'Me too,' said Sam. 'I've got a mother and kids, but if they could come... If it was feasible to live there... well, maybe.'

'I'll give you twenty-four hours to think about it,' said the professor.

'What if we don't want anything to do with it?' asked John.

The professor spread his free hand and shrugged his shoulders. 'You'll disappear from the face of Earth anyway!'

~*~

'What do you think we should do?' asked Russell.

They strolled side by side through the mansion's woods, each swinging a folded umbrella.

'I'm going to bring the *Hollywood* no matter what,' answered Trevor. 'I'm going to live there. The rest of my life will be spent either there or here in our estate. AB can do what they like, although I hope John and Sam will join me. I haven't so much to lose, the *Cloud* and my experiments are my life anyway. It's harder for you. You've got your dojo and pupils and friends. What do you want to do?'

'Yes,' admitted Russell. 'My dojo is my life. I don't know. I'm torn. This is all so exciting. Do I have a choice? If there really is going to be a community on the *Hollywood*, maybe I could run my dojo there.'

The muddy path ended at a large clearing and the *Clouds'* stately house came into view, its round turrets and white stone walls smudged and grey after the heavy rain.

'Two people behind the house,' said Aidme, floating in his usual position thirty centimetres from Trevor's shoulder.

An automatic lawn mower purred across the large lawn, and two Alsatian dogs pranced along behind, sniffing and playing as if they were cats chasing a clockwork mouse. The dogs caught and recognised Russell's scent, lifted their heads, darted at Russell, stopped two metres from him, and barked savagely.

'So it's you again, is it?' said Alf, trotting from behind the house with Bert close on his heels. 'What're you doing here?'

'We live here,' answered Russell and offered his hand.

'Liar,' said Alf, ignoring the hand.

'Who are these people?' asked Trevor as he grabbed Aidme and tucked him under his arm.

'What do they want?'

'These are two friends of mine,' said Russell. 'We met in the park some time ago. Alf and Bert, isn't it?'

'Think you're funny, don't you?' said Alf, still wearing his vest, soggy from the recent rain. 'We've been here for weeks now. Ain't seen nobody. Nobody lives here. Least of all two twits like you.'

'It's rather fortunate we meet again,' said Russell, hands on hips, 'because I have a proposition for you.'

'Well it ain't fortunate for you. Because I'm going to teach you a lesson.' Alf threw a well-placed fist at Russell's nose and Bert dived for Russell's waist. But neither the nose nor the waist remained still. Bert skidded along the wet grass on his belly and crashed into the lawnmower.

Alf threw another jab, then another; short, lethal punches with a fist like a steam-hammer head. Another jab, then another, his body low, well balanced and disciplined, the air cracking each time his deadly fist shot forward.

But Russell's head was never there. Or it was there, with that huge grinning smile, but it kept dodging out of the way at the last moment.

Losing patience, Alf threw a wide swinging punch hoping to catch Russell off balance. Russell swept the arm aside and dragged it forward, propelling the stunned man face down along Bert's skid mark.

'Would you two please stop messing about and listen?' said Russell.

Alf sat on the wet grass and wiped mud from his eyes.

'If you two like it here so much, you can stay. It's true we don't own this estate, but our parents do, and they have given us complete and legitimate authority to administer it as we see fit. We would like to employ you two as guardians of this property. We'll pay you a good wage to keep trespassers out. There's a small gatehouse down by the main gates where you can live; it's a bit run down but fully habitable.'

Bert put the lawnmower straight and gave it a little push. He smiled happily as the mower purred on its way.

'What's the catch?' asked Alf.

'The only condition is that you stop robbing people,' said Russell. 'And work with the police instead of against them. Now give me your hand and shake on it.'

'You're a slippery customer,' said Alf. He took Russell's hand and dragged himself up.

Bert took his hand cautiously as if he might get an electric shock. 'Yeah! You're slippery all right. But you're a nice guy, ain't no harm in you at all. We'll work for you, won't we, Alf—if the money's right?'

A small hole opened in the dark clouds and a ray of sunshine floodlit the two brothers.

'Up there,' said Russell. 'Amongst the clouds and beyond. That's where we belong. Me and my brother Trevor, the Cloud boys, are going to be rather busy—busy reaching for the stars.'

THE END

Author's note: I hope you enjoyed this story, if so, do me a favour by spreading the word on your Blog, Twitter or Facebook site. Why not let me and others know what you think by posting a review at your favourite online bookshop; even a review of few words is helpful. Thank you.
James

The adventure continues...
Book two in the Cloud Brother's series:

Pink Water

The Mantis have left a booby trap. Within two weeks the oceans will turn pink, boil, and evaporate. Trevor and Russell, their parents, an icebreaker and her crew, are captured by the Mantis and time warped into deep space. The parents are given the task of finding a remedy for the pink water—but first they must escape and find their way home.

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Gathering Clouds...
(2016 Edition)
This novel is a work of fiction.

PINK WATER

The Cloud Brothers

Book Two

James Field

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Chapter Zero. Hero

Leroy didn't understand Spanish, or Argentinean, or whatever the crummy lingo was. But he understood body language and the three dockworkers ahead spelled trouble. Just the sort he was looking for.

A massive solar flare had destroyed the electronics on the icebreaker where Leroy worked. All the long day he'd waited in his cabin while podgy technicians came and went to repair the damage. Tomorrow, his ship was leaving on a secret mission, but this evening, he craved his exercise.

Brave because of their reputation, the three dock workers sneered and gestured in their greasy language. By night, they terrorised the docks. Nobody felt safe. Nobody dared venture out alone after dark. They were untouchable and supreme.

Leroy didn't falter. He marched with increased speed, sorting the strong from the weak.

Two of the gang took a nervous step back.

The gang's leader crumbled to the ground with four broken ribs. A second man pulled a knife and his wrist snapped like a twig. The third man turned to run but crashed to the ground with a smashed knee.

His exercise over, Leroy returned to his cabin and locked the door, friendless and lonely.

~*~

A shadow had witnessed the confrontation. Outlined by an eerie glow, it took the form of a short gypsy. 'You'll do,' he said, gradually fading. 'You tell me if you don't.'

Chapter One. Barbecue

Russell scratched his ear with a pencil and pointed at the crossword clue. 'Hilly region in Hungary, twelve letters, second letter R.'

'TRANSDANUBIA,' said Trevor, basking in the late afternoon sun.

'Yes, that fits. Thanks.' Russell filled in the blanks. 'You've turned into a walking encyclopedia. Is there anything you don't know?'

'Oh, there are many things I don't know, but when it comes to general knowledge Aidme puts the answer straight into my mind.' He opened his eyes and glanced sideways at the grey football floating at his shoulder. 'Right now, he tells me our good friend the professor is approaching.'

'Is he? I wonder what he wants this time.'

Six minutes later, an old-fashioned helicopter buzzed over the estate's tree tops, wobbling in their direction.

Russell squinted. 'Isn't that one of those things they use for dusting crops with insecticides? Has the professor developed a fear of insects?'

'ENTOMOPHOBIA, twelve letters,' said Trevor. 'Probably the only thing he could find that works after our little escapade destroyed every single piece of electronic equipment in the world.'

The brothers grimaced at each other. Thankfully, very few people knew the truth. The professor had convinced the world's press a solar flare was to blame.

The helicopter crashed onto the manor's expansive lawn with a jarring bump. Before the rotors stopped, Professor Maurice Masterson fell from the open-sided cabin and swore.

Russell dashed to his aid and lifted him to his feet.

'Thank you,' said the professor, dabbing his brow with a starched handkerchief. 'Damned thing should be put back in the museum where it belongs. Better still, scrapped. Get your calloused claws off me, I'm not a decrepit pensioner yet.'

'Come up on the veranda,' said Russell, ignoring the professor's typical sourness, 'we're drinking tea and Trevor was helping me with a crossword.'

'Helping you waste time is more like it. You're a pair of shirkers.'

They climbed a wide row of stone steps and the professor collapsed into a well-cushioned patio chair. His ever-watchful eyes scanned their surroundings and settled on a movement where the expansive lawn boarded a distant wood. A rusty, beaten-up van crunched and rattled along the shingle road, trailing a cloud of dust.

'Who's in the wreck, and why is it coming here?' asked the professor.

'Ah,' said Russell, 'that's probably the chef. We're having a barbecue and I decided to let someone else do the cooking. I found an advert in the classified section of the local paper,' he patted his folded newspaper, 'and since the telephones aren't working, I sent Bert with instructions.'

Alf and Bert, the newly employed security guards, had also noticed the approaching van.

'That's him,' said Bert, stroking and reassuring his two Alsatians, 'I recognise his old banger.'

One back wheel locked as the van skidded to a halt. A short gypsy stepped out. Using his aged strength, he swung the car door shut. It screeched on dry hinges, banged against the frame, and flopped open again. He turned his back to the van, stretched out his hand ready for shaking, and stumbled up onto the veranda.

'Misters Clouds?' he said, offering his grubby palm. Broad jaws and dark-brown eyes set wide apart gave him the appearance of a friendly old Mastiff. A red headscarf stretched across his scalp, and golden earrings glittered from his protruding ear lobes. 'I'm going to make the most delicious spare ribs and pork-chops and chipolatas you've ever tasted. The secret is in the marinade, and MY marinades are the best, you tell me if they're not.'

Two crisp bodyguards hopped down from the helicopter. While one searched the van, the other approached the chef. Automatically, the chef raised his arms.

'Pay no attention to my men,' said the professor, 'it's their job—checking for weapons and the such.'

'I shan't complain,' said the chef. 'You can never be too careful these days. I'm used to being frisked and I don't mind a bit. I wouldn't hurt a fly. There's not a trace of nastiness in me.'

Satisfied, the bodyguards took up positions on each corner of the veranda.

The chef shuffled to the gas-grill, lit it, then fetched a large hamper from his van.

Professor Masterson poured himself tea. As he sipped, he relaxed. Without doubt, this marvellous estate was his favourite spot in London, and these two brothers, barely old enough to

vote, managed the entire property alone. He lowered his voice. 'I came to see you boys because I need to meet your parents.'

'Is that the only reason?' said Russell, disappointed. 'We'd like to meet our parents too, but they're always busy with some new project or another. It's been ages since we spoke to them. Why do you need to meet them?'

Stirring milk and sugar into his tea, the professor wished life could be as comfortable and problem free as he felt right at this moment. With a sigh, he said. 'You boys have become two of my closest associates. May I say friends?'

'Thank you,' said Russell, 'the feeling is mutual.'

'Good. Now then, you will agree friends have no secrets and can ask favours of one another?'

'Absolutely.'

'Confounded nuisance really, but I make it my business to carry out an intimate research of all my closest friends. It's a necessary precaution, a part of my life, all in the name of security. My research has revealed everything about your parents, and I believe, from what I discovered, that I need their assistance. To meet them, I need your assistance.'

The chef strolled up and interrupted. 'Excuse me gentlemen, I'm sorry to butt in, but the grill is ready. I KNOW you're hungry so what would you like, I have everything, you name it.'

'Go away you nincompoop,' said the professor. 'Can't you see we're having a private conversation?'

Instead of leaving, the chef stared at the professor with a glint in his eye. 'I know YOU Sir, and may I say what a great honour it is to make your acquaintance. Here Sir, allow me the honour of shaking your hand.' He grabbed the professor's hand and pumped it up and down.

'You have me at a disadvantage—who the hell are you?'

Bert's two Alsations growled and a bodyguard drew a gun.

'A fan Sir, don't be alarmed. I wouldn't hurt a fly. There's not a trace of nastiness in me. You are the great Maurice Masterson, twice Olympic gold medallist in fencing.'

'Ah, yes.' The professor released his hand and straightened his bow tie, flattered someone still recognised him. 'Yes, quite correct, but that was a long time ago. Where do you come from? I can't make out your accent.'

'Now then, Sir, I am a Romany, call me a gypsy if you like. I have travelled all over the world and can't seem to settle anywhere. Sometimes I am a tinker. Other times I am a fortune-teller. Today, I am a humble chef and I'll leave you gentlemen in peace.'

'Bloody foreigners,' said the professor as soon as they were alone. 'Now then, what was I saying? Oh yes, your parents.'

'Shall we move to the table?' said Trevor, 'looks like the food's ready. There's enough for all so I hope you'll join us?'

'Yes, thank you, stop interrupting, we are discussing your parents.'

'And exactly what is it you've discovered about them?' asked Russell as they seated themselves.

'As I said, I've done a thorough research. Your well-regarded parents have developed, own, and run a successful pharmaceutical industry. Your mother specialises in microbiology and genetics. Your father specialises in chemistry and mineralogy.'

'Yes,' chuckled Russell, 'a pair of dry old sticks. The problem is they travel the world searching for samples, and they seldom let us know where they are.'

The professor sat sideways in his chair, facing Russell. 'My intelligence informs me they are in the Falklands, which suits the situation rather well.' He leant forward, covering his mouth. 'To put

it short, I require their assistance to save the world. It's that confounded iceberg you two dragged back from space. The damned thing's a chemical time bomb...'

'Excuse me please.' The chef set down a plate of steaming sausages.

The professor threw himself back in his chair and groaned.

'Now, I don't want you to think I'm pushy,' said the chef, 'but I know a thing or two and I like to have my say.'

All three men raised their eyebrows.

'You two are young,' he said, stretching his arms towards Trevor and Russell, 'and young people are generally rash. But YOU two are not rash. You two are sensible and responsible and destined for great achievements.' He placed his index fingers against the side of his temples and winked. 'What I have to say is this: It's no good putting more wood on the fire after it's gone out.' He patted his nose with a greasy finger and left the men in shocked silence.

'Peculiar chap,' said the professor, studying him as he moved away. 'What do you suppose he meant by that? Sounds like a secret code. I'll have my men check him out.' He shook his head and made a mental note. Before continuing, he made sure the chef was out of hearing range. 'Because of your parent's unique expertise, I firmly believe they are the only people competent enough to analyse and neutralise the iceberg's lethal properties.' He blinked at his watch. 'Let's see. The Falklands are on the other side of the world, close to Argentina, chronologically three hours behind us. If we leave immediately in your *Cloud* contraption we can join your parents for lunch.' He turned to his bodyguards and the two burly security men. 'You men enjoy the barbecue,' he called. 'I'll be back within two hours...'

Chapter Two. Parents

Margery and Dennis strode along a barely perceptible sheep path. Dennis led the way. In one hand he held a walking staff, in the other a compass. His boots squelched on the sodden grass and his hood flapped in the restless wind. He glanced at his compass, squinted through the mist, and squished along the path until he reached a stream.

Margery trembled. She felt frozen and vulnerable. Wide-open spaces always gave her the creeps, especially in dense fog when she couldn't see where she was going. Her imagination began to stir, overwhelming her. Perhaps they headed for a cliff edge and would stumble over. Perhaps they headed for a bog that would suck them down. Perhaps a wild animal would savage and eat them. She huddled up behind Dennis, absorbing his courage.

'I do believe we're lost,' said Dennis. 'Can't see a damned thing in this mist, must have missed a turning somewhere.'

'But you said you recognised the path,' said Margery.

'I don't remember this stream, do you? We'd better retrace our footsteps, no need to worry, I'll soon pick up the right track.'

'We can't turn back. You'll never find the path. I knew I didn't recognise where we are. You're hopeless, Dennis, I can't trust you for anything. We're miles from civilisation. Nobody knows we're here. Nobody will search for us. I can't move. I shan't move.'

Margery felt Dennis' arm around her shoulder. It did little to stifle her fear.

'It'll be getting dark in a few hours,' said Dennis. 'Perhaps we should find shelter and make camp?'

'No! I can't stay out here all-night, I'm cold, I'm wet, I'll die of exposure. Try the Satellite-Navigator again, I want to get back to camp.'

'No point trying, Margery, it'll be ages before they send up new satellites. They all malfunctioned, don't you know.'

'Yes, Dennis, I haven't forgotten, I'm not as scatterbrained as you. My mind isn't going yet.'

'Solar flares,' said Dennis, 'that's what the media say. Strange business, don't suppose we'll ever know what really happened. The sea level subsided two metres, don't you know.'

'Yes, Dennis, I haven't forgotten that either. I really don't care just now, right at this moment the only thing I care about is...'

'Hello there!'

A shadowy figure waded towards them across the stream, his boots and gaitered calves under water, his canvas poncho heavy with damp. A callused hand poked through a slit, ready for shaking. 'I know what's YOUR problem,' he said, 'you're lost. Tell me if I'm right.'

Dennis took his hand, clasped it firmly, and shook it as if he would never let go. 'I say,' he said, pumping the hand, 'you're just the chap we need. Where the blazes have you come from?'

'Now then, Sir,' said the man, patting his nose, which was about the only feature seen beneath his big baggy shroud. 'I am a Romany. Call me a gypsy if you like. I have travelled all over the world and can't seem to settle anywhere. Sometimes I am a tinker, other times I am a fortune-teller, today, I am a humble shepherd keeping an eye on the bosses sheep.'

'We're lost,' said Margery, almost fainting with relief. 'Thank God you found us, do you know your way around here. Do you know where we are?'

'Now don't you go-getting yourself all alarmed, Madam, I'll see you safe and sound. You two follow me and I'll soon have you on the right track again, you see if I don't.'

The shepherd set off, his crouched figure limping so fast Margery and Dennis had trouble keeping up, more than once he faded into the mist and had to stop until they caught sight of him again.

Two hours past, a showery squall banished the mist and they made their way towards a hard sandstone ridge. Reaching it, Dennis stepping up from the marshland, stamped mud off his boots, and turned to give his wife a hand.

'I recognise where we are now,' he said, pushing his compass into a soaking wet anorak pocket.

'I've recognised our surroundings for the last twenty minutes,' said Margery. 'I was waiting to see how long it took you.'

Dennis regarded his spouse with wonder. 'Perhaps you should go in front. All these rocks and hills look the same to me.'

Margery dropped Dennis' hand. 'Not likely, you're so tall and broad you make a very efficient windbreaker. I'll just snuggle on behind. Where's our little friend?'

'Vanished for good,' said Dennis, peering in all directions. 'Didn't even get to say thanks. Most peculiar, never would have believed it possible.'

Margery switched her wooden staff to her left hand and pushed her hood back with her right hand. 'It has stopped raining,' she said, 'you can pull your hood back if you like.'

Dennis sniffed the cold air and gazed at the distant, misty hills. The Falklands reminded him of the Yorkshire moors on a bad day: barren, desolate and weather-beaten. Large seagulls circled in the sky, hanging on the wind, and Dennis wondered if they felt the cold, or if they played in the air currents and enjoyed life whatever the weather.

'Well don't just stand there,' said Margery. 'Either take your hood off or get moving. I really must get out of these wet clothes and warm myself.'

'I sometimes wish I was a seagull,' said Dennis. 'Look how graceful they are and how skilfully they fly.'

'Dennis, instead of studying chemistry and mineralogy, why didn't you become a ballet dancer?'

'With my spindly legs? Ha-ha. Oh no, my legs are made for walking, don't you know.'

'So you keep telling me, Dennis. Could you give me a little demonstration, towards our camp maybe?'

They set off again. A fresh squall howled across the moor, rudely pushing and shoving them. 'What do you think it's like in the summer?' asked Dennis, shouting to make himself heard.

'The rain is five degrees warmer, otherwise the same. I detest this place.'

'Ah, yes, it's certainly wild and unspoilt. Are you keeping up all right?'

'What? I can't hear you.'

'Are you keeping up?'

'Yes, don't stop.'

The squall eased and a low white sun broke through the grey clouds, blessing their surroundings with vivid colour. Dennis loosened his hood and pulled it off.

'We've found some unparalleled cultures,' he said. 'We may never know the reason behind those strange global events, but they caused some curious effects with nature. I'm excited about our fungi samples, they're unique; and those mosquito brains show a most peculiar tendency.'

'Yes, Dennis, and the sooner we complete our studies the sooner we can finish your new brain drug and get back to England.'

'Think of it, Margery, a drug to aid the slow at learning, to accelerate brainwaves and induce harmonic operation. No more depression, violence, Alzheimer's disease, or low intelligence. It'll revolutionise brain surgery.'

'Yes, Dennis, I think we'll test it on you first.'

'Ha-ha, you're playing games with me. You are my precious dove, don't you know.'

'Thank you, Dennis.'

They walked on in silence, stepping nimbly over moss and stone and tufty grass. Twenty minutes later, they reached the rough dirt track where their adapted Land Rover waited.

'I'll put the samples away in the fridge, Margery, then I'll put the kettle on. You change into something dry and warm.'

Warm air soon toasted their cold feet and steaming mugs of tea warmed their frozen hands. Comfortable and safe, they smiled at each other. Margery reached across the narrow table and stroked Dennis' cheek, then found a map and spread it between them.

'Two more areas to explore,' she said, pointing with her pencil, 'up across this range here, and down along the fjord over here.'

'Another couple of weeks?'

'Yes,' said Margery. 'That should do it. Then we can return to our container-laboratory at Stanley, thank goodness. Only another two weeks, can we hang on?'

Dennis opened the fridge and studied its contents. 'We're out of milk and cheese, but there's plenty of meat and fish.' He opened another cupboard. 'Plenty of tinned food and rice too, but we're almost out of vegetables and fruit. Shall we drive back to Stanley for supplies?'

'What? Are you turning soft in your old age? I'd rather finish our explorations here as soon as possible and get back to our experiments. I'm fine, really. And if we don't find what we want on this Godforsaken island, then let's try somewhere warmer next, the Caribbean maybe.'

A new rain-squall dashed against the windscreen, and the Land Rover shivered.

'Perhaps we should leave,' said Dennis. 'This place gives me the creeps.'

'Gives you the creeps? How do you think I feel? We're totally isolated from the world—supposing a real storm breaks, how safe are we?'

Dennis found his notebook and scribbled formulae. 'I think I have enough samples, we've plenty of specimens to work on, we don't necessarily have to explore those last areas.'

'It's up to you. It's your brain drug. Personally, I've had enough of this place.' Margery paused, gathering her thoughts. 'Dennis?' she said.

'Yes.'

'Did you notice anything out of the ordinary with that funny little shepherd?'

Dennis nodded. 'Most peculiar, never would have believed it possible.'

'What?'

'Well, where did he come from, where did he go? He must have been eighty years old but blown if I could keep up with him.'

'Yes, that too,' said Margery, 'but that isn't what I mean—I think he was a ghost.'

'Good Lord, do you?'

'Yes. Didn't you notice how he kept walking through things? We dodged around rocks and boulders while he passed straight through. That's the reason we kept losing him and had trouble keeping up.'

'Ah. I was hoping you hadn't noticed. Most peculiar, never would have believed it possible.'

'Another thing,' said Margery as hairs on the back of her neck tingled and rose, 'how did he know which direction to lead us? How did he know where our Land Rover was parked?'

A sudden gust twirled itself round the Land Rover, searching the windows and doors for an entrance. In rage, wailing and howling, it grabbed the roof rack and tried to rip it off, then, with an extra surge, flung itself against the car, rocking it like a crib.

'I don't like this,' said Margery, catching her pencil before it rolled off the table. 'I'm frightened.'

Finding no hold, the gust lingered a moment then slid away in despair. It soared across the moor, moaning into the distance. Margery followed its path as it flattened grass and lifted water from streams and puddles. It fell into a crevice, spinning, then broke loose and climbed into the lofty mountains beyond.

Margery's gaze lingered in the high reaches. She squinted, then reached under her seat for her binoculars. 'My goodness,' she said. 'Dennis, quick, take a look at this.'

Dennis fumbled for his binoculars, lifted them to his eyes, and focused on a strange shape soaring towards them in the sky.

'What is it?' asked Margery.

'It's an egg, Margery.'

'Yes, Dennis, I can see it resembles an egg, I'm not going blind yet, but it's the size of a barn. Doesn't that seem in the least bit strange to you—what is it?'

'It's moving extremely fast, that's what it is. I don't like the look of this, Margery, I don't like the look of this at all.'

Margery slid under the table. 'Well don't just sit there, drive us away, my God—hurry!'

'I don't think that would do us much good. The thing has stopped now, right beside us, and there's a little ramp opening underneath. Come and look, Margery, we're about to be visited by aliens.'

'I don't want to see any aliens, drive us away, drive us away.'

Dennis bent down under the table and put his hand on Margery's shoulder. Then, when he felt her fear, he slid down beside her and covered her body with his own. 'They'll go away,' he whispered. 'Just stay calm and quiet, pretend nobody's home.'

They heard footsteps rustling through the grass and then a tap on the window. Margery wanted to scream but stifled it to a faint whine.

'Mother? Father? Are you in there?'

'Russell?' Dennis banged his head under the table as he struggled to climb up. 'Russell, is that you?'

'Hi, Pop,' said Russell, cupping his eyes against the window and peering through. 'Where's Mother?'

'You've frightened the living daylights out of her. She's hiding under the table.'

'Oh, sorry about that. I said to Trevor we should call you on the Zip-Linq, but he wanted to surprise you.'

'Well, you certainly succeeded in that.'

Margery clambered to her feet and threw the car door open. 'You stupid boys,' she shouted. 'Always playing pranks. When are you ever going to grow up?'

'Sorry, Mother.'

'How did you find us? Oh, never mind, give me a hug—before I punch you.'

She jumped to the ground, reached up, and threw her arms around Russell's shoulders. 'What have you boys been up to, what is this... thing?'

'Come inside and see, Mother. We've brought a special friend along who wants to talk to you both. He's a professor at a university in London. It was he who located you.'

Dennis patted Russell's shoulder as he wandered past towards the egg. 'Marvellous, marvellous, is it safe?'

'It's called the "*Cloud*", Father, like our name. Don't stand out here in this disgusting weather, go on in, Trevor's waiting inside, up the stairs.'

'I can't meet anybody like this,' said Margery. 'I haven't showered for a fortnight and my hair is a total mess.'

'Go on in, Mother. You can shower in my apartment before you meet the professor. He's tucked away in the control room so you won't bump into him. Anyway, you look great.'

Margery stood at the bottom of the little ramp and hesitated. She clasped an armload of clean clothes into her chest, then stepped forward until her head poked just inside the strange object. Deciding it was no worse than boarding an aeroplane, she climbed all the way in. A flight of metal stairs led up to a broad landing where Trevor stood waiting.

He welcomed his mother with a peck on her cheek.

'Up the next flight of stairs to my apartment,' said Russell, following up behind.

Margery ran up the broad carpeted stairs hardly noticing the works of art hanging there, even though most were 'borrowed' from their mansion in London.

Russell ushered her into his apartment and closed the door.

'You're safe now, Mother,' he said.

Margery puffed, caught her breath, and took in her surroundings. 'This is pure luxury,' she said, collapsing into a deep blue armchair. 'Is this what you two do with our money?'

'Partly,' said Russell. 'But you mustn't worry, it's all for a good cause. Me and Trevor saved the world with this.'

'Oh, I'm not condemning you, Russell, you don't need to make silly jokes, there's no shortage of capital. Actually, I'm mighty pleased you came along. Where's the bathroom? I better clean up.'

She locked herself in the plush bathroom, turned on the shower, and let the water flow hot and fierce. Where the water came from, and where it went to, she couldn't guess, but she hummed and sighed until the rejuvenating torrents had thoroughly rinsed away her aches and cares.

Dennis reached the hallway and nodded to his eldest son Trevor. 'I presume this is another of your inventions?' he said. 'Rather more ambitious than some of your other efforts, don't you think?'

'Yes, Father. This is my best invention so far. Are you still frightened of heights?'

'So-so, why do you ask?'

'Come into the control room and I'll introduce you to the professor.' He threw the door behind him wide open and stood aside. 'Take a look at the control room.'

There was no room—only a few pieces of furniture floating high above the ground. A man dressed in a tweed suit stood up from a floating settee and walked across thin air to meet them.

'My name is Professor Morris Masterson,' he said, 'and I reacted precisely like you when I first saw this room. Yes, it is a room, but the walls are invisible.' He shook Dennis' hand. 'I'm so pleased to meet the parents of such gifted boys, come and sit beside me on the settee, you won't fall, I promise.'

'Come on, Father.' Trevor pushed from behind. 'You'll soon get used to it.'

Dennis made a dash for the settee and threw himself down. He took a moment to compose his nerves, then turned to the Professor. 'Please excuse my bad manners, Professor. My name is Dennis Cloud.'

'Give yourself a moment,' said the professor. 'Can't say I like this confounded free as a bird procedure either. But once you're acclimatised, it's a stupendous sensation.'

'I was just saying to Margery I would like to fly like a seagull, or was it a crow? Anyway, I think I'll pass on that now. Why are you carrying that football, Trevor?'

Trevor dropped the ball and it drifted to a position close to his left shoulder. 'Father, we haven't seen each other for many months, and some strange things have happened to us during that time. This is Aidme, which stands for: Artificial Intelligence-Directly Mind Embedded. He's not from this planet, Father. I found him on the outskirts of the universe, abandoned in a giant alien spaceship we call the *Hollywood*.'

Dennis studied Trevor's face, then the professor's, and found no sign of jest. 'Well now, Son, most peculiar, yes, most peculiar, but I believe you, don't doubt you for a moment. There have been some odd goings-on here too these last few days. Not a drop of rain anywhere in the world, and all electronics wiped out.'

'Yes, Father, we know. That's what the professor wants to talk about.'

'Does he now?' Dennis shot a glance at the professor. 'Can't imagine why, it's none of our doing.'

'I'll explain everything shortly,' said the professor.

'Well, Son,' said Dennis, turning back to Trevor, 'congratulations. You and I have an awful lot to discuss, but better not let your mother in here, she's terrified of heights.'

Russell called down to announce lunch was ready and the men made their way up to his apartment. Margery stood just inside the door and smiled sweetly as Russell introduced the professor. Professor Maurice Masterson took Margery's hand and kissed her fingers.

'Mrs Cloud, you look enchanting.' He escorted her to the table, held her chair and waited while she sat, then motioned for the others to follow.

Dennis sat beside Margery. She sniffed, wrinkled her nose, and whispered in his ear. 'I think you need a shower.'

'As soon as we've eaten,' promised Dennis, eyeing the selection of small food bowls scattered around the table.

'Just a simple serving,' said Russell. 'Call it Tapas if you like—Spanish finger food.'

The professor preferred not to use his fingers. 'Could I please have a knife and fork,' he said, 'and I expect your parents would also appreciate proper utensils.'

'Yes, thank you,' said Margery, 'and napkins too, please.'

'Beer or wine?' asked Russell, placing a good supply of each on the table.

Margery and Dennis served themselves good portions of food, and a few mouthfuls of wine soon relaxed the atmosphere, the howling wind and freezing rain forgotten.

'This is all very pleasant,' said Margery, sipping her wine. 'I understand it was you, Professor, who sought this visit.'

'Yes, madam, I hope to solicit your help.'

'Really? How intriguing.'

'I've already complimented your husband on your sons' brilliance,' said the professor, folding his napkin and pushing his plate away, 'but in all truth they're a pair of ninnies.'

Margery's smile vanished. Her fork slipped from her hand and clattered onto her plate. 'I beg your pardon, Professor, but you have a strange way of seeking help. I'm afraid you're going the wrong way about it.'

'Madam, I understand your reaction, but nonetheless I repeat my statement. These two boys are brilliant, but their brilliance makes them absent-minded ninnies.'

'Well, they've inherited that from their father, he doesn't own a morsel of common sense.'

'I say, Margery, I rather resent that remark. My ancestors are known for their eccentricity, not lack of common sense. I'm sorry, Professor, but I think we're unable to help, we're rather occupied with an important project and time is of the essence.'

'I'm not deliberately attempting to be offensive,' said the professor. 'Please don't turn me down yet. Give me half a chance and I'll qualify my statement.'

'Ninnies?' said Margery, recovering her fork.

'If it makes you feel better, I consider myself a complete ninny too. The dire situation in which we find ourselves is due partly to my own foolishness.'

Trevor and Russell bowed their heads like two students caught reading comics during lessons. They glanced sideways at each other and Russell grinned. Trevor kicked him under the table and they both started to snigger.

'Need I say more?' asked the professor.

'Tell us what you have to say,' said Margery. 'Our boys are not as immature as they make out—and what dire situation do we find ourselves in?'

The professor rested a hand on Trevor's shoulder. 'Your brilliant sons saved our planet from an invasion of aliens.'

'Aliens?'

'Yes, madam, aliens. The aliens were stealing water from our planet like arrogant thieves, siphoning it off and constructing a massive iceberg in the outer atmosphere. Your brilliant "ninny" sons, together with two American astronauts, and this wonderful *Cloud* machine, and that Aidme object hovering on Trevor's shoulder, gave the aliens a bloody nose and sent them back to their own planet empty-handed. The ninny part was that we transported the iceberg back to Earth before testing it.'

'Which means it was more than distilled water?'

'Correct, Margery. The aliens added a chemical to the iceberg which our scientists have failed to analyse.'

Dennis placed his cutlery beside his plate and sat erect. 'It isn't possible to "not" analyse a chemical. There is no such thing as a "new" chemical.'

'Our scientists,' said the professor with a sneer, 'are as competent as a bunch of five-year-olds. We obtained a sample, but it turned bright pink and the temperature rose to one hundred and sixty degrees before the "so-called" scientists even had a chance to scratch their numskull heads. We tossed the sample into a volcano in Iceland and the damned thing erupted.'

Margery sighed. 'Men are so stupid. You think you know it all and dash ahead without thinking. Didn't it occur to you the iceberg could be polluted?'

The brothers sank their heads again and the professor fiddled with his bow tie. 'What's done is done, Madam. What I'm trying to ask, in my own clumsy way, is whether you will help us.'

'Well, yes, of course,' said Dennis. 'We're good at this sort of thing, don't you know. Won't take us long to sort it out. How do you feel about it, Margery, the decision is yours.'

Before she had time to answer, Russell broke in with his own thoughts. 'How did you manage to take a sample, we deposited the iceberg in the South Pole.'

'It wasn't easy,' said the professor. 'Our technology is reduced to the level of the last world war; but they managed in those primitive days, so we're not totally without resources. Two brave men risked their lives journeying under the South Pole's ice in a mini submarine borrowed from the maritime museum. They took a sample, but it became unstable even before it reached our hands.'

'Heavens above,' said Margery, shuddering at the thought of all that endless ice shutting the submarine off from fresh air. 'Those men deserve a medal. How does anyone dare that sort of thing?'

'They're trained for it, Margery,' said Dennis, 'it's amazing what you become accustomed to with time and patience, don't you know.'

'No, Dennis, I don't know. I've been married to you all these years and I'm still not accustomed to you.'

'But you are my precious dove.'

'Thank you, Dennis.'

Margery heaved a sigh. 'And how, Professor, do you propose we obtain a sample?'

Expecting the question, the professor nodded. 'On our way here today, we took a little detour and inspected the iceberg. I strongly recommend you undertake your experiments in the iceberg's close vicinity. I have taken the liberty to arrange transport with an icebreaker. Your container-laboratory can be chained to the deck, and we can outfit the ship with any other equipment you might need.'

'Oh,' said Dennis. 'I'm not good on boats, I suffer from seasickness.'

Russell slapped his knees. 'Hey, Father, haven't you come up with a decent travel-sickness pill? Perhaps you should develop one on your way down?'

'Be quiet,' said Margery. 'This isn't the time for flippancy. Professor, can't you fly us in a helicopter?'

'No, sorry, without radar and satellite navigation nothing can fly down that way. I'm sure your sons would gladly give you a lift in the *Cloud*, but then we'd have to explain the *Cloud* to the icebreaker crew, and that would never do, the *Cloud* has to remain top secret.'

'Ah, yes, righty-ho. I can understand that,' said Dennis, shrugging his shoulders. 'And you consider it too risky to bring a sample here?'

'It's impractical, dangerous, and out of the question.' Forgetting his social behaviour, the professor picked up a meatball with his fingers and popped it into his mouth. He licked his fingers and wiped his mouth with a serviette. 'I would ask you to consider this,' he said, munching the meatball. 'Most of the world's fresh water is stored within the South Pole's enormous quantity

of ice. If all the ice was to melt, the sea level would rise by sixty metres.' Another meatball popped into his mouth.

'Yes, Professor,' said Dennis. 'But how likely is that?'

'It has started already. The ice surrounding our iceberg has melted, and the melted seawater is tepid and—pink.'

Dennis ran his fingers through his thinning hair and straightened his back. 'We have to do something about this, Margery. Damned nuisance really, but it shouldn't take long.'

'Well of course, we'll do all we can. How far is it?' asked Margery. 'How long will it take us to reach this iceberg?'

'Oh, three or four days,' said the professor. 'It depends on the weather and thickness of ice you'll have to break through.'

'How about this for an idea, Mother?' said Trevor, leaning forward. 'We'll follow in the *Cloud*. You won't see us because we'll be invisible. When you board the icebreaker, say you don't want to be disturbed and go to your container-laboratory on deck. I'll pick you up, then drop you off when the icebreaker arrives.'

'I'll tell you what,' said Margery, on a brighter note. 'We'll join the icebreaker, and if the weather's nice, we'll treat it as a cruise. Since our container-laboratory is with us, Dennis, you can use the time to work on your brain drug, it'll take your mind off seasickness. And if the weather turns bad, we'll take up your offer, Trevor, and join you in the *Cloud*.'

'Well spoken, my dear,' said Dennis, sliding his arm around her shoulder. 'That's everything settled then. You are my precious Dove, don't you know.'

'Thank you, Dennis.'

Chapter Three. Icebreaker

The ship's captain wore full uniform, which bulged at the seams, constricting his movements. 'Welcome aboard,' he said. 'My name is Adam Everett, but everyone calls me Captain Adam.'

Dennis studied the captain's face as they shook hands. He felt sure he'd seen it before somewhere. The captain's bulbous nose, riddled with hair-thin purple veins, glowing a healthy red, his full sailor beard, bushy and dark-grey like a metal scouring pad, and his wishy-washy blue eyes, all reminded Dennis of a picture he'd seen on a packet of frozen fish fingers.

Dennis and Margery introduced themselves.

'Kindly follow me,' said Captain Adam. 'I'll show you to your cabin so you can freshen up.' Considering his bulkiness, he set off at a brisk pace.

As they entered the ship, Dennis gagged. The distinctive odour of vomit reinforced the usual boat stench of diesel and stale air. 'I think I'll go up on deck to watch,' he said. 'I'd like to oversee the Land Rover and container-laboratory as they're hoisted on-board.'

'Right you are,' said the captain, turning into a long wide corridor. 'I'll show you to your cabin first, then I'll take you up. Here we are.'

'Oh yes,' said Margery, pushing past the captain. 'Most comfortable, carpets and a three-piece suite, it'll be like taking a cruise.'

'I don't know about a cruise, Doctor Cloud,' said the captain, 'we'll be sailing through some of the most treacherous waters in the world, and this icebreaker rocks like an old bucket. Have you heard of the Katabatic winds?'

'No, Captain Adam, I can't say that name rings a bell.'

'Well let's hope you don't gain first-hand knowledge.'

Dennis groaned.

'You'll find seasickness pills, and seasickness bags in the bathroom cupboard and placed all over the ship,' said Captain Adam. 'Even some of my seasoned crew suffer from seasickness when she's at her worst.'

Margery glanced around the cosy cabin and hoped the weather would be kind. She rather fancied a cruise. Clean, red curtains hung at a small round window. Beneath it stood a round table and two easy chairs. A single red rose in a thin vase decorated the table.

Margery sniffed the rose and tested the chair for comfort. 'You two go up on deck,' she said, 'while I make myself at home, off you go.'

The Land Rover and container-laboratory had already been hoisted on deck, and the crew and dockworkers were busy strapping it down.

Dennis gulped fresh air and watched the hustle and bustle with pretended interest. His nausea still nagged, but had calmed.

A big man with bulging muscles did most of the work, he pulled on heavy ropes as if made of thin cotton, and cast chunky chains around as if made of hollow plastic.

'That's Leroy,' said the captain, with a hint of pride. 'Our tough guy.'

Leroy wore a navy-blue knitted hat with the edges rolled above his ears, and a navy-blue knitted pullover with the sleeves rolled under his armpits. Both the hat and the pullover looked two sizes too small. His large powerful frame, muscular neck, deep chest, and wide shoulders rippled with energy and perspiration. On top sat a massive head with small ears, angry eyes, and button nose.

'He's a bit of a bully sometimes,' said Captain Adam, sounding less proud, 'but he works well and he's extremely useful. Just ignore him if he causes trouble.'

'Trouble? What sort of trouble?'

'Oh nothing really. Most of the crew are scared of him, he doesn't smile much and he doesn't say much. Don't worry about him, I'll tell him to stay away from you. Ah, here comes Timmy, he'll help with your bags.'

The boy stepped up and nodded. He was the complete opposite to Leroy. His shoulders stooped making him appear short, and his eyes lacked sparkle. From the state of his tangled fair hair and rumpled clothes, you'd think he'd just fallen out of bed, ready dressed.

'Ah yes,' said Dennis. 'Quite right, the suitcases, glad you reminded me. The luggage is in the Land Rover, I'll show you where.'

Captain Adam clapped Timmy's back and left for the bridge. Dennis and Timmy wandered across to the Land Rover.

'What do you do in there?' asked Timmy, nodding at the container.

'That's our laboratory, and I'm mighty glad to see it again. Come on, I'll show you where the luggage is and help you carry it down, there isn't much.'

Before long, they stumbled along the deck, panting and grunting, hands overloaded with suitcases and soft bags. They found an open door and squeezed through into the icebreaker's interior.

Leroy came towards them in a narrow corridor, his broad shoulders filling the passage.

'I say,' said Dennis, 'make room there my good man. Step aside and let us pass if you please.'

Leroy made no attempt to move aside.

'Come along there, chappy,' said Dennis, 'stop this nonsense and let us pass.'

With an ugly sneer, Leroy flattened his broad back against the wall. Not that it helped much. He puffed out his chest like a proud cock leaving the minimum of space. Timmy ducked past as if

he expected a clout from behind. Dennis stretched to his full height, a whole half-head taller than Leroy, but as he struggled past he avoided Leroy's eyes and almost ran back to his cabin.

'What is the matter with you two?' asked Margery as they dropped the bags and slammed the door behind them. 'You look terrified half to death.'

'Goodness me,' said Dennis, a red flush on his cheek, 'what a most peculiar encounter.'

'I hate him,' said Timmy.

Dennis rested his hand on Timmy's shoulder. 'This is Timmy. Timmy, this is my wife, Margery.'

'Pleased to meet you, Marge,' he mumbled.

Margery studied the shy boy. He evaded her eyes and fiddled with a stone pendant hanging around his neck.

'Well,' said Margery, 'Aren't one of you going to tell me what happened?'

'There is a grossly oversized man on-board,' said Dennis.

'Leroy,' mumbled Timmy.

'Yes, Leroy. Well I say, Margery, he's a monster.'

'I hate him,' repeated Timmy.

Margery raised her eyebrows and looked from one to the other. 'You're not being coherent,' she said. 'You've met a monster named Leroy and Timmy hates him?'

'Never mind, Margery, no harm done, just peculiar behaviour. You look ravishing, my dear.'

'Thank you, Dennis. Come in, Timmy, sit opposite me.'

Timmy hesitated but managed to find his way to the chair without lifting his gaze from the carpet.

'Are you afraid of this "Leroy" monster?' asked Margery.

Timmy nodded and stole a quick glance into Margery's face. 'Do you like the rose?' he asked. 'I put it there.'

'I love roses,' said Margery, 'thank you very much. Have you told Captain Adam how you feel about Leroy?'

'Captain Adam is my uncle, everyone hates Leroy.'

'Including your uncle? Why does your uncle allow this man to terrorise everyone?'

'Uncle's afraid of him too, but uncle is too kind to get rid of him.'

'Your uncle sounds like a sympathetic man.'

Timmy almost managed a smile. 'Uncle is the only person who has ever been kind to me.'

Margery lifted an eyebrow. 'Surely your mother and father are not included in that remark?'

Timmy fiddled with his stone pendant and stared at the rose. 'I'm sorry, Marge, but I have things to do.' He jumped up and hurried to the door. 'If there's anything you need, call me. I'm the steward and I can get you anything.'

'Very well, Timmy, as you wish. When do we sail?'

'Uncle says we have to sail as soon as possible, another half-hour maybe.' Timmy blinked his sad eyes and hurried out.

Dennis sat in Timmy's abandoned chair and peeked through the dirty window. Rain dashed across the quayside and puddles rippled in the wind.

'Did you hear what that cheeky boy called me?' said Margery. 'Nobody has ever called me Marge. It sounds terrible, like something the poor people spread on their bread. Why didn't you correct him?'

'Yes, Margery, I suppose I should, but I feel sorry for the boy, I'm sure I saw a tear when you mentioned his mother and father.'

Before Margery could answer, the cabin speaker burst into life and Captain Adam's voice crackled loudly. 'Would everyone please come to the mess hall. And by that, I mean everyone. Thank you.'

The Captain met the scientists in the mess-hall door, and guided them to a broad table. Tea was served together with a bowl of warm vegetable soup and fresh white loaves. The captain had swapped his jacket for a thick crew neck pullover and now Dennis was convinced he must have modelled for a packet of frozen fish fingers.

'I called this meeting,' said Captain Adam in his soft pleasant voice, 'so we can be acquainted with one another and discuss the purpose of this voyage. As you can see, there aren't many of us. Because of the dangerous and secret nature of our expedition, I have reduced the crew to a minimum.'

'We set course for the Weddell Sea in the South Atlantic, which lies to the east of the Antarctic Peninsula.' His mouth formed into a sarcastic grin. 'We don't usually go to the Antarctic this time of year because the sea can be treacherous and the ice, if we get that far, is too thick to break.'

Dennis and Margery glanced at each other.

'Captain Adam,' said Dennis. 'I expect we shall lock ourselves away in our container-laboratory for most of the journey, and we don't want to be disturbed.'

Captain Adam burst out laughing. 'Ho, ho, ha! I didn't mean to alarm you good people. I could be wrong, of course, the crossing could be like a duck pond, and the ice as thin as this soup—miracles do happen, ho, ho, ha.'

'I'm already feeling queasy,' said Dennis, holding his stomach. 'It's best you forget about us until we arrive.'

The captain scratched his beard. 'I'm sorry I can't promise a smooth crossing, but such is life on the ocean.' He sighed, stood up, and placed his hands on each crewmember's shoulder as he introduced them.

'This is Timmy. You've already met him, my nephew and purser. If you need anything at all this is the lad to ask.'

He moved on. 'This is Cook, and he's the reason I'm so overweight, he's been with me since the first boat I ever sailed.'

He moved on. 'This is my engineer, Friendly Fred, another good friend. As you get to know him you'll understand why I nicknamed him Friendly.'

Fred nodded, 'Pleased to meet you, she's a good solid boat and runs beautifully. Don't worry, she'll get us there in one piece—unless she busts a gut in the effort.'

Captain Adam placed his hands on Leroy's broad shoulders. Leroy shook them off with a grunt and the captain smiled awkwardly.

'This is Leroy, strongest man on the docks of Liverpool, or any other dock for that matter, and a good man to have around. He's the hardest worker I've ever known and if we should ever need a bit of brute force this is the man to ask. He's a capable fitter and handyman, under direct orders of Fred the engineer.'

The captain moved to the last man. 'This is Mr Horiatis Wood, my first officer. For this voyage, he is also the radio operator and medicine man. Mr Wood joined us at the last moment. My usual first officer was taken ill with appendicitis, so all I know about our new young friend here is that he has excellent references and impressive qualifications.'

Mr Wood smiled. 'Please call me Horace, I've grown tired of the name Horiatis.'

His dress was faultless: officer's jacket, white shirt, perfectly tied knot. His manner was charming, like a well-bred Lord, and his whole person radiated serenity and intelligence. 'I'm

delighted to make your acquaintances, each and every one of you.' He lifted his officer's cap and bowed graciously to everyone, beginning with Margery and ending with Leroy.

His dark eyes had a purple tint in the iris, and his pupils were large and deep. His head and face were hairless, resembling a boiled egg. He replaced his hat and straightened it.

'I would like to say a few words about my appearance,' his smile broadened, revealing perfect white teeth. 'I was born with a genetic disorder, I am hairless, and I have no finger or toenails.'

Peeling off his skintight, black-leather gloves, Horace disclosed a pair of soft pink hands, lacking fingernails. 'Apart from that,' he said, lifting his hands for all to see, 'I'm quite normal.'

'Well I'm glad to hear it,' said the captain. 'Please keep your socks on, I don't think anyone is interested in seeing your toes.'

The captain strolled back to the head of the table and addressed his crew. 'The Cloud Doctors are to be left alone at all times. Timmy is the only person allowed to approach them.' He turned to Margery and Dennis, 'Do these arrangements suit you?'

'Yes,' said Dennis. 'Thank you, Captain. Would you like me to say a few words?'

'Go ahead. All I know is that every piece of electronic equipment on-board my ship was repaired in express speed, and that we were all sworn to secrecy, and that you people would explain everything. Please, go ahead.'

Dennis cleared his throat. 'Well, actually, we're looking for an iceberg.'

Everybody, except Horace and Margery, collapsed in laughter.

Leroy bellowed the loudest. 'They're looking for an iceberg,' he scoffed. 'An iceberg? In the Antarctic?'

'Thank you, Leroy,' said the captain, fighting to control his own laughter. 'That'll do. We'll just have to keep our eyes open. Ho, ho, ho, haaa...'

Margery glowed bright red. 'Really, Dennis,' she scolded. 'You've made a fool of us.' She slapped the table with the flat of her hand. Cups and cutlery bounced and danced until the merry captain and his men sobered.

'Thank you,' said Margery, her expression dared anyone to laugh. 'We are not making this trip because we think it's funny. We're making this trip to save our planet from extinction. The iceberg we seek has been deposited by aliens; and before you start laughing again, consider all the bizarre climatic events lately, like the extremes in temperature, and the lack of rain, and the sea level sinking by two metres.'

'Not to mention all the ruined electronics,' said Dennis.

Captain Adam scratched his beard. 'I never believe in anything I have not seen,' he said, 'and as I have never seen an alien, I don't believe in them.'

'But you do admit to all these bizarre phenomenon?' asked Margery.

All the men nodded, things had indeed been strange.

'As we approach our destination,' continued Margery, 'we shall break through the ice into an open area of warm pink water, and when we arrive at this pink water, we shall find our iceberg. My husband and I are commissioned to investigate this pink water phenomenon, discover the cause, and rectify it. Our mission is as simple as that. And more than that we cannot say, and more than that we do not know.'

Dennis placed his arm around Margery's shoulder and squeezed.

'Very well,' said Captain Adam. 'We are looking for an iceberg surrounded by pink water. Personally, I never believe in anything I have not seen, and as I have never seen pink water in the Antarctic, or anywhere else for that matter, I don't believe I ever will. But we are commissioned, and will do our utmost. We have a job to do and if there are no questions I suggest we get along.'

'I would like a word,' said Fred the engineer. He had listened intently, nodding and frowning. He squeezed his cheeks between fingers and thumb. Age-old grime stained his fingernails that no end of scrubbing could remove, and stubble covered his chin that no end of shaving could remove. 'We've been through thick and thin, the captain and I, but I've never seen the likes of this mission. And I must say—I don't like it.'

The captain patted Fred's back. 'Always the pessimist.'

'You know my hunches, Adam. I've got you out of a scrape or two in our time. You mark my words. Nothing good will come from this trip. Not that it's any of my business, never mind me, I'm just the grease monkey, a worryguts who likes to see everyone safe and happy.'

'Thank you, Fred, your comments are noted. Does anyone else have a question or comment? No? Very well, one last word: Nobody is permitted on deck after we leave port, which is from now on. Deck side is out of bounds. Thanks for your attention and have a pleasant voyage.'

...

Back in their cabin, Dennis gazed through the grimy round window and sighed. Dockworkers had begun to release mooring ropes and throw them into the sea. The ship's engine picked up speed and objects tinkled in the vibration. Immediately, the ship started to rock and Dennis stretched out on his bed. 'Wake me when we get there,' he said.

But the journey started calmly and Dennis woke next morning with his stomach under control. Timmy served them breakfast in the mess hall, then sat opposite them at the table.

'Why is it forbidden for us to go up on deck?' asked Margery. 'The weather is beautifully calm.'

'It's too dangerous,' said Timmy, 'there are so many things to trip over and the deck is always wet and slippery. If you fell off the side we'd never find you again, and anyway, the water's so cold you'd freeze to death before you drowned.'

'How old are you, Timmy?'

'Eighteen.'

'The same age as our youngest son, Russell.'

Timmy's hand went to his pendant and he rolled the stone between his fingers. 'He's lucky then. My ma and pa are dead.'

'Oh I say,' said Dennis, 'that's rotten back luck.'

'Be quiet, Dennis,' said Margery.

Timmy tried to smile, but it washed over his face and dried away. 'Pa killed himself in a car crash one evening and ma died of anorexia.' He fiddled with his stone. 'I'm ashamed of them, I hate them.'

Margery felt an urge to hug him. Instead, she placed her hand on top of his.

'Don't do that,' said Timmy, snatching his hand free. He collected the plates, and hurried to the kitchen.

Margery started to follow.

'Best leave him be,' said Dennis. 'It's none of our business really. Come on, let's go back to our cabin, I have some notes to study.'

As Dennis spoke, the ship creaked to one side, then rolled and creaked to the other. 'Oh dear,' he said, supporting himself on a chair, 'this isn't good,' He made a dash for the door, hurried back to the cabin, lay on his bed, and fell asleep.

Margery followed close behind and wondered how it was possible for anyone to fall asleep so fast. She found a boring old magazine about yachts, sat in her comfy chair beneath the round window, and leafed through the pages. An irritating dunk-dunk bass sound throbbed through the walls. She tolerated it for fifteen minutes, then sighed, and went in search of the noise.

Out in the hall, she saw the huge Leroy at the other end and thought about ducking back into her cabin. He hadn't seen her, so she waited quietly, hand on the door handle. Leroy faced a door and thumped his fist against it so hard she was sure he must have left a dent.

'Turn off that row, Timmy,' boomed Leroy, 'or I'll bust this door down first and bust your skull afterwards.'

The music stopped and Leroy turned to leave. He caught sight of Margery and glared at her with a disrespectful sneer, then entered his own cabin on the opposite side of the hall. Margery swallowed, braced herself, slunk to Timmy's door, and tapped softly.

'Timmy, it's me, Margery, may I come in?'

The door opened and Margery stepped in. The cabin was a lot smaller than hers and smelt of stale air and rotting socks. Evil looking posters covered the walls, rock stars, she supposed, with painted faces and black clothes. Why anyone should want to appear like the devil she couldn't imagine.

'You can sit on this chair,' said Timmy, transferring dirty laundry to his bed. 'Sorry about the mess.'

'Was that you playing music so loud?'

'Yes, did you hear it?'

'I should think the cod on the bottom of the ocean heard it.'

'I was playing along with my guitar, that's why it came out so loud. I usually play when we're in a storm—nobody can hear it then.'

Margery noticed an electric guitar on the bed with a curly wire plugged into a big black box. 'Why don't you use that one?' said Margery, pointing to an acoustic guitar hanging on the wall, covered in dust and grime.

'Me pa gave it to me when I was ten, just before he died. It ain't loud enough and I don't like it.'

A laptop computer stood on the desk. Behind it, half buried under music CDs was a grey and dusty cardboard box. A yellowing photograph hung above the desk. Margery bent closer to look. A young couple in a warm embrace smiled back at her.

'Who are these people?'

'That's me ma and pa, they got engaged in that picture.'

'They seem happy.'

'That's before I came along and spoiled things.'

Margery turned to look at Timmy. He was fiddling with his stone again. She turned back to the photograph and studied it for a moment. 'Is that pendant around your neck the same pendant your mother is wearing?' she asked.

'Yeah. Pa gave it to Ma when he proposed to her. They were poor and he couldn't afford an engagement ring. I played with the stone when I was a kid and the colours fascinated me.' He lifted the stone and held it to the light. 'If I hold it to the sun I can see right through and the colours glow and sparkle at different angles. It reminds me of happy days.'

'Happy days?'

'Yeah, early on, not many, hardly any really.'

The ship rocked with increasing violence and Margery rose to leave. 'I'm sorry,' she said, then paused at the door. 'Timmy, come and visit us whenever you want, you don't have to sit here alone. Promise me you'll come and see us.'

'Okay, Marge, I'd like that. You'd better get back to your cabin before the storm breaks. See you sometime.'

The icebreaker rose and fell against the approaching storm and Margery had to steady herself against the corridor walls. She felt vomit rise and a sudden hot flush made her sweat. She dashed to her bathroom and threw up. Relief lasted five minutes and then the nausea returned.

The cabin speaker popped into life and Captain Adam's calm voice crackled out. 'Please take heed, our old friend the Katabatic wind is waiting for us up ahead. Secure all loose objects and prepare for some rock 'n' roll. I would recommend our good doctors to strap themselves into bed.'

Chapter Four. Pink

Above the towering waves, where the wind tore unheeded at almost three hundred kilometres an hour, the invisible *Cloud* cruised unperturbed and unruffled. Trevor and Russell watched from the comfort of their recliner chairs and marvelled the icebreaker remained afloat.

Each time the icebreaker tottered on the white curling crest of a thirty-metre wave, the storm savaged the ship like a dog playing with a rag doll. She rolled and plunged, then careened into the foaming valleys and wallowed up the next fluid mountain, bravely and persistently fighting her way further and further into the heart of the South Pacific.

The ship was strong, but she shrieked and yelled in agony. Every wall, floor and ceiling quivered and groaned as the storm wrung and twisted the vessel. Margery and Dennis had strapped themselves to their beds and lay in their own vomit. They slept in a semi-conscious haze, and prayed and wished they were dead.

The nightmare storm ravaged throughout three long days and nights before it admitted defeat and left in search of other ships to terrorise. The icebreaker still pitched and rolled on the mountainous swells, but with less ferocity and a blessed, gentler motion. Dennis stirred, and crawled across the floor to help Margery clean herself up.

The icebreaker steadied. Then loud explosions boomed and screeched through her body as if she ran against rocks.

'What now?' said Margery, staggering to the little round window. She opened the blind and blinked. Ice floated everywhere, grey, cold, and desolate. Suddenly, the ship hit something solid and juddered to a halt, throwing Margery into her chair. Immediately, the ship's engines roared with power and the icebreaker forced her way into an endless field of brilliant white ice.

Two hours later, the engines stopped, and the icebreaker stood as solid and silent as a snowman at midnight.

'Good morning one and all,' crackled the cabin speaker. 'We'll take a rest to check for damage and clean up. Dinner will be served in the mess hall in one hour.'

...

Timmy bustled backward and forwards between the kitchen and mess room, his practised hand arranging place mats, crockery, cutlery, glasses and serviettes. He arranged trays of steaming poached fish and boiled vegetables within everyone's reach. Satisfied every person had all they needed, he sat beside Margery.

'I'm sorry about the rough ride,' said Captain Adam, as unflustered as when they departed. 'That's about as bad as it gets, poor Horace has been terror stricken, though to give him credit, he wasn't seasick. I think you'll agree, Margery, if I may be so bold to use your first name, this isn't a cruise ship. But it looks as though you have survived. All of us have survived.'

'I shan't ever set foot in a boat again,' said Dennis.

'I'm afraid you might be stuck on this boat for a considerable time,' said Captain Adam. 'When the ice becomes impossibly thick we'll be stuck here until winter loosens its grip. Could take months before we break free.'

'Ah,' said Margery. 'I'm afraid you're wrong there, Captain Adam. In another few months, if we don't complete our mission, there won't be a speck of ice anywhere in the world and the sea will be scalding hot.'

'I don't believe in anything I have not seen,' said Captain Adam, 'and as I have never seen the Antarctic free from snow and ice, I don't believe I ever will.'

'I sincerely hope you never will,' said Dennis. He forced himself to eat some fish and it settled his stomach like magic. All he needed now was fresh air to clear his dizzy head. 'Can we go up on deck?' he asked.

'Yes,' said the captain. 'Go and breathe some fresh air and check your equipment. Take Timmy with you and be careful, there's ice everywhere. But you've only got a few minutes.'

'Can I stay in my container-laboratory and work on my experiments, aren't we finished with stormy seas?'

Captain Adam shook his head. 'Breaking through thick ice is no picnic either. My ship can break ice fifteen metres thick...'

'Fifteen metres?' said Dennis. 'That's incredible.'

Fred paused in his eating, nodded and pointed his knife at the ceiling. 'She's an incredible ship. If ramming doesn't break the ice, we ride on up and use her weight. And in case we get stuck, we've even got a heavy gyroscope mounted inside the ship to make it wriggle loose. There's a lot of movement, Dr Cloud, some of it vicious.'

'There you have it,' said Captain Adam. 'As you see, Dennis, there's no way you can remain on deck.'

The crew scattered and hurried away to check for damage and carry out repairs. Margery made her way outside and stood at the railings, marvelling at her new world. A flaming red sun rested on the horizon. Streaking towards her like fingers of molten metal, powdery snow scurried across a sea of solid ice. She hugged herself to stay warm and searched the sapphire blue sky for her sons in the *Cloud*. There was no sign, but she waved anyway. Reluctantly, she made her way back to her cabin.

With everyone safely back inside, the icebreaker's engines throbbed into life. The ship shook herself free and drove on.

~*~

Up in the *Cloud*, Russell waved back to his mother.

'She can't see you,' said Trevor.

'I know, but she didn't look very happy. I expect they wish they were up here with us. Tell you what. Let's give them a hand. They'll never get anywhere at that speed. Can we clear a path for the icebreaker?'

~*~

Captain Adam rubbed his eyes, scratched his beard, and rubbed his eyes once more. He couldn't believe what he saw. Directly ahead, as if an invisible giant boulder ploughed across the landscape, ice split and crumbled, imploding, sending seawater spouting like a geyser.

'Cut the engines,' he said. The icebreaker stopped and so did the phenomenon.

'Forward half speed.'

The ice ahead continued to break, forming a channel, matching their speed.

'Full reverse.'

They backed up one hundred metres.

'Full speed to starboard.'

They cut a new path into the ice—and a new channel broke ahead of them.

The captain slumped back in his chair wondering how he should word this incident in his logbook—or whether he should omit it altogether. 'Full speed ahead, Horace. Is it just me or do you see what I see?'

'I see it too, Captain Adam.'

'And do you understand what's happening?'

'No, Sir, but if this keeps up we'll be at our destination within hours instead of days.'

They sped forward in this weird and wonderful manner for thirty-six hours. The channel never faltered, and just when Captain Adam expected the ice to become grossly thick, it became thinner. To his astonishment, they broke through into a vast lake of bright pink water.

'Neptune's whiskers,' whispered Captain Adam. 'I don't believe it.' With a shaky finger, he pressed a button on the intercom panel. 'Timmy, fetch Dennis and Margery and bring them here immediately.'

Two minutes later, Captain Adam greeted the scientists, his face flushed and excited. 'I didn't believe you,' were his first words. 'Take a look,' were his second.

They floated in bright pink water, and the ice landscape had fallen far behind. Directly ahead, a wall of ice soared almost five thousand metres into the sky and spread from west to east on each horizon.

'This enormous mountain of ice isn't supposed to be here,' said the captain, 'and according to our echo sounder, this monster is resting on the ocean bed. I think we've arrived at your iceberg.'

~*~

Dennis unlocked the container-laboratory, stepped in, and inhaled deeply. Chloroform and other chemical solvents tingled his nostrils and he sighed with delight. 'Come on in, Timmy, and make yourself comfortable.'

'Smells like a dentist,' said Timmy, 'and this room looks like the waiting room.'

'A rational observation,' said Margery. 'This small anteroom is where we eat and rest, but most of our time is spent in the laboratory through there.' She pointed through a glass wall.

Timmy sat on a soft corner settee and rested his elbows on the table. 'Can I stay here all the time?' he asked. 'Uncle said I should look after you and I won't be a bother. I'll just sit here quietly and run to fetch things as you need them. Can I?'

'It would be rather practical,' said Dennis.

'I'll make a condition with you, Timmy,' said Margery. 'You can stay here if you bring your acoustic guitar and play music for us.'

'Oh I say, Margery,' said Dennis, 'what a fabulous idea. I love classical guitar music, can you play Mozart and the such, Timmy?'

'Never learnt none of that stuff.'

'Well, never mind, we have rather a large selection of classical music. You can play along and learn as you go.'

Timmy grabbed the chance. 'Okay, Marge, it's a deal. I'll do anything to stay away from that Leroy ape, and... and I like you two.'

'Well the feeling is mutual, my dear boy,' said Dennis. 'But we must get on.'

The two scientists entered a small, intermediate, changing room. They donned white coats, white hats, white slip on shoes, and passed through to the laboratory. They pulled open cupboards, rummaged in drawers, set up Bunsen burners, test tubes, rubber pipes and instruments of every shape and size. They uncovered a photo-spectrometer, a chromatograph, a particle

accelerator, a synchrocyclotron, two huge microscopes, and holography equipment. And then, as a finishing touch, came the incubators, calculators, and percolators.

Dials were set, shiny metal instruments laid out, notepads and pens spread all over the place, until, nodding with satisfaction, the scientists made their way back out.

'Come along, young chap,' said Dennis, carrying a tray of instruments. 'We're ready to fetch a sample, would you care to assist?'

At the ship's railings, Dennis set the tray down by his feet. He drew a pair of rubber gloves over his long bony hands, tied nylon-fishing line to a glass test tube and lowered it over the side. It wallowed in the sea and sank. He pulled it back up filled with pink water.

'I'll just put the test tube in its little stand and measure the temperature,' explained Dennis, lowering a thin sensor into the sample.

'Upon my soul,' he exclaimed, 'just look how fast the temperature's rising.' The needle on his instrument rose across the scale, accelerating as it went. Steam rose from the test tube and small bubbles appeared inside the glass. Using a pair of tongs, he gripped the test tube and flung it over the ship's side.

'Wow, Den,' shouted Timmy, pointing to where it hit the water, 'the whole sea is boiling.'

Fizzing bubbles burst to the surface as if a red-hot poker had been thrown in, then the sea calmed, and Dennis let his breath out with a loud whoosh.

'That took you by surprise. Didn't it, Den? You weren't expecting that to happen. How are you going to get a sample now?'

'Goodness me,' said Dennis, quickly regaining his composure. 'This is what experimentation is all about, don't you know. That was a huge step forward, we'll soon get to the bottom of this.'

'How so?'

'Glass is made of sand, plus a few other minerals. We already know salt slows the pink water's chemical reaction, we now know something in the glass hastens it.'

Dennis bent down to his tray and reeled off four lengths of fishing line. 'Fun isn't it?' he said, tying one piece of line to a plastic spoon and another piece of line to a stainless steel spoon.

He passed the two spoons to Timmy.

'You can help, just let me tie some line to this wooden spatula and this aluminium dish—like so. Now, let's dangle these items into the sea and observe how they react.'

They held their fishing lines and peered over the ship's railing for several minutes. 'How are your spoons getting along?' asked Dennis.

'Not much happening here.'

'Well I can see the aluminium dish is warming up. Note how it steams when I lift it from the water. The wooden spatula seems fine though.' He tossed his fishing lines away and told Timmy to do the same.

Selecting a stainless steel beaker from his tray, he attached a piece of fishing line. The beaker splashed into the sea and came up filled to the brim. Dennis immersed the temperature sensor and nodded. 'Yes. This is stable. Thank you, Timmy, I now have my sample and we can proceed. We'll soon get to the bottom of this.'

Hours passed, and Timmy asked himself a hundred times what 'soon' means. He gave up waiting, fetched dinner on a tray, and tapped on the glass dividing wall. The scientists ignored him. When the food grew cold, he carried it away and returned with sandwiches.

As evening drew on, Dennis and Margery stopped for a break.

'Have you found the position of equilibrium yet, Dennis?' asked Margery, still engrossed in her work and ignoring Timmy.

Dennis grabbed a sandwich in each hand. 'Far to the left, Margery, hardly any product is formed from the reactants.'

'Don't speak with your mouth full, Dennis. Have you found a suitable catalyst yet, we really must speed up the reaction.'

'Only at the molecular level, but my macroscopic equilibrium concentrations are constant.'

'Have you written an equilibrium equation for the reaction?'

'Of course, Margery. Oh look. A couple of ham sandwiches, your favourite.'

'Thank you, Dennis.'

The tray was soon empty, and the two scientists stretched out on the sofa for a nap. They woke after six hours, stretched, yawned, and ate breakfast.'

'That's better,' said Margery, pressing her hair back in place. 'Thank you, Timmy. You're a marvellous help. I really ought to shower but we better get on. I'm ready for another session, how about you, Dennis?'

'Not really' said Dennis, rubbing his eyes. 'I haven't slept well, I keep pondering about my brain drug.'

'Brain drug?' said Timmy. 'What about the pink water?'

'I'm working on a brain drug too, Timmy, in-between.'

'Oh. What's the most difficult, the brain drug or the pink water?'

'This pink water business is no more than an irritating interruption,' said Dennis. 'But my brain drug will revolutionise mental health. Disorders will be a thing of the past, it'll be the biggest breakthrough since penicillin.'

'Oh,' said Timmy, shrugging. 'That's good. Does my guitar playing annoy you?'

'You play the guitar beautifully,' said Margery, smiling at Timmy's innocence. 'You've a lot of talent, nice voice too, but can't you play something jolly? You either play death dirges or war marches.'

'I'm sorry, Marge, but it's my mood that decides. I either feel sad or angry and it comes out when I play. Do you want me to stop?'

'No, Timmy, you play like a maestro, just play something bright and cheerful once in a while.'

All morning the scientists scribbled notes, read dials and glared into their telescopes. At mid-afternoon they stopped for another break, still conferring in their secret scientific language.

'We're not progressing fast enough,' said Margery. 'I think you're spending too much time on your brain cocktail.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that, Margery, I think we're making excellent progress. It's taking longer than I expected because we have nothing like a standard molar enthalpy of the reaction here, the calculations are rather complicated, don't you know.'

'We need results, Dennis, not weak excuses. And while you've been engrossed in your brain drug, I've managed to isolate a mineral cation.'

'Have you? Well done. We'll see how it interacts with my anionic ligand, hopefully, it should form an electrically neutral complex, and if does, we'll have a pink water antidote.'

~*~

Cook had prepared the most delicious casserole for dinner. He'd baked fluffy-crusty rolls for the side plate, mixed a crispy salad for starters, and assembled a scrumptious chocolate sundae for dessert. Even so, Cook was not happy.

'My word, Cook,' said Captain Adam as he entered the mess hall. 'Care to tell me what's the problem?'

Cook stood in his kitchen doorway with folded arms, legs spread wide. 'I refuse to do all the work here. Where is Timmy? I can't make the food and lay the table and serve the food and clear

away and wash up. What do you think I am? I'm the cook, not the dinner lady. How many arms do you think I have?'

Captain Adam scratched his beard and nodded. 'Quite right, Cook, quite so.' He turned to survey his crew and placed a hand on Leroy's broad shoulder.

'Leroy, my good man, would you help Cook until this business is over. Look alive, come along.'

Leroy resisted the captain's gentle push and remained stock-still. 'Ain't part of my job,' he said, and shook Captain Adam's hand off. 'I ain't gonna do it.'

'Come now, Leroy. Don't be difficult. It's only temporary. Don't make me order you to do it.'

'It ain't my job.'

The other men stepped to a safe distance.

'This whole mission is unusual, Leroy, all of us are doing things above and beyond our normal duties. The rest of the men here are officers, do you expect any of them to wait on you?'

'Why can't Timmy do it?'

'Timmy is also performing duties beyond his normal tasks. Come along now, Leroy, I'll help you lay the table.'

Leroy tensed his shoulders, grunted, and made for the kitchen.

Cook blocked his way. 'Show me your hands,' he said. 'Nobody comes into my kitchen and touches my food unless their hands are scrubbed clean.'

Leroy brushed Cook aside as if he was a swing door and grabbed the casserole. He carried it to the mess room and banged it down on the table. From the sideboard, he lifted out a stack of plates and crashed them down beside the casserole. Then he pulled open a drawer, scooped up a fistful of knives and forks, and cast them on the table so half clattered to the floor. Scowling, he served himself a huge portion of casserole, slumped down in his usual place at the table, and started eating.

'Yes. Quite so,' said Captain Adam, spreading the plates out.

Cook carried the remaining food from the kitchen, and grouched back.

Eager to finish and get away, Fred and Horace served themselves casserole and spooned it down their throats as fast as they possibly could. Leroy, still wearing his rolled up knitted hat, helped himself to a second large portion and four bread rolls. By the time he had finished, the mess room was deserted and he served himself a third portion followed by the whole bowl of chocolate sundae.

'Nice,' said Leroy, and burped.

Cook had taken possession of the kitchen doorway again. 'Bring the dirty plates and put them in the sink,' he said. 'Then you can go. I don't want you in my kitchen. Tomorrow I'll place the food on the sideboard like a buffet. All I want you to do is tidy up. Is that too much to ask?'

Leroy scowled at Cook, stood up, expanded his chest, and swept the dirty plates and cutlery into his arms. He marched to the kitchen sink and threw his load in with a frightful crash.

'Get out,' screamed Cook. 'Get out, you animal.'

Leroy squared his massive shoulders and swaggered across the mess hall. Before leaving the room he turned back and said, 'Nice.'

He entered the corridor, turned into a longer corridor and stopped dead. Up ahead, backing in from the deck with a large tray in his arms, was Timmy.

The door closed behind Timmy and he set off along the corridor. Too late, he caught sight of Leroy. He hesitated and considered dropping the tray and running away in the other direction.

But he was too slow. Leroy bound forward and struck the tray from beneath, sending it crashing into the ceiling. Food, drink, cutlery and broken glass rained down on Timmy's head.

'I ain't doing no kitchen work,' barked Leroy. 'You get back in there and do your own shitty job or I'll punch your face in.'

'Get away from me you ugly ape,' said Timmy, backing away. 'My uncle is the boss around here and I don't take orders from you. I hate your guts and one day I'm going to kill you, just you wait and see.'

Leroy's huge fist smashed into Timmy's face. 'I don't care who the boss is, but I ain't doing no kitchen work.'

~*~

Many hours passed before Timmy crept back into the laboratory-container and shrunk into the settee's corner. He placed the tray quietly on the table so as not to disturb Dennis and Margery, and stretched out along the settee to sleep.

Late next morning, Dennis needed a whole bucketful of pink seawater and rushed in and out without noticing Timmy. He placed the bucket in the centre of the laboratory and smiled at Margery.

'Are you ready?' he asked.

'Yes, Dennis, I'm ready. Pour it in.'

With a steady hand, Dennis tipped a stainless steel thimbleful of green liquid into the bucket. Putting his arm around Margery's shoulders, he said. 'Nothing to do but wait now.'

'Yes, Dennis, I'm starved. Shall we find something to eat and breathe some fresh air while we wait?'

'I can see it's working already,' said Dennis. 'But come along, watched kettles never boil, don't you know.'

Timmy sat up as soon as he heard them approach and pushed the tray of sandwiches into the table's centre. Margery held her hands to her mouth and screamed.

'My God, Timmy, your face, what on earth has happened?'

Timmy sobbed and large tears dripped from his chin. The left side of his face shone red, brown, and yellow. A puffy swollen welt pinched his eye shut.

'By Heavens,' said Dennis, bending closer. 'That's a corker. Who did it?'

'Really, Dennis,' said Margery. 'Do you need to ask?'

'I'll kill him,' said Timmy. 'I swear I'll kill him.'

'This has gone too far,' said Margery. She turned to Dennis and pushed him towards the door. 'Don't just stand there,' she said, 'go and reprimand him this instant.'

Dennis stood there, resisting, gently shaking his head. 'Well now, Margery, let's not be hasty here. Perhaps we should let Timmy explain what's happened, and then go to the captain.'

'If you don't go this instant, Dennis, I shall go myself. I'm not afraid of that brute, even if you are. I won't tolerate his outrageous behaviour.'

'Yes, Margery,' said Dennis, without enthusiasm.

He advanced with small steps, muttering as he went. 'What sort of nonsense is this? I'm not a physical man, what does Margery expect me to do?'

His steps grew longer and more determined. 'Violence is a criminal offence,' he reminded himself. 'The weak need protection. No matter what Timmy is guilty of, he doesn't deserve to be struck. My word, his face is a mess. Upon my soul, Margery is right, Leroy needs to be put in his place, it is outrageous.'

Reaching Leroy's door, he barged straight in.

Leroy sat at his desk, studying a motorcycle magazine.

'Now you listen here,' said Dennis, thumping his clenched fist on the desk, 'I'll not stand for this...'

Leroy leapt up, grabbed Dennis under his armpits, lifted him off his feet, and slammed him against the wall over and over again until he wilted in his grasp.

Margery had followed Dennis at a safe distance. When she heard the commotion, she ran the last few steps and bounded through the door. She shrieked, picked up a metal tray lying on Leroy's bed and smashed it over his head. His rolled up hat fell to the floor. 'Leave him alone you brute,' she screamed, smashing the tray with all her might.

Leroy let Dennis sink to the floor and faced Margery. He opened his wardrobe, pushed her in, slammed the door shut, and locked it. Then he turned back to Dennis and lifted him to his feet.

Dennis swayed on jellified legs and leant against the wall to hold himself upright.

'Take your bawling bitch with you and get out,' growled Leroy.

Margery's claustrophobia made her gag with fear. Too terrified to scream, her knees buckled and she swooned. Dennis fumbled with the key, tore open the door, and released her into his arms.

They stumbled into the corridor, and Leroy's door banged shut behind them with enough force to burst their eardrums. They hobbled along, arm in arm, Margery in tears, Dennis assuring her she was his precious dove. They made straight for Captain Adam's bridge.

'Neptune's whiskers,' said Captain Adam as soon as he saw the scientists. 'Has there been an accident? Come in, come in and tell me what's happened.'

'Leroy,' screamed Margery. 'That is what has happened. He has physically assaulted Timmy, Dennis, and me. I demand—do you hear me? I demand you lock him away.'

'I think you better come in and sit down, both of you,' said the captain. 'Horace, put the kettle on for a cup of tea.'

'I say old man,' said Dennis. 'I'd rather have a whisky. I can't stop shaking.'

Horace put the kettle on, then found a brown bottle in the medicine cupboard. He poured out a large glass and handed it to Dennis, who swallowed the contents in one gulp.

'We don't encourage alcohol,' said Captain Adam, taking the glass and putting it aside, 'except in emergencies.'

Horace lifted Margery's wrist in his gloved hand and counted her pulse. 'Are either of you physically hurt?' he asked.

Margery snatched her wrist back and stroked Dennis' chin. 'How are you, Dennis, did he hurt you?'

'Only my pride, Margery, only my pride. If I'd been twenty years younger I'd have given him what for.'

'Now see here, Captain Adam,' said Margery. 'Your nephew, Timmy, has a black eye the size of a bowling ball, and I demand to know what you intend to do about Leroy.'

'Ah, Timmy, poor boy, poor boy, always being hurt.' The captain clasped his hands behind his back and strolled up and down the bridge, gazing at the floor and shaking his head from side to side.

'Timmy's mother,' he said, 'my sister, was an alcoholic—so was her husband, and Timmy, well... Timmy has had a hard time of it.'

Horace placed a steaming mug of tea in front of the scientists and evaporated into the background. The captain continued his wanderings.

'It's a tragic story,' said the captain. 'My sister was a lovely girl, as bright and cheerful as a spring morning in May. I never saw her so happy as the day she married, and her husband was as gentle and loving as the beautiful songs he sang. When Timmy came along, well, I don't really understand, but they didn't cope, it was as though he came between them. He upset their lives somehow.'

'Timmy has a picture of them in his cabin,' said Margery, 'they look very happy.'

'Yes, they were—until that damned alcohol infested their lives.'

'Alcoholism has ruined many lives,' agreed Margery.

'Her husband died in a road accident, drunk as a monk he was, and my sister fell to pieces after that. Like most alcoholics, she was devilish clever to hide it, and Timmy's life became a nightmare. To cut a long story short, she lost custody of him and drunk herself to death. That's when he came to live with me.'

'Well, Captain Adam, under your care, the poor boy is still being mistreated. I demand to know what you intend to do about Leroy.'

The captain shrugged. 'I don't think he will cooperate.'

'Why on earth have you taken him on-board?'

A shadow of anger crossed the captain's brow. 'I have my personal reasons, madam, which I have no intention of sharing with you.'

'For God's sake,' said Margery. 'Leroy has attacked three people. I'm not interested in your personal reasons, I demand you to put him out of harms way.'

The captain chewed his lip. 'This puts me in an extremely difficult situation. I find this state of affairs downright agonising.'

As the captain struggle with his conscience, Margery gave him time, one foot tapping the floor.

'You see,' said the captain, 'I vowed I would never show a ggression or use physical violence against Leroy. His pa was a bully who dealt out violent punishment as often as any other father deals out friendly smiles. Leroy's younger brother was so afraid of their pa that he ran away and drowned himself in the river Mersey.'

'I'm really not interested in hearing this,' said Margery.

'His mother, bless her soul,' said the captain, ignoring Margery's objection, 'was never allowed to comfort him, no matter how unhappy he was. The only emotion ever granted him has been violence and anger. Leroy never learnt how to be gentle, he only learnt how to be violent.'

'Which is why he needs locking away,' said Margery. 'Men are so stupid,'

'We are, Margery. Yes, we certainly are.' The captain's expression softened. 'Leroy's mother was a lovely girl though. Gentle as a lamb and as pretty a creature as God has ever created. Tragic. The whole business is tragic.'

'Did you know her well?' asked Margery.

'I've known Leroy's mother since before he was born. I'm a sailor, Margery, I've always been a sailor, and you know what they say about sailors—"a girl in every port". I should have married her myself, but I was often away at sea and she didn't wait for me, can't say I blame her really. But why she married that confounded, no-good, tyrant I'll never understand.'

His eyes glazed as if he could see nothing but the past. 'I was a young man then, Margery. My hair was jet black and I was strong as an ox. He was a monstrosity of a man, despised and feared by all—except me. One day, on one of my returns to Liverpool, we fought over the girl and he ended in hospital. I made rather a mess of him I'm afraid, and the silly girl felt sorry for him and accused me of being a bully—me?'

'Why are you telling us all this, Captain?' asked Margery.

'I'm sorry. I get carried away at times. It upsets me when I think about what could have been if circumstances had been different.'

'I'm not asking you to share your private life with us, Captain Adam, I wish to know what you intend to do with Leroy?'

'Try to understand, Margery, I've felt sorry for Leroy since the day he was born.'

'But he can't go around molesting people, don't you feel sorry for Timmy?'

'Or Margery?' said Dennis.

The captain shuddered, then studied his guests with a frown. 'Tell me what happened between you and Leroy?' he said at last. 'Timmy and Leroy often quarrel, but why did he assault you? Did you provoke him somehow?'

'I went to his cabin to give him a piece of my mind,' said Dennis. 'I only got two words out before he went berserk.'

'Did you knock?'

'Knock? It wasn't a social visit, the only thing I intended to knock on was his thick skull.'

Captain Adam shrugged as if that was the end of the matter. 'I'm afraid you rubbed him up the wrong way. Leroy is indisposed to friendship—all he asks is to be left alone. He insists on privacy and solitude, and when you barged into his room, hostile and uninvited, he couldn't help himself but attack.'

'Preposterous,' said Margery. 'Doesn't he care about anybody?'

'The only person he ever cared about was his younger brother. They were total opposites. His young brother was a pathetic weakling and a snivelling coward, just like his father. I never understood why, but Leroy took it upon himself to be his protector, not that he was very successful.'

'From your description of Leroy's father,' said Margery, 'and by the way Leroy behaves, I would say Leroy is the one who has taken after his father. Is anything of what you've told us based on facts, or is it all presumption? How do you know so much?'

'I'm a sailor, Margery, a girl in every port. And if you must know, I look Leroy's mother up whenever I'm in Liverpool. If she can get away, we meet.'

Margery clucked her tongue.

'Well,' said the captain, 'I'm sorry if you disapprove, I shan't "shock" you with any further confessions. Let me finish by saying that after Leroy's brother committed suicide, Leroy's life went to pieces and he got in trouble with the police. I made his mother a promise—I said I'd take him with me and make a sailor of him.'

'And does Leroy know of this promise?'

'Oh no, Margery, that wouldn't do.'

'I could give you something to put in his food,' said Dennis, leaning forward. 'Put him to sleep while you lock him up.'

'The whole male population of this planet needs putting to sleep,' said Margery.

Captain Adam scratched his beard as if an answer might lie within the matted tangle. After a long pause he asked, 'How is your experiment coming along?'

'Oh Lord,' said Dennis. 'I've completely forgotten about that. We've gene modified an algae culture and are testing it in a bucket of water. Come along, Margery, let's hurry back.'

Margery stalked to the door. 'I hope, Captain Adam, we've found a solution. I really hope so, because the sooner we get away from here the better.'

...

Hurrying through the corridors, holding each other for support, Margery sniffed and said, 'I want to get off this ship as soon as possible. I refuse to spend another hour here. Get in touch with Trevor in the *Cloud* and tell him to rescue us.'

'Yes, Margery, but let's see how the experiment has turned out first. We can't leave until we're certain the solution is effective.'

'You know we've solved it, Dennis, and so do I. I refuse to be manhandled by a bully like that Leroy. He scares me, Dennis, I can't stay.'

Timmy had fallen asleep on the laboratory-container's settee. He woke with a start when the door banged open, but relaxed when he saw the two scientists. Dennis rushed past to check the bucket inside the laboratory. Margery sat beside Timmy and took his hand.

'Timmy, I'm sorry, but we have to leave.'

Timmy scratched his head. 'What do you mean, "leave"? You can't just leave. How?'

'Dennis and I have a guardian angel watching over us.'

'You're lucky. I wish I had a guardian angel watching over me.'

'We all have a guardian angel, Timmy. You just have to believe.'

'Well I don't believe. And I don't believe in God either, and if there is a God then I don't know why He hates me so much.'

Margery had the same doubts. She often wondered why God allowed so much suffering in the world. 'Timmy,' she said. 'We have two sons, and they're close by, ready to pick us up.'

'How, where, I ain't seen nobody, have they got a helicopter or something?'

'Yes, something like that.'

'Can I come with you?'

'No, Timmy, I'm afraid you can't. If you go back to your normal kitchen duties, Leroy will leave you alone. When you arrive back in port, perhaps we can arrange to help you.'

Timmy put his hand to his pendant and jerked upright in his seat. 'My stone,' he said, all else forgotten, 'it's gone.' His hand searched his bare neck. 'I must have lost it in the corridor when Leroy hit me.' He leapt to his feet and tore out through the door, leaving it hanging open.

Margery heaved a deep sigh and joined Dennis. He greeted her with a smile and pointed at the bucket. 'Works perfectly.'

A thin layer of green slime floated on the surface, and Dennis scooped it aside with his gloved hand. The water beneath was clear. He filled a glass beaker to the brim, sat it on the bench, and dropped the temperature sensor in. The needle pointed to twenty-three degrees and remained stable.

'Good,' said Margery. 'Have you examined the algae?'

'Yes, there's a sample under the microscope. Take a look. Pure nutritious fish food.'

'Wonderful, Dennis, now please go to the Land Rover and communicate with Trevor on that zip-ling gadget so we can be off. I mean it, I'm not spending another minute on this ship.'

'Very well, Margery, you get yourself ready and I'll be back in a jiffy.'

Conflicting thoughts accompanied Dennis as he made his way to the Land Rover. He had no objection to leaving the ship, and he was pleased the pink water remedy was finished, but he loathed leaving the laboratory when his brain drug was so near completion. He sat in the Land Rover's driver seat and fiddled with the bulky prototype zip-ling. He plugged it into the cigarette lighter socket, stretched a headset across his ears, and scanned the array of buttons. He had seven buttons to choose from, one for every rainbow colour. He pressed the blue button and spoke into the microphone.

'Hello, Trevor, are you receiving me? Hello Tr...'

Dennis grabbed his stomach. A sudden dizzy headache set off a nausea attack worse than anything he had experienced. He slid the window open, stuck his head out, and spewed down the Land Rover's side. A screeching sound, like a thousand nails clawing at a blackboard, made him lift his head. His jaw dropped, his eyes bulged, and he screamed.

The ice mountain wobbled and swayed like soft jelly. The horizon rose and fell in sinuous waves. The sea and the sky blended making it impossible to tell which was which. Wind whizzed from all directions, reeking of ozone. In the chaos, the icebreaker alone remained solid and

constant, but Dennis found it impossible to tell whether it was the ship that rolled and pitched, or the world that spun and lurched.

A violent jerk sent Dennis sprawling back into his seat. His head banged against the window frame as it flipped in. Then all was deathly silent and still. With trembling fingers, Dennis rubbed his head and pulled himself upright in the seat.

Dennis's hand dropped away from his head, and he gazed with horror at what he saw. The icebreaker remained unchanged, but the world around it was unrecognisable. Everything was blurred and grey like the picture on an old black-and-white television with its aerial out of position.

Chapter Five. Grey

Fred, chief engineer, pumped oil from his can and whistled a merry tune. The ship's engines had been idle for days now, and with nothing better to do, he passed time by pampering the machines with a little light maintenance. But his cherished engine room was far from silent and he wore ear protectors to dampen the sound. Generators roared, supplying the icebreaker with electric life.

Without reason, the generators stopped. Fred lifted his ear protectors and looked up in surprise. A sudden deafening screech surprised him even more, and he dropped the ear protectors back in place. Then all the lights blacked out and his stomach and head spun so violently he thought he was having a stroke. He stumbled against the railings and held on for support, but a vicious jerk toppled him over, sending him tumbling into a deep pit beneath the engine.

Leroy had been standing beside the engine's main control panel when the generator stopped. He dropped the barbell he'd been lifting and listened. The screech made him scowl, the dizzy nausea made him sway, and the violent jerk threw him headlong to the floor. Only his rolled up woollen hat saved his skull from cracking. He lay still and listened. The room was so silent he could hear his eyelids open and close; and the room was so dark it made no difference.

'What's happened Fred?' he called, fumbling to his feet while rubbing the back of his head.

Even the emergency lights hadn't come on, but Leroy knew his way around and felt his way to the desk. He found a cigarette lighter, flicked it into life, and gazed around in the meagre light. Everything looked normal enough. With one hand rubbing his sore head, he plodded across to the generator, pressed the start button, and wondered why nothing happened.

'Where are you, Fred? What's going on here?' he called. He made his way to a small emergency generator and pressed the start button, but nothing happened there either. He decided the batteries must be flat, all of them, everywhere.

The emergency generator was also equipped with a cord-start. Leroy primed the carburettor and tugged on the cord until he found the point of compression. He let the cord retract, then yanked it out. The motor spun, coughed, and chugged into life, re-establishing light and sound.

Throwing a few switches, Leroy diverted power to the main generator's starter. He pressed the generator's start button and grunted with satisfaction as the old vibration rumbled back into existence. Taking a few minutes to confirm everything worked normally, he stopped the small emergency generator and went in search of Fred.

~*~

In terrified awe, Dennis stumbled from the Land Rover and hobbled back to the container-laboratory. The world beyond the ship was gone, and all that remained was a formless grey shadow. The world had no substance, no colour, and no depth. It reminded him of a ship in a

bottle, the glass stained with smoke and age, with the icebreaker and himself on the inside looking out.

Margery lay on the floor with her hands covering her head. Dennis bent down and she reached up and hung around his neck.

'Dennis,' she sobbed. 'What's happening?'

'Something terrible, Margery. Are you hurt?'

'I'm so scared, Dennis. There was a power failure, and a dreadful noise, and a jolt, and I felt so dizzy I thought I was going to die. I thought the iceberg had fallen over us.'

Dennis nodded. 'If only it was that simple, Margery, if only it was that simple.' He stroked her hair and waited until her breathing calmed. 'Come on my precious dove. Get up from the floor. I want you to be brave and come outside.'

Dennis led the way and held the door for Margery. She took one glance and covered her eyes. Her shoulders shook as she cried with fear, and Dennis drew her in close. After a while, she breathed deeply and lowered her hands.

'This is a living nightmare,' she said, holding Dennis' arm for comfort. 'Have you any idea?'

Dennis shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. 'I was calling Trevor on the zip-line when it happened. I don't even know if he heard me. My experience was the same as yours, Margery, and I'm as mystified as you.'

A door squeaked open further along the deck and Captain Adam's ashen head peeked out. His bulging eyes stole a panicked glance over the ship's side, then he beckoned the two scientists. 'Come on in,' he called. 'We're meeting in the mess room.' With a final glance at the grey distorted world, he disappeared back inside.

'Dennis,' said Margery, her voice almost a whisper. 'We didn't administer the antidote.'

'No, Margery, we didn't. I think it's too late now. What the devil has happened here?'

They crept to the railing and peered over the edge. The sea was inky black, like a bottomless cave.

'Psst,' said somebody behind them.

The scientists snapped their heads around.

'Mother, Father, is anybody about?'

'Russell,' said Margery, 'you're always sneaking up on us. One day you're going to frighten the life out of us—what's left of it.' She glanced back along the deck. 'No. Nobody about. Come on out both of you and give me a hug.'

Dennis hurried them all into the container-laboratory. Trevor and Russell sat side by side on the settee and folded their arms on the table.

'You two look terrible,' said Russell, bright and cheerful as always. 'You're not worried about all this, are you?'

'Please tell me,' pleaded Margery with her hands in prayer. 'Please tell me you understand what's happening here. This whole trip has been worse than a nightmare.'

Trevor shook his head. 'We can only guess, Mother. At the moment we can only guess.'

Dennis gazed at his sons with admiration. 'I wish I felt as fresh as you boys look,' he said.

'Yeah,' said Russell, 'we saw you had a rough time in the storm, but we didn't feel a thing in the *Cloud*, nothing bothers the *Cloud*.'

'What about that jolt when all this happened?' asked Dennis. 'And that ghastly screeching sound? Your mother found it very upsetting.'

'We heard a "pop",' said Trevor, 'that's all. We've heard it before and it's about the only clue we have.'

'Did you hear me calling on the Zip-Line?' asked Dennis.

'Yes, just before all Hell broke loose.'

'I was about to let you know we'd found an antidote for the pink water and wanted picking up— Oh Lord. The antidote... My brain drug...'

Dennis dashed into the laboratory. He knew the antidote was safe in a stainless-steel thermos, but he wasn't so sure about his brain drug. A quick inspection calmed his fears and he returned with a smile.

'The jolt can't have been as bad as we imagine,' he said. 'Both the antidote and my brain drug have survived.'

'Stop smiling you stupid man,' said Margery. 'The antidote and your brain drug are irrelevant— how do you suppose we're going to get of this, this...'

The container door burst open and Timmy flew in, slamming the door behind him. 'Oh,' he said, as he saw the two new people.

Margery jumped up and put her arm around Timmy's shoulder. 'Don't be frightened,' she said. 'These are our two sons I told you about, Trevor and Russell.'

Trevor snatched Aidme from the air and placed it on his lap.

'I am frightened,' stammered Timmy, gazing at his feet. 'Fred is dead.'

'What? How?'

'I don't know. Uncle Adam is scared shitless and he told me to fetch you. Nobody else dares going outside, but I had to make sure you were all right.'

'Well thank you, Timmy,' said Margery, 'you're such a good boy at heart. We're badly shaken, no worse. But what's this terrible news you bring us, how did Fred die?'

'Leroy said he fell and bashed his skull open. Are we all going to die?'

Margery gazed at her sons. 'Trevor and Russell don't seem particularly troubled.'

Avoiding their eyes, Timmy nodded in their direction. 'Where've they come from?'

Russell climbed to his feet and shook Timmy's hand. 'That's a corker of a black eye you've got there,' he said. 'I've had a few of those myself but none as impressive as yours.'

Timmy turned his bruised side away.

Russell rested his hand on Timmy's shoulder. 'Come and sit next to me, tell me all about it, was it a door or a fist?'

'We can discuss Timmy's problem later,' said Margery. 'At the moment, we have a far more acute problem.'

Timmy let Russell guide him to the table, where they both sat, side by side.

'But how did they get here?' asked Timmy, still preferring to look at Margery.

'They work a kind of magic,' said Margery. 'They're a bit different from the rest of us. Let's just say they floated here on a cloud.'

Timmy lifted his one good eye towards the brothers. They sat, one on each side of him. Trevor's features were stern and intelligent. Russell's were easy-going and chummy.

'Can't they just float us all away again?' asked Timmy.

'That's exactly what we were discussing when you came in,' said Margery.

A hush fell over the group. Everyone exchanged glances. Some eyes showed worry, some eyes asked questions, and all eyes were tainted with a shade of fear.

'Trevor will find a way out of this,' said Russell, breaking the spell. 'Trevor always finds a way.'

'Well, for the moment,' said Margery, unconvinced by Russell's optimism, 'I think we should all find our way to the icebreaker's mess room.'

Trevor leant forward. 'Hang on, Mother,' he said. 'We can't just "turn up", the *Cloud* has to be kept secret.'

'And what do you plan to do, young man, sit up there in your *Cloud* until all this blows over? Oh no. You got us into this, now you can get us out.'

'I say, Margery,' said Dennis. 'That was a bit hard on the boy. We made our own decision to accept this assignment, it's not his fault.'

'Thank you, Dennis, just like you to take the children's side.'

'I'm twenty three,' said Trevor, 'and Russell is eighteen—not exactly children.'

'Well you know what I mean, stop being argumentative. Have you tried flying away from here, to see if this is local?'

Trevor's face twisted and he shook his head.

'What does that mean?' asked Margery.

'I don't know how to put it, Mother. The world isn't there any more—not as we know it. I daren't try to fly anywhere.'

Margery eyes opened with shock. 'So you understand as little as the rest of us?'

'A fraction more, maybe. I can only make guesses, nothing concrete.'

'Well, since you're stuck here with the rest of us, you'll have to make your presence known and explain to everyone what's going on here.'

'Mother, I don't know what's going on here.'

'You know more than the rest of us.'

'I can't explain, I only have a wild guess.'

'What?' demanded Margery. 'What do you guess?'

'Mother, I... Well, Mother, I suspect we're caught in a time warp. How can I explain that to anyone?'

End of this sample.

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