

***SPIRITRUNNER***

***By Leon Southgate***

Smashwords Edition

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## *Spiritrinner*

This is a tale of multiple dimensions, secret government psychic agencies, off-planet humans and space-creatures. Our heroes are two psychic, disabled teenagers who can shift between this world and other dimensions. Long ago the world was consumed by the deadly space creature, the Elif. The government is in league with the Elif and everyone is determined to gain the ruro – the most powerful psychic substance in the universe. Unfortunately for Danny, everyone needs him in order to get it...

Words – 73,004

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## Chapter One – The Psychic Agency

Quietly scratching away, the gold-nibbed fountain pen gracefully swept across the expensive cream-coloured, hand-made paper. There was a muffled roar and then a short high-pitched squeal of tyres as an RAF fighter jet landed anonymously, somewhere nearby. The tall, bird-like man looked up from his desk. He surveyed the moonlit airbase from his comfortable antique-furnished office. He was three storeys high in an immaculate, white-corniced Victorian building on the edge of a military compound somewhere in the south of England. The ex-military man loved the dark mahogany tones of his office, his rounded wood-framed chair, the expensive oak floor. He especially enjoyed looking down on things from high up here in his ‘perch’. But now, he steepled his fingers, closed his small and suspicious looking eyes and went deep down within his own mind.

‘Sigil? Snake!’ cried the man telepathically.

‘I am here - *master*. Why do you trouble me so Alistair?’ came the hissed reply.

‘That disabled boy is nearly ready, you know the one, your favourite neurode. Get him to send this message to the global mind, straight away – if you can,’ Alistair, who still had his eyes shut tapped the paper on his desk, his prim Oxford accent ringing out across the ether. It annoyed the snake entity, the green slits of its eyes flashed. He disliked humans and had no favourites as Alistair knew. ‘And prime his mind ready for occupation Sigil. You can call me, *Master Civil* by the way. Mind who you’re talking to snake.’

‘Your kind don’t frighten me,’ it whispered slowly, emphasising each word.

‘You wouldn’t want me to have a little chat with the Elif again, would you old chap?’ Alistair breezed. The snake entity suddenly felt itself chilled to the core. Even the agency was said to fear that thing.

Alistair smiled slyly and slowly levered his long slender middle finger against the antique, black, bakelite phone that sat to the right of his desk. For a moment, Alistair briefly admired his perfectly manicured nails. The phone was a working 1920’s model. He picked up the cup-like receiver from the candle-stick cradle with a cold, thin left hand and began to enter a number with his right. The moving dial at the base clicked through the digits with a satisfying grace. Instantly, the snake entity felt itself dissolving, transported, controlled...

On the other side of the country, an owl called out hauntingly as it glided past Danny’s bedroom window. There was a loud crack of breaking wood from a tree outside and a fox ran for cover, startled. Danny strained to see over the blue padded cotsides of his bed. He could smell a faint tang of urine and sweat. The full moon shone against one side of the big old ash tree tree that stood outside his sash window. The light against the branches created a beautiful silver silhouette. Faintly, he could hear the midnight chimes of a church-bell in the distance, evocative of things lost but half-remembered.

Something felt amiss. There was a menacing, cold feel in his room, as if someone was sucking the heat from the grimy, stagnant air. Danny felt a chilly sliver of fear slowly crawl up his spine and then run back down again into his bladder. There was something evil, a cold presence gathering in the room. Bit by bit, a swirling circle of grey energy formed near the ceiling until it looked like the ouroboros trying to swallow its own tail.

‘Sso, you’re the one they call Danny?’ hissed the sly, snake-like voice that suddenly appeared inside his head, ‘think you’re going mad do you?’ it added with a slight sneer.

‘Why would I think that? I’m used to this kind of thing - as you well know,’ Danny replied telepathically in a defensive tone. Internally he tried to ratchet down his level of fear. He knew the entity, he sensed it was a snake, could smell the stuff. In fact they lived on it, eat it - salty, bloody, fear. Danny shook his box-like head, his scruffy dark hair sticking to his pale skin with toxin-loaded sweat.

‘I know you are quite the gifted one, disabled boy that is true. And don’t think I don’t know you’re trying to control your emotions too. Let it *all* out. We wouldn’t be,’ it paused, ‘working with you if you didn’t have the right “qualities”. My master has a job for you boy.’

‘Can’t you just leave me alone? There must be thousands of psychics out there in this world. I am just a disabled lad trying his best to get by. Why don’t you go and pick on someone else? Someone with your talents doesn’t need a loser like me, a mere human.’

Danny could begin to see the snake now. It had dark red eyes with a luminous, dangerous, thin slit of green. Its body was just swathes of grey, out of focus. It was not a large creature.

‘It is not up to me. But in any case my kind, *we* made you. *We* helped you become what you are. There is power beyond your wildest dreams, Danny. There are rewards you would find it hard to even imagine.’

‘I’m not interested – Sigil,’ he had picked up the entity’s name from the ether. ‘I just want to call my life my own again.’ Danny continued.

‘That’sss not possible. When your mind delved into our realms we picked you up. Yes, I know, that was years ago, you were but a child,’ it paused. ‘We nurtured your skillss. We took you under our wing. Now it’s time to repay your debtss. After which, I have been told you may go free.’

‘I’ll believe that when it happens,’ Danny’s mental voice was tinged with anger.

‘Do as you will human-child – it is none of my concern. But know this, you have already chosen. This life - it is just a play. You could turn away, yes. But then you would forfeit my masters. And believe me, you don’t want to do *that*,’ said the telepathic snake viciously.

‘I’m not afraid of dying,’ snapped Danny.

‘Who said anything about dying? You’d pay me to die a horrible, painful death in return for nullifying the forfeit.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Need I remind you that I can read your intentions?’

‘I’ll do whatever it is that you want – this time. But *I* want out,’ Danny replied.

‘Everything has its time human-boy, no need to rush. Have you not read any of our teachingsss?’

‘You’ve had your snake-like fingers in every ancient teaching under the sun. Even I know that. I’m not stupid,’ said Danny bravely.

‘We are watching, listening, tasting your every move - your every thought,’ Danny could feel the creatures forked tongue sensing the ether. ‘There is nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide,’ the snake continued, ‘the plan is inevitable. But use your talents right and you could find the view from the top of the mountain quite to your liking. Think about it. Here is the message for the mass mind.’

Danny held his hands to his head as his brain vibrated strongly with an unpleasant throbbing low-pitched hum. The message downloaded itself straight into his cortex. He could feel his brain physically shake with the aftershocks. The first time he experienced a download he thought he was having a cerebral stroke. He had got used to it now.

Danny shifted his mind sideways and entered a slightly altered state of consciousness. He was relaxed but aware, drowsy but conscious. He was using the universal ether, the unseen force that surrounds everything. Part of himself was still attached to his unwashed physical body, clothed in yesterday's striped pyjamas, but the deeper part of him had shifted entirely into the Thought Realm. The Thought Realm is made of thought-substance. It is a web of imagination hidden just below the surface of our everyday world.

Danny still had his disabled body in the Thought Realm. In fact, he was still in his bedroom but his point of view had changed entirely. He was now looking out from above his body. He was a subtle yellow light streaming like a ballerina's ribbon. He was a spiral of electric yellow that moved up and down and around his sleeping physical form, prone on the bed.

Telepathically, Danny called the mass-consciousness. Once he was sure he had been heard he asked it to broadcast the message he had just been given. Some people think the mass-consciousness is just a concept, but Danny knew better than that. The mass consciousness is a thing – a living, breathing child-like thing and it always responded to Danny. The message streamed out all over the Earth, like an immense electric spider, reaching every man, woman and child in seconds. Danny quietly shifted his mind back to the everyday realm.

Danny wished he knew what that broadcast really meant. The real meaning was hidden within a dream-like code, a code that could twist and change, translate and transmute itself. It was part communication and partly an infectious mass-dream. He disliked using the mass consciousness, he felt he was deceiving it, delving deep into its dreaming mind and harnessing the hidden energy there. The actual message had consisted of two granite mountains side by side. They exploded dramatically one after the other and then crumbled into a blood-red stormy north sea. The music was classical piano with a feeling of complete calm. The soundtrack could not have been more opposite to the pictures. A short written message accompanied. It said simply, in every language, 'We will protect you'. It was not Danny's place to wonder why.

The coldness in the room began to dissipate and the grey dirty swirls flickered away into the nothingness from which they came. A sense of peace, and of warmth returned. The fear that Danny felt was not so quick to leave.

As Danny knew only too well, that message had come courtesy of an organisation that was almost too secret to exist. It laughed at the rule of law. It scoffed at the ups and downs of finance. It was a world-wide psychic agency and it was older than civilisation itself. It had no name but those who knew of it preferred to pretend that they didn't.

As far as the agency were concerned, every thought, every mind on the planet was an asset that belonged to them personally. Its one fault, it could be said, was that it was almost entirely evil, although Alistair B. Civil certainly did not like to think of it that way. Their's was just a superior perspective that was all. A view that was free of all the usual trivialities.

Danny heard footsteps. He could tell by the sound and speed both the identity and the mood of the carer. It was good old Michael – and he was not feeling too tired tonight judging by the upbeat patter of his footfalls. The bedroom door, covered in teenage stickers, creaked open and Michael's large and prematurely bald head poked itself round the corner. This corner was created by the false wall that hid the ensuite toilet.

'Can't you sleep Danny mate?' enquired Michael kindly.

'B-Been having those d-dreams again, Mike. And then I couldn't settle. Just lying here thinking,' replied Danny, his tired voice crusty with sleep.

'Put the TV on would you Mike? Music or landscape c-channel,' said Danny casually, trying to delay Michael as long as possible.

‘You can leave the light on too, if you wouldn’t m-mind,’ spluttered Danny as Michael left the room - he wished his vocal cords worked half as well as his telepathy.

‘Okay, but try and settle down now, eh? Or you’ll be knackered tomorrow. You’ll end up like me, old before your time.’ Michael smiled then shuffled off, his shoulders hunched within his light-brown, unkempt cardigan.

For some reason, Danny began to think of all the tears he had failed to shed over the long years of his short life. The tears he should have cried when his Mum died. Then there were the tears that should have fallen when his Dad cancelled another of his sporadic visits. So many unshed tears.

Danny could hear the distant call of the local owl. Danny’s house was in a leafy, ancient suburb of south Liverpool and horse fields adjoined the rambling but ornately styled garden. Foxes would steal past the crumbling grey stone entrance pillars and survey the leafy curving drive up to the house. It was a large, square, ivy-covered limestone cottage graced by a lovingly tended Victorian-era front garden, full of red roses. It had once been owned by the son of a local lord.

Gazing at the soft movement of the moonlit branches outside his window, Danny was reminded of Sarah’s long hair. She had beautiful, sweeping locks of natural blonde hair that fell lightly across her shoulders and bounced every time he saw her. She was kind but in her own cheeky way, ‘Hey Danny! Hows my scruffy old teddy bear keeping?’ she might say in passing, giving him a cuff around the head for good measure.

Danny shared his supported housing with two other teenagers. There was his best friend, Bendhu, Ben for short, a boy not known for his words. His longest sentence in a day might be a withering glance. And of course, there was the gorgeous Sarah. Danny was the youngest, at fourteen. What Danny lacked in years he made up for in other ways. He had a certain sadness that lay hidden in the depths of his character. A melancholy that might have been more at home in someone many times his age.

Sarah had moderate learning disabilities and was locked into experiencing the life and anxieties of a much younger girl. Her mind had never been able to get past some outpost of childhood. On top of that, she obviously had the feelings of a young woman. Danny and Sarah got on well. Anything more than friendship was unlikely Danny reminded himself. He had a body that barely worked and she was forever a child - albeit a child trapped in a young adult’s body. Besides which, he was not exactly a great catch and she was – there was no other words for it, simply beautiful.

He, on the other hand, had a head that was slightly too large, untidy short black hair, greasy pale skin and blue-green piercing eyes. These were eyes that seemed to look right into the depths of your very soul. He had overheard some of his carers talking about that once, ‘You ever notice how Danny looks at you? Those are seriously weird eyes he’s got.’

‘Yeah, you’re telling me. I wouldn’t like to get too deep inside *his* mind that’s for sure. It’s like he looks right inside you, if you know what I mean.’

It was just another throwaway conversation, one that he shouldn’t have overheard, but for some reason it had got stuck inside his mind. His brain seemed to have a masochistic need to replay it every now and again when his confidence ebbed. Sometimes though, if he caught himself a sideways glance in the mirror, he thought he might even be a little handsome. He was also slightly overweight, or so the nurse had kindly told him. He had been born with cerebral palsy. It meant he could move his head with full control, his upper body with limited degrees of success and his lower half, stupidly, did not respond to requests at all.

## **Chapter Two – A Golden Calling Card**

‘What a beautiful morning,’ sighed Danny out-loud.

‘Wonderful isn’t it. Shame I’ll be snoring for most of the day,’ replied Michael who was looking forward to crawling into his rumpled bed when he got home. He felt slightly annoyed, at no-one in particular, that his current nocturnal shifts meant he would be missing out on most of the morning sunshine.

The whole world looked as though it was brand new. It was a feel good summer morning and everything dew-sparkled with the life-giving rays of the early morning sun. Michael opened the curtains and paused for a moment as he watched the night’s dampness steaming up from the long grass at the end of the garden. It could have been the garden of a stately home. It had in fact once been a lord’s present to celebrate his eldest son’s marriage. It had one of the last remaining ha-ha’s - a raised lawn surrounded by an ornamental ditch. This would have been there to keep father’s flock of sheep from over-running the expensive, hand-scythed lawn.

Danny had been washed in bed, an expert job that Michael had down to a fine art. Wash and roll, dry and roll, Michael’s strong but hairless arm as lever between Danny’s knees, onto side, wash back, roll back, roll and dress, job done. Michael pulled the blue sling underneath Danny and across the creased bedsheets. He lifted him up with the mobile hoist. As Michael swung him out over the bed they both paused again, looking out the window to watch the last of the night’s foxes slink back into the horse field beyond the garden. Danny rocked ever so slightly back and forth. He quite liked being in the sling, it felt almost womb-like. Eventually, he was ready to face the world, ‘Well, that’s you done Danny mate, nearly time for me to hit the sack,’ and with that Michael clapped his hands together eagerly and left the room.

Once downstairs, Danny waited patiently in the dining room. An hour passed whilst Danny sipped his sweet milky coffee through a thick plastic straw. The sun rose splendidly in the morning sky. The night carers departed. Michael waved goodbye, ever-cheerful, although Danny knew it was often a show. Michael did not love his job but sometimes it seemed to Danny that he was reluctant to leave the shift. Perhaps there was more chaos at his home than Michael admitted. The day carers arrived, fresh-faced and smelling of morning showers and brand-name toiletries.

Danny put mouth to joystick, a globule of spittle falling onto the armrest. His electric chair stuttered into life whilst the yellow lights of the charging panel lit up indicating a full battery. Danny used his mouth on the small black joystick on the right-hand armrest of his wheelchair to control his movement. Soon, he was gliding across the light wood floor of the dining room with a quiet electric hum. He moved over from the grand patio bay windows overlooking the garden to one of the two large wooden tables in the middle of the dining room. These were dark polished blood-red wood with a single Rubinesque carved leg in the middle. They were good for wheelchair access and suited the Victorian corniced, high-ceiling feel of the room.

Before long, his best friend Ben wheeled himself in amidst great effort, his light brown skinny arms slipping off the steel wheel rims. He took his place at the table alongside Danny. Whilst the carers were gone fetching breakfast they had a quick chat.

‘So, D-Danny, those c-control freaks have been at it again haven’t they?’ squeaked Ben, his boy-like frame almost flopping over in his manual wheelchair with the effort of talking. His coordination was too poor to let him loose in an electric wheelchair, besides which, Nathalie, the head carer, wanted to keep his arms strong.

‘You m-mean the agency? How did you know?’ replied Danny.

‘I don’t know anyone else who f-fits that description. And you know me, always tuning into the m-mindwaves,’ sighed Ben, his Indian accent rising in tone at the end of each sentence. Whilst he talked his legs kicked out involuntarily. His words had an odd squeaking quality due to the nerve degenerative disease he suffered from – freidrich’s ataxia. It was not easy understanding him but it was second nature to Danny.

‘Yes they contacted me, had to send out some stupid m-message for them, to the mass consciousness. I wish they would leave me alone,’ said Danny grumpily. He slurped up some cool coffee from the thick yellow straw.

‘The mass consciousness won’t talk to them f-freaks so they have to use you. Maybe one day we’ll both escape them. Leave this world behind too.’

‘If only it were that easy Bendhu my friend. You would gladly swap this life for another world I know. But some of us are,’ Danny hesitated, ‘m-more attached, if you know what I mean. I’m not ready to leave this world just yet,’ Danny replied quietly. Ben gave him a meaningful look. His time was more limited, his physical disabilities greater. Just then, Sarah sauntered into the dining room throwing back her long blond locks which were still wet from the shower.

‘What are you two weirdos planning?’ she laughed in a kindly tone. ‘When you two are whispering, something crazy’s being planned for sure.’ Hands on hips, she eyed both of them in a kind of mocking matronly fashion that Danny found irresistibly attractive.

‘We’re just talking about n-normal things, like going shopping,’ laughed Danny, who was cheered by the sight of Sarah. How could she always be in such a good mood? He wondered.

‘You two never talk about normal things,’ she jibed.

Just then Nathalie, the morning carer swept into the dining room. Her long flower-printed blue dress swirled behind her highlighting her naturally red hair. She had a tray of breakfasts, porridge and toast. The friend’s attention turned itself to food.

‘You coming to school today then Dan? Go on, you know you love the chaos really!’ Sarah said gently. Danny tried to weigh it up in his mind. Was it worth the stress of trying to fit in for a whole day at that hectic place just to spend twenty minutes chatting with Sarah at lunchtime?

‘Dan’s had enough of school by the l-looks of him,’ stuttered Ben.

‘I am a bit knackered,’ agreed Danny.

‘That’s because he’s probably been fighting ghosties all night knowing that looney,’ Sarah chimed.

‘Probably,’ Danny sighed in reply.

After breakfast the three chatted for a while longer until Nathalie announced that the bus to take them to school had arrived early.

‘I think I’ll give it a m-miss today Nat,’ explained Danny. ‘Didn’t get too much sleep last night.’

Judging by Nathalie’s all-seeing, but kindly expression Danny wasn’t sure whether she believed him or thought he was isolating himself unnecessarily. After the others had gone to school, Danny sauntered electrically, gliding in his wheelchair over to the grey metal lift doors opposite the office. From here he could glance at the grand Victorian front door, which was nearly as wide as a man is tall - ideal for wheelchairs. It had stained glass panels, in triangular patterns and was painted a deep green colour. Nathalie followed and pressed the lift call button for him. Danny made his way upstairs and into his bedroom.

As soon as he entered the room the flat screen TV switched itself on. This was not a good sign. Danny felt a little frightened. He tried not to think about his involvement with that sinister



agency. But as hard as he tried he could not help worrying. In the middle of the huge flat-screen there sat a Golden Frog.

‘Brrrrrup,’ it said.

With a twist of his body Danny slammed the bedroom door shut using the back end of his wheelchair. He was not going to show them any signs of fear he had decided. The frog lazily scratched its oversized glistening head with a smooth golden hind limb as though it knew exactly what Danny was thinking.

A logo in the top left hand corner of the TV screen flipped into mirror image and back again. It did this whenever you looked at it, but otherwise remained perfectly still. The logo was a white triangle shining like the sun.

‘You have done ver-ry well,’ remarked Golden Frog suddenly. Frog’s mix of gruff working class Tokyo and broad East London accents gave the frog a loud and unsettling tone.

‘You have helped us prepare and big boss is pleased. We have special task for you in future also,’ squeaked the Frog, who was now hopping excitedly from side to side.

‘Would you care to tell me what this is all about?’ enquired Danny. He thought he’d better get his questions in whilst they were in a good mood.

‘No we wouldn’t care to,’ said Frog. ‘But listen up, this much I can say,’ he continued. ‘We have some shopping to do. Very special shopping. Our snake colleague has - what to say? Been redeployed - permanently I hope. Anyhow, no need for any more mind-messages to mass consciousness. Now is time for *action*. We shall be in touch.’ Frog winked maliciously.

The logo on the screen did a double flip. The whole image then swirled away as if a plug had been pulled. Once the images had gone the screen returned to its usual lazy haze.

Danny chewed it over, trying to make sense of it all. He wondered what effect he could possibly have? What task could that misbegotten agency need him for now? He knew he could do things with his mind that some may find wonderful but to Danny it was nothing spectacular. In fact Danny did not really think of himself as special at all. He was just some silly disabled kid who got harassed by weird stuff. The psychic powers were a poor compensation for the endless frustration of his daily life. He yearned for a body that actually worked and did what it was told. How he wished for the comfort of a girlfriend. But for now he would settle for just being left alone.

## **Chapter Three – Close Encounters of the Amphibious Kind**

Some two hundred and fifty seven miles away from Danny, across the green and cultivated Midlands, beyond the second city of Birmingham and the university town of Cambridge, in the middle of that flat and for some, prosperous county known as Suffolk, sat Alistair B. Civil. He was thin and tall and had sharp angular features. He looked a little mismatched in his expensive but slightly ill-fitting grey suit. He perched in his thick green leather and dark wood chair and pecked hungrily at the small sushi lunch sat sadly on his desk.

‘Now where did I put it?’ Alistair sighed softly. He reached down below the antique, green leather-topped desk and retrieved a small brown-wrapped, twine-fastened parcel. Alistair Civil had received a strange package that day. He’d assumed it was the new mind-ware device he had ordered from the Nature-technics department and he was right.

Alistair had been in authority at the world's most secret psychic agency for some time now. Even before he had been appointed to his present, all-powerful job he had been firmly at the helm. Alistair and power were just two things that went together - like chips and fish. Alistair had the aura of a boss. He was the man with the plan, a smiling assassin, a cat with a half-dead mouse.

Alistair gave people a creepy feeling. Conversation with him was like attending a high-class dinner party, one in which they themselves were to be the ingredients. In short, he was dangerous and everyone knew it. Luckily, people rarely attended dinner parties with Alistair, and if they did it was certainly not for pleasure.

Secret agencies, especially this one, tended to work in a cellular manner. Each cell worked on a strictly ‘need-to-know’ basis. The cells themselves were organised into levels. Each lower level was kept in the dark by the one above. Centuries of British secrecy had made this process smoother than the best Cornish ice-cream. This all helped to avoid the attentions of the official UK government – not that they would want to interfere. Today’s top politicians might be rascals but they knew their place. One did not interfere with the agency. Otherwise skeletons from the past would be dug out and deposited in the front pages of the newspapers for everyone to see. Or if the agency was suitably upset, one’s own skeleton might find itself deposited somewhere considerably less comfortable than the First Class compartment to which it was accustomed.

Alistair certainly didn’t worry about the government. Such things come and go. He loved his job. Not knowing what his job was really about was not a problem. This was partly why he was so good at it. Certainly it could be said that the devil of bureaucracy smiled happily down upon Alistair's humble, obedient soul.

He grinned like a little boy as he carefully felt the weight of the parcel, moving it from hand to hand and cautiously giving it a sniff with his long chiselled nose. Everything felt right. A dark, hungry fire glowed in his almond-shaped beady eyes.

Alistair had been waiting for this special package for some time and if the man had any weaknesses at all it could be a dislike for being kept waiting. It would contain the most advanced entity the agency had ever possessed. It was a device that could be used to look directly into a person’s mind. It could change thoughts and twist desires - it spelt Power with a capital P. Sure, they could do all that psychic stuff before with a person here and a politician there. But he wanted more, much more, and they were right on the verge of getting it. This package was not, ‘It,’ exactly but it was a key step toward that ultimate prize.

If the agency wanted to see inside a mind, transplant a thought, twist a desire, it could all be done. This had a great deal to do with extra-terrestrial software, though mind-ware would be more exact. In fact, this new device contained a living entity. An entity shaped like a golden-coloured frog.

Alistair reached into the desk's top drawer and took out a silver rectangular device. It had no visible markings. He scanned the parcel by passing the device over it. Satisfied, Alistair opened the parcel. He found a blue crystal glass container and a short note from Monty, the head of Nature-technics at the agency.

***For the attention of Mr Alistair B. Civil,***

*Please find enclosed the Mind-Ware-Six device as requested. It has the appearance of a faint yellow frog-shaped haze. It is contained within a diamond nano-glass box. The Mind-Ware-6 can locate and penetrate any mind or group of minds in the Earth's mass consciousness. Sometimes it will do so before you are aware of wanting it to be located (the time-streaming capabilities are still experimental). Any operative's thoughts whilst running the Mind-Ware-Six can of course be monitored or altered.*

*You may need the help of UK Special Operative Four, or similar level neurode, to use the device. The following will instruct you in the method of its activation.*

*Regards,  
Monty.*

Alistair looked around his dark wood-panelled office, at the original stone fireplace, the beautiful Arabian rug and the rows of leather-bound expensive books. He gazed out the white-framed Victorian window at the airbase beyond and coldly contemplated Monty's future. As he chewed the top of an expensive black fountain pen, he wondered, absent-mindedly, if Monty already knew the real reason why he needed the Mind-Ware-Six. UK Operative Four meant a whole lot more than merely being the hardware for running the device. But he figured it couldn't do any harm even if Monty did know the wider picture. Where he was going people tended to keep their thoughts strictly to themselves - permanently in most cases.

Special Operative UK-Four just happened to be Danny Sola. The Mind-Ware-Six on the other hand, as a Virtual Device, was an entity made entirely from thought. It was also the most complex Virtual Device that the agency had ever possessed (or more accurately, stolen). It needed the use of about forty two per-cent, an 'Adams' worth to use agency lingo, of the running capacity of a suitable human brain when it was operative. When the Mind-Ware-Six was resting it was happy to exist as a golden frog-like haze.

Alistair played with the immensely beautiful, diamond-crystal, rectangular nano-glass box that contained the Mind-Ware device. It was about six inches tall, flat at one end with a pyramid-shaped roof at the other. It looked ancient but beautifully crafted. It was seamless, not a joint in sight. He twirled it this way and that, toying with it with his slender, manipulative fingers. Distractedly, he enjoyed the cool sensations emanating from the box whilst he intently watched the golden, swirling cloud trapped inside it.

Alistair prepared to download the device straight into the unsuspecting mind of Danny Sola. Alistair picked up the black, bakelite phone with his long cold fingers and entered a number

using the round movable dial that a phone of this age possessed. It clicked repeatedly then rang a few times before being picked up.

‘Hi, Michael speaking.’

‘Hello. This is Alistair, Danny Sola’s Uncle,’ he lied in an insincere, officious tone. Alistair twirled the ancient cloth cabling with his free hand.

‘Oh right yes, I’ll just get him. Hang on a minute.’

Michael went to fetch Danny. The lad took his mouth off the wheelchair joystick whilst Michael held the phone to Danny’s head.

‘Yup,’ sighed Danny reluctantly. Why couldn’t he get a nice telephone call occasionally?

‘It’s your Uncle. I am sure you are very pleased to hear from me.’ Alistair intoned sarcastically in his dry, upper class accent.

‘N-Not at all.’

‘Just a small favour Daniel, I’m sure you will be glad to oblige.’

‘I won’t.’

‘Well actually my friend, let’s be honest here. I do not feel you have a whole lot of choice in this particular matter. Would you like to know why? Let me explain, the problem’s like this...’ Alistair paused, sounding as though he was in deep thought about a perturbing matter.

But instead, Alistair quickly turned the blue glass box containing the mind-ware device upside-down. He pressed the flat bottom to the phone’s old-fashioned black mouthpiece and held his thumb to the invisible release catch at the tip of the pyramid at the other end of the device.

The next thing Danny heard was a strange hallucination of a sound as if a sheet of metal had been pulled apart within a musical storm. It was like being assaulted by an evil sound wave. The sound repeated itself over and over again like a flash of light caught forever in a diamond, shifting through space. Danny tried to jab at his ears. He felt like a lump of slime was trying to crawl down his auditory canal. Danny spat phlegm at the phone, which was now on the floor minus its casing. Michael groaned internally.

‘What *are* you doing Danny!?’ shouted Michael. Danny was still gibbering and was now trying to bang his head against the arm of his wheelchair.

‘MMMMrrraHH Gerroffff!’ moaned Danny.

‘Are you Okay?’ Michael was worried now. ‘YOU OKAY Danny?’

‘Yesss, I fer-fer-think so. Strange noise, it hurts. Fish in me ear. FISH IN ME EAR!’

‘Okay, calm down mate. C'mon, let’s get you to your room.’

Michael took Danny off and he calmed down. He needed his wits about him for this one. He did not have a fish in his ear at all. No, it was definitely a frog, a golden one at that.

‘Who would think we be sharing same brain!’ said Golden Frog triumphantly in his curious Japanese-English accent as soon as they got back to Danny’s room. ‘But I no ask to be here, any more than you wanted me. I have assist you carry out task. Then say I can return home - if I am lucky.’

‘And where is home?’ said Danny.

‘Nowhere you know. Just beam of light in suburbs. A little place I like call my own. Only prob-rem, it long way from here. I castaway.’

‘Who’s paying you? What’s the big interest in my head? And what do you get out of it?’

‘For now, I get to exist. Maybe sum day, they help me get back home,’ said the Frog. ‘Though, they none too clever. They think I just engineered mind-entity.’

‘Yeah, but there must be more to your business than that, surely?’

‘Mmhm, you are right. If carry out stupid agency mission - feel pleasure. If don’t - feel pain. It ve-ry strange.’

Danny was beginning to like Golden Frog just a tiny little bit. It took his mind away from the loneliness he felt. When there are gaps in your heart as empty as the ones in Danny’s, having an alien life-form living in one's head isn't entirely a bad thing.

That night Danny slept better than he had for a long time. He forgot to worry about his Dad, or when the next begrudged paternal visit would be. He couldn’t help missing the old git, but he was always such a busy man. He even clean forgot to feel bad about his Mum or to yearn for the touch of a feminine hand, preferably Sarah’s. Instead, he dreamt of ponds and lily pads and the sound of water gently dripping into a lake from a mountain-fed stream. It was all so calm and relaxing. He would awake with a feeling of pure bright blue coolness. A coolness which would make him feel pleasantly disposed toward mankind in general and to Golden Frogs in particular.

## **Chapter Four –The Sapient Realm**

The next morning Golden Frog remained asleep. It may turn out to be a good day thought Danny. Michael had some time off so Nathalie had come along to get him up and dressed a bit later than usual. She was a cheerful, motherly soul and her happiness was infectious. She smelt of an old-fashioned perfume that reminded Danny of country meadows. The sun shone brightly through the bedroom windows making a comforting pattern. Nathalie hoisted him from the bed to his wheelchair. As he rocked in the blue cradle Danny watched the light shining through the large gap in the curtains, picking out motes of dust speckling through the air.

A little while later, Danny put mouth to joystick and glided forward in his double-battery, black, electric wheelchair. He entered Ben's room, which was just along the corridor from his own.

Unusually for this time of day Ben was already up and dressed and sat quietly on his bed. His thin, child-like legs hung over the bed-side in his tight black jeans which he insisted on wearing (much to the consternation of his carers).

'I-I know,' said Ben.

'Y-you know what?'

'I know about the f-frog. They just want top control, right?' Ben's Indian accent rose in tone at the end of his sentences.

'I guess,' spluttered Danny who was himself in mid-stutter.

Ben seemed to go inward briefly. He looked as though he was meditating. However, what he had done was switch to telepathy. Ben continued, the words bouncing clearly, but quietly around Danny's mind, 'We've got to get round that frog of yours. I'll meet you in the Sapient Realm later.'

'I think Frog is asleep. Why don't we just talk now?'

'Sorry. It's got to be the Sapient Realm. That frog might just be pretending to be asleep. We'll be safer in the Sapient Realm.'

'What if next time I can't get back?' Danny queried anxiously. He loved visiting the Sapient Realm but there was always an outside chance that you would not return.

'We're seasoned travellers, its second nature to you.' Ben counselled wisely.

'Sapient Realm it is then.'

Switching realms was a bit like birth and death - there was always a risk. Ben knew Danny was not a great fan of risk but would be good to his word.

Frog was very quiet that day. He needed to rest for a while after his travels. Danny in turn, needed all his wits about him for the social interaction and buzz that was their school. To him, it was like a great sea of people. Sometimes he felt like he just was not cut out to be a human being - everyone talking all day long and rushing about in circles. He preferred the non-verbal quietness of nature. That night, after what felt like a very long day, Danny went on his way to the Sapient Realm.

Everyone entered the Sapient Realm in a different way. Ben entered through a slipstream of sensual feelings as his mind released its grip upon the material world. Danny entered through a world of sound. A heartbeat at first, then broken half-chords flew from above, below, every direction. Each unpredictable snapshot of music seemed to follow its own pattern - yet it all fused together in harmony.

‘It is perfect,’ said Danny out-loud to no one in particular. The musical ecstasy caressed his mind sending all memory, all thoughts, back to their home in oblivion. Danny watched, as his body became the music. His hands, arms and then his legs disappeared into pure movement. He watched the last of his little self vanish. For a split second the most dreadful flash of pure fear spread throughout his body. And then it was gone. The real fear was the sheer pleasure of it all.

‘Maybe I’ll just leave my material body back there in the ordinary world,’ Danny thought to himself. But he knew in life there was never such an easy escape.

‘So you have brought your friend little one,’ said Thinking Stone, the Sapient Tree, in his rich chocolate tones. ‘Perhaps Danny, you would like to climb this old tree, which, as monkeys, you are particularly well-suited I must say.’

Thinking Stone was his favourite tree. He was an old oak tree with a weather-worn trunk, gnarled and open in places with a broad canopy. It was like a father to him. In the Sapient nature realm, no humans can abide. It is the realm of the Sapient trees and their near-eternal intelligence. Danny and Ben had been transformed into small grey and brown spider-monkeys by their journey here. Each time they were born into this realm it was as a different creature.

Both Danny and Ben had full use of their limbs in this higher energy Sapient Realm. Their bodies, having been transformed into small spider monkeys were wondrously strong. Danny was fascinated by his small supple fingers. The two of them started to look for handholds as they pulled their way effortlessly to the first crook of the tree. Soon Danny and Ben had both made it to the safety of the tree’s highest nook. They were sitting comfortably, backs against a branch, each in their own little hollow.

The trees in the valley seemed to be dancing to a slow beautiful harmony. Danny felt the cool air flowing through him, refreshing his spirit. He felt that each wind-swept hair on his body was alive as he looked out across the shimmering valley. The two friends and the tree sat quietly. Each was thinking the same thoughts in a myriad of different ways as silently as a graceful bird in flight.

‘Now there is something we really need to discuss,’ said Thinking Stone eventually. ‘Why such trauma should have happened to the humans, I shouldn’t like to guess. Only thing I know is that the Great Trauma did indeed occur. It is just as it says in the old books of man. A long time ago a most terrible thing happened. Before this time there was great happiness throughout the land. Humans were as wise as the trees and as happy as the animals. We called that time the ‘Eternal Dance of Energy’ or EDEN for short. Everything happened back then just as it should. And that was the way it had been for as long as even I can remember. However, we all knew a short, but traumatic time was coming. The Earth and its celestial friends were to travel through the hostile space plains of Armageddon for some six thousand of your Earth years.

‘In time, the planet grew sick, animals died of thirst and the crops withered. The people thought that Mother Nature had abandoned them. They cast away their gods and cried salty tears into the newborn deserts. Their children crumpled before their very eyes. Little did they know that the Earth cried with them, that she mourned as much as they did. The humans became traumatised. The great cities of the ancients decayed and were plundered. Much of the human race simply died. Those that survived forgot their roots and succumbed to the power of anger. Bitter anger, hatred and fear, people scrambled for food and water. War became the norm.

‘The Earth is about to enter the space plains of Aquaria. It can heal itself now. However, the evil lords of the Armageddon era must step down! The Council of Sapient Ones and I as their representative want you, our precious human friends to do something for us...’

‘Who are we though? Nobody listens to us,’ Ben said breathlessly.

‘And I've got a frog in my brain,’ said Danny half seriously.

Thinking Stone laughed. He indicated to look at the sky. The sun came out from behind a perfect cloud and warmed their very bones.

‘Now you two really should not worry. Everything is just as it should be. All you need to know will come to you when the time is right.’

Danny and Ben didn't feel scared anymore. All afternoon and into the evening they wandered the nearby hills, they climbed trees with their muscular monkey arms, they played with sticks in the mud. The sun shone, the ants worked, and Danny and Ben explored. All was right with their world.



## **Chapter Five - An Offer You Can't Refuse**

The next morning, back in the every-day world, Ben made his way along the upper corridor. As he guided his wheelchair his slight fingers would slip off the wheel-rims time and again. Still he would transport himself slowly but surely. A few minutes later Ben had finally succeeded in reaching Danny's room.

Danny was watching his television, which as usual was a close up of a sandstorm seen from the inside. To Danny however it was a beautiful multitude of mind-enhancing colours.

'What's that you're watching Danny,' enquired Ben. He felt sure that something important was going on. His mind wasn't able to decode the sandstorm into a coherent picture and he felt a little jealous.

'*Oi!*' a peculiar Tokyo and East London accent rocked itself into Danny and Ben's brains. 'You no for-get Golden Frog?'

'How could I forget *you*, Master Frog,' whispered Danny out loud. He had lost track of the visitor in his head.

'You can call me Golf. It's short for Golden Frog by the way.'

'And here's me thinking it was short for...'

'Danny! Let's not upset Golf,' advised Ben.

'Wise man. You do well to listen to your friend.'

The frog had been sleeping the last day in order to recover from the long journey into Danny's head. Being digitally encoded and transmitted electronically has its drawbacks.

'Better not speak out loud to Golf,' reminded Ben breathlessly.

'Yes. He is right. We all go telepathic-visual now. Prepare for enhanced communication,' said Golf.

Danny and Ben suddenly found themselves sitting in an all-white vaguely circular room. It was quietly humming. The sounds were both soothing and peaceful. The whole room pulsed gently as if it were alive. Danny tried to guess the size of the cabin but measurements didn't seem to quite fit what he was looking at.

'Telepathy with virtual reality - that's some gadgetry Mr Frog. I'm impressed,' Danny commented absent-mindedly.

'Mhmm, yes. My employers like to think they well equipped. You have been projected aboard deep space alpha-energy ship, or the likeness of one,' continued Frog.

'We really are impressed now,' thought Ben quietly.

'You have both been chosen as, what to say, agents - I guess,' Golf continued.

In a secret, hopefully non-frog-accessible location within the Danny-Ben mind-set, the pair exchanged exclamation marks. They had set up this mind-arena, in what is called the Thought Realm, years previously as a place for secret exchange (should anyone be eavesdropping telepathically). Most communication here was visual or even via smells - never verbal. Words were just too easy to track. Danny and Ben exchanged images. They were on a desert island at night surrounded by blank-faced people muttering unknown words. Everyone wanted their attention and there were rough seas in the background.

Danny and Ben felt worried. Firstly, the Sapient Trees wanted their abilities in some unknown way in order to help the Earth humans. A frog-like mind-entity from a secret and highly sinister psychic agency also wanted their services. 'Whatever next?' thought Danny in visual mode to Ben.

'Hey! Are you two listening?' interrupted Golden Frog angrily. He was looking suspiciously from Danny to Ben and back again.

'No worries Golf, we're just a little taken aback with all this really amazing virtual telepathy,' thought Ben quickly.

'Yeah, we ain't seen nothing like this before,' added Danny.

'We got keep mind on job. You be sorry if you mess with Golden Frog. Here is deal,' said Golf.

Golf explained a little. Having little option otherwise, they reluctantly accepted the mind entity's offer. They were now both working on a particular mission for the agency. Danny had already sent some mind messages to the mass consciousness for them and he was not happy about that. Now he was being dragged in much deeper. It was something quite definite that they wanted, something quite crucial, something physical. Exactly what it was they weren't being told.

## **Chapter Six – Unidentified Flying Organisms**

In an eerie blue light, which seemed to dance hypnotically, a spherical silver object glimmered in the endless blackness of space. The object was cruising slowly high above a beautiful blue-green planet. The occupant admired the planet's light blue aura encircling its sphere as the silver disc made its serene way through space.

Within the object was a lone humanoid. His only and best friend was the ship itself. The human was 150 years old and the ship was about 600. He was a teenager where he came from. He was considered a bit of a rogue even.

His parents had been very embarrassed when he had just helped himself to a deep-space alpha-energy ship. There was no property in their society but there were unwritten rules as to how things were shared. He had taken off around the galaxy without so much as a quick goodbye. It was this that had hurt his parents the most. His distraught father wondered what he had ever done wrong. Had they not always shown him love? The boy did not seem to enjoy the wild food expeditions or playing with the animals like their other children and he avoided the village meditations altogether. In fact, looking back, the only person he ever really related to was his grandma - and she was quite an oddity herself. In fact, she was a legend of discontent upon a planet famed for its enlightenment. Hevel worshipped her however and the poor boy had never been the same after her death.

Although his parents thought about him every day, it was now some time ago that he had disappeared and the village elders had thought it best to simply let him get it out of his system. It would all work out in the end they believed. Others, a noisy minority, had argued that he should be recaptured and have his personality forcibly reset. That was an unpopular measure and the technology had been abandoned millennia ago. People started to forget about him and the missing ship.

There were of course occasional rumours that Hevel's escape with the ship was part of some sinister, galaxy-wide conspiracy against the Confederation. Hevel didn't have the wits to commandeer a ship on his own it was argued. In any case, he and the ship were gone, and, by the looks of it, gone for good.

When Hevel had been a child he had heard about a fairy-tale planet far, far away called, 'The Earth'. Hevel's now sadly departed, aged and wrinkly grandmother, who was then very nearly 900 years old had been a little bad-tempered too. The only person she wasn't habitually rude to was her beloved grandson, Hevel. She excelled at storytelling and Hevel loved her dearly. She used to tell him folk tales about planet Earth. Strange monsters, enchanting demons, masquerading evil forces, slaves, zombies and brave heroes peopled this planet. Sadly, the planet's citizens were enslaved by evil and had been killing each other for millennia. But it had not always been this way.

Hevel, with his mind for the macabre meant he loved hearing Grannie's, '*Tales of the Dark Side: Planet Earth*'. As he grew up he yearned to find out what it was like - if it really did exist. The elders used to imply planet Earth was not a real place. It was just some sort of twisted myth dreamt up by people who should know better. He wanted to find out for himself.

Throughout the galaxy there were great streams of alpha-force. This is the dark matter, the zero-point energy, the circulating life-force. It travels in massive currents throughout the galaxy and is the power behind most UFOs. After many years of patient, behind-the-scenes work, the

now 'teenage' Hevel and the ship, which was called Aleya, rode the great, mid-galactic alpha-force stream. They stole away from the planet Gaiya to the distant Earth.

The ship was more like an intelligent surfboard than a technology-packed spacecraft. It breathed, had thoughts of its own and life-force pulsed in its twinkling fibre-optic veins. There were no electronics - Gaiya was a post-atomic civilisation and had no need for such technology. Besides which, ordinary electronics would not survive the ship's intense energy fields.

The ship had no engine. It simply generated a powerful field that allowed it to skate upon the alpha-force streams that criss-cross the galaxy.

'Aleya.'

'Yes, Hevel.'

'I want to be alone. Turn yourself off in here would you?'

'You've come all this way to visit some backward pre-contact humanoid planet - just so you, "can be all alone?"' she said mimicking Hevel's high-tone voice.

Aleya was helping to edit Hevel's video. Hevel had stolen an unreleased, educational video from the Confederation, an association of 33 planetary cultures. Hevel's home planet, Gaiya, was the founding member of this confederation. The educational film was a most advanced form of video. They are multi-dimensional, have a direct emotional contact with the audience and are almost better than reality. Watching one is a little like falling madly in love. Hevel thought it was criminal such technology was used by his native Gaiyans to make documentaries. He was going to use it to rock a whole planet, hopefully to its very foundations.

Hevel was planning to create as much trouble as possible using his stolen and adulterated version of the Confederation video. The Confederation had intended to make public contact with planet Earth in the not-too-distant future. They were going to explain how Earth's history had been manipulated for millennia. How various extra-terrestrial, sometimes benign, but often malign and warring factions had been busily interfering with Earth humans for aeons. Military contact with some Earth forces had already been cemented of course - mostly by species with a less humane agenda than the Confederation. Of course no-one followed the universal directive about non-interference. Rather, just about every humanoid species in the galaxy had been busy interfering with the Earth for just about forever. The Earth was considered to be a rare jewel in the galactic crown - and everyone wanted a piece of it for their own.

It was anticipated that the Confederation's public contact would cause upheaval but that it would be for the best overall - if a cosmic war with Earth's current 'keepers' could be avoided. The last one had not gone too well for the Confederation, although it had added some spice to what would become the Vedas - the great books of the Hindus.

Hevel had other plans. The video was originally intended for potential contact-crew only. It was interplanetary recruitment. By beaming his version out early Hevel was hoping to embarrass the Confederation. It should also outrage the Earth humans and possibly start a war between the Confederation and the Earth's secret extra-terrestrial rulers - who were possibly the most malign force in the galaxy. Hevel always aimed big when he looked to cause trouble.

Hevel had spent many long years secretly cementing his friendship with Aleya. An intelligent deep-space alpha-force ship cannot be stolen without her complicity. It took a dozen years to form such a ship, although she was not large in size being only twenty metres across. She had the classic silver disc-like appearance and sported flashing lights across the mid hull. Ships, such as she, were more grown than built. Aleya was a human-type mind living in an organic crystal computer interface within a living ship that was her body. She was grown from a living form of crystal-metal. It was a material that was solid and liquid at the same time and never needed

polishing. The ship could also become physically invisible for short periods. Aleya was termed a silicate organism.

Hevel leant back in his chair, 'Roll the video Aleya - please.'

Aleya sighed, waited a moment then darkened the lights. A wall lit up with the introductory credits.

'Sorry Hevel, I need your attention,' said Aleya suddenly in a serious tone.

'I'm busy editing, or at least I will be if you didn't keep interrupting,' Hevel complained in his whining nasal voice.

'I've got something you will want to see.'

'Mhmm, we'll get back to this later then.'

Aleya stopped the video. Another wall fluoresced like water and then became transparent showing a breathtakingly beautiful view of the planet Earth. There in the middle of the entire panorama was a dirty great rocket-launched space capsule hurtling right at them.

'Those Earthies *cannot* be serious. That's so backward it's *mind-boggling*,' remarked Hevel, tapping his crossed legs in anger, 'haven't they got any alpha-force technology?'

'They do, but they insist on keeping the old "crash, bang, whallop" stuff going as well for some strange reason,' Aleya replied. 'Incidentally, shall we get out of the way before they crash into us?' she asked. 'We have but a few seconds till impact.'

'I guess so. Let's make ourselves known as it passes us by. In fact, let's follow it. It must be going to that heap of scaffolding they call a space station.'

Just off to one side of Hevel and his best and only friend, Aleya, in a crowded little space capsule sat Jill, the UK's fifth official space-woman, and her two male colleagues.

'*OH-MY-GOD!*' she screamed. 'Did you see that! It was a SPACESHIP.'

'We're in a spaceship, Doh!' said Jack, hitting his forehead theatrically. He was used to this sort of thing. 'Don't bother telling control neither,' he continued.

'And why might that be?' said Jill, indignant.

'Star-ships don't exist unless the U.S. government says they do and it says they ain't. So just keep it zippo,' replied Jack helpfully.

Igor, the Russian compatriot aboard the mission, muttered under his breath. He had seen stolen copies of Russian E.T. files. It was common knowledge in certain circles that every major government had stacks of files on UFOs. Some governments even had UFO denial departments dedicated to misinformation. These were usually the same governments that had UFO flying departments. They had teams dedicated to flying their stolen, 'gifted' or reverse engineered UFOs. Igor wasn't bothered. He just hoped he could smuggle the implanted retina-camera back home without the interfering Americans finding out.

As Hevel and his best friend, the ship, followed a now somewhat spooked crew of one English-woman and two men in their pocket-sized, rocket-launched space capsule, something odd happened. A mind-entity by the name of Golden Frog entered the mind of the interstellar star-ship with a stealth-like smoothness. There was a slight blip in the ship's sensor systems but then nothing - neither Aleya nor Hevel noted the intruder. The frog-like mind entity took some notes and made a few 'corrections'. Golf rubbed his virtual hands in thinly disguised glee. He told the mind-spanner to non-integrate and quietly prepared to take his leave.

He hoped his bosses wouldn't find out about his little trip. He needed insurance. If things didn't work out at the agency he could always hitch a lift with the living ship - if she was still in the vicinity of the solar system. Even Golf was impressed - very few galactic civilisations had developed, 'Silicate Organism Ships'. Golf knew he couldn't trust those mind-control freaks at

the agency. If this ship was reasonably near-by Golf would know. He could then teleport straight into her mind-storage systems and hide.

With the job complete, Golden Frog calculated that to go from the ship's mind-storage facility back to his host human mind on planet Earth would take him just over 66.6 Earth seconds - or thereabouts.

## Chapter Seven – A Golden Goodbye

Danny, Ben and Sarah were sat down waiting for Saturday lunch to arrive.

‘There’s something not right about you today, I can tell Danny,’ said Sarah eyeing Danny suspiciously from across the dinner table.

‘There’s n-no hiding from you, is there?’ laughed Danny self-consciously, trying to cover his embarrassment. There was very little time to do what he was planning and it was going to make him look a complete fool in front of Sarah. He could not possibly explain that he was trying to escape from some mad entity that had forcibly made a home for itself in his head.

‘You’re definitely up to something. Tell me!’ Sarah demanded petulantly. It was hard to say no to her. Danny would have loved to tell her everything but Sarah did not hold truck with any of his, ‘Weirdo stuff,’ as she so delicately called it.

‘You’re not still upset about your dad are you?’ she said quietly.

‘Nah, he can’t help being married to that bloody take-away.’ Danny’s dad owned ‘Five Star’ the areas busiest, and msot successful Chinese take-away.

‘Well, he should’ve come over when he said he would anyway.’

‘I-I know. I’m just a bit out of it today, that’s all.’

‘You’re not fooling me Danny, you’re hiding something.’

She swung her long blonde locks, turned her head away from him disapprovingly and folded her arms.

‘Lovers tiff,’ smiled Ben.

Danny tried to give Sarah a meaningful look that he hoped expressed his innermost tender feelings and his sorrow at excluding her. Then he was on his way. Quickly he wheeled his chair toward the patio doors.

A few seconds later Nathalie entered the dining room, ‘What the *hell* are you doing Danny?’ she gasped. She couldn’t quite bring herself to believe what she was seeing. She had been in the kitchen when she had heard Sarah’s shouts for help. As Nathalie had entered the room Danny had powered his electric wheelchair straight at the patio doors. They viciously failed to smash.

Danny then proceeded to batter down the push-handle exit bar with the only thing available to him - his head. Nathalie, not quite registering the strange scene, turned round to call for Michael. He was however right behind her and she stepped straight into his moving path. Nathalie watched, frozen to the spot, as the tray of hot soup Michael was carrying went flying upwards. Time went into slow motion as the soup made its journey through the air.

Impact! Time snapped back. Nathalie started screaming and tearing off her dripping hot, soup-soaked clothes.

‘Okay Ben,’ shouted Danny as loudly as he could through the noise. ‘Follow me quickly.’

‘Why Danny, what’s happening?’ Ben replied telepathically.

‘We’ve got one minute to reach the old holly tree. The Frog’s gone and left my head. When we reach the tree the Sapient Ones will blast us out of here. Quick! Before Frog gets back.’

‘I’m not so sure Danny.’

Getting to the Sapient Realm would normally take up to an hour of intense meditation to achieve, even for Danny. Ben knew such instant shortcuts were not advisable - not if you were overly attached to physical survival. Even Ben, who was nonchalant about living at the best of times, did not want to risk leaving this life just yet. There was another way of getting there, as they both knew. Certain trees, which were really outgrowths into this world from the Sapient

Realm, could act as spirit portals. They were an inter-dimensional gateway for the soul, a spirit gate. But it was dangerous – strictly for emergency use only.

‘Quick, NOW, there’s no more time. I can’t do it without you,’ grunted Danny out loud. Danny, having smashed the door-release pad made his way out of the patio doors. He wheeled down the wheelchair-ramp and toward the old holly tree. Here, he immediately buried his head in its split trunk.

Meanwhile, a near-naked Nathalie was finally free of her scalding clothes that lay scattered on the soup-soaked floor. Michael, realising that Danny may have hurt himself too, decided to try and get past her. He lurched forward as he slipped on Nathalie’s clothes on the wet floor. The now horizontally travelling, fourteen-stone carer went toppling, knocking heavily into Ben in his wheelchair. Ben had just undone the safety catch on his wheelchair belt when Michael slammed right into him. He sent his tiny body hurtling out the chair, through the patio-doors and out toward the tree. Danny had by now managed to ram himself fast between the two lower portions of the trunk.

‘C’mon Ben, you can do it, touch the tree, TOUCH the TREE,’ Danny screamed telepathically.

With one last effort Ben forced his rebellious, light brown arm upwards and outwards. Just before Ben touched the tree the sky suddenly darkened over into what felt like a premature dusk. A deeply purple, silver-edged, brightly glowing storm-cloud then materialised in a spiral out of nowhere. As the cloud appeared a gut-wrenching mind-numbing, ripping sound echoed through their brain-cells and out again. As Ben made contact with the tree a deadly bolt of sizzling blue-fire shot out of the cloud. It hit the tree with a finger of death-defying mega-watts.

Danny and Ben lit up the sky like a Lord Mayor’s firework display. Their minds were whipped to the Sapient Realm in an instant. Stark pain drifted into bliss. Multiple colours swirled and fused like inter-dimensional fire. A musical symphony was formed from the ripping sound. Danny forgot who he was. Ben felt the power of a million suns course through his veins. This is how life should really be, Ben thought to himself. Ben was at home in this intense energy form. Soon, their minds at least, were gone from this coarse world.

Nathalie who had recovered from the first shock waves of intense burning pain glanced upwards to see Michael staring open-mouthed at the tree. He was repeatedly saying the words, ‘No way, no way man!’ whilst swaying sideways from leg to leg like a robot. The two boy’s bodies were still there but they looked slightly charred, steam was rising from their clothes. Their lungs were on auto-pilot, taking small shallow breathes. They were alive, but nobody was home.

Michael’s brain was now about one nano-gram heavier. Inside his brain there were now 1.48 nano-grams of very angry Golden Frog. On his way back from the ship Golf had realised that something was seriously wrong. He had borrowed some of Danny’s life energy to beam himself out. His return journey was therefore pre-set, like an elastic band, to bounce back to Danny. Unfortunately for Golden Frog, Danny’s mind had in the meantime, bounced off. This left him dangerously homeless.

If only he had been a mere fraction of a second earlier! He could have stopped him then. Outside Danny’s brain he was powerless - for now. After he had landed Golden Frog had no choice but to head straight for the nearest inhabited brain. He had a survival time of just over a minute when outside a live neural network or a specially constructed gold and diamond nano-glass pyramid box.

Michael hadn’t even realised he had a visitor. Frog could kick back and relax, but instead he was worried. The way things were going he was headed for a good desiccation from his ‘masters’



over at the agency. Maybe he should just try and go it alone, ditch the agency altogether, but he had been trying to get home for decades to no avail.

Michael felt suddenly restless and annoyed as though someone else was using his emotions. That's strange he reflected suddenly. He was sure he had just been thinking with a gruff, half-oriental, half-cockney accent. That was quite a deep thought for Michael. He was not a thoughtless fellow but he was usually pre-occupied, work, family and football filled his days.

Michael now had a Golden Frog mind entity, with a working class Tokyo and East London hybrid accent, to do *all* his deep thinking for him. This thinking would be provided at a very reasonable cost: one somewhat neglected, overworked human body (answers to the name of Michael) and the unlimited use of the Michael brain. Michael was getting a great deal as far as Golf was concerned. Sure, he might kill his host but why sweat the small stuff?

## **Chapter Eight - Not So Happy Returns**

Danny and Ben descended from the Sapient Realm heavens, at a rate of knots. They fell out of the sky with all the grace of a thousand bricks. Thinking Stone reached out and gently caught them within his powerful branches. The large oak branches did not actually move they just pulled the boy's bodies inward like a magnet sweeping up iron filings. Once he got his breath back and his heart had stopped thumping wildly, Danny got the feeling that Thinking Stone had found the whole episode quite funny, but he kept that to himself. If Danny had seen his Sapient Realm body he would have understood Thinking Stone's humour. They were both brown and white plumed flightless birds, a little dodo-like in appearance and size.

It had been strange enough for Danny and Ben to be whipped to the Sapient Realm, at a speed which would have left light standing. This was a very high mind-speed with which to enter. Usually it would take up to an hour to change realms, the spiritual equivalent of going through customs, boarding your inter-dimensional jet, taxiing, runway and take-off.

The experience of inter-dimensional transfer could be unnerving to the uninitiated. It was similar to dying - somewhat scary at the time but guaranteed to open new doors. To change realms in a split of a lightning strike was disorientating beyond belief.

Much later, once Danny and Ben had settled in and stretched their brown, white-tipped flightless wings. Thinking Stone, the elder tree, patiently explained their mission, 'There is a substance so powerful, so desirable that it has its own dimension, its own realm to protect it. Well, perhaps that is not entirely true, the realm I speak of does other things too, but this substance is its power source.'

Danny and Ben perched a little hesitantly on a lower limb, 'We need some of this substance. Not for our own good but to protect this world. And we need you both to retrieve it. No-one else is qualified for this mission,' Thinking Stone explained.

What worried Danny the most, and he was a champion worrier at the best of times, was that he could tell that Thinking Stone was trying to play down the difficulty of this mission.

'This substance my friends, is called ruro,' Thinking Stone continued. 'It lies within a unique realm called the Akashi. It is essential to us all and all the dimensions I'm afraid.'

'And I guess that the psychic agency also wants it,' added Danny.

'Yes, and for much darker reasons. The agency can be dealt with. You should just play along with them for now.'

But Danny had his doubts about that. At what cost could they be kept at bay and for how long? They always seemed to find out about everything sooner or later as far as Danny could tell. Danny thought that Thinking Stone, living in this beautiful reality, untouched by the hand of war, might just be underestimating the agency. Perhaps he didn't grasp the fear Danny had to live with every day back in that dense realm we call reality.

Danny, even though he felt scared at the prospect, did like to have a mission, although he never would have admitted as much. It made him feel needed, special even. It confirmed his place in the troubled world. This however went well beyond anything he had known before. It made him feel doubtful deep down in the pit of his stomach. He would have loved to have told Sarah too, just to see the reaction in her face but he knew that was impossible. To Sarah, beautiful as she was, reality worked in a certain way and no-one was going to persuade her otherwise, least of all him.

‘My special friends,’ Thinking Stone intoned. ‘The ruo essence must be retrieved both for your mission and mine. There is much at stake but there are great powers assisting you so do not be afraid. Yes, there are others who would stop at nothing to possess it but we will hinder them at every turn. I will return you to your home now. Are you ready to go?’

‘Now's good,’ said Danny.

Ben just looked a little less inscrutable than usual – he was not big on words, whether of the spoken or the telepathic variety. Danny and Ben curled up underneath Thinking Stone and fell soundly asleep. The next few hours were spent in the half-self bliss of semi-consciousness.

## **Chapter Nine – One Step Forward, Two Steps Back**

‘Danny, is that you?’ squeaked Ben out loud. He felt strangely invigorated, and this new found vigour seemed to have reached his lungs. It was a part-time vigour however, one that got easily tired.

Ben could not move his head or arms at all. He was lying on his left side on an unusual material. It was not quite plastic, too warm. He was laid out prone in a bed looking through two long shiny metal bars with a blue mesh between them. In the distance he could hear a mostly regular bleeping noise and further away a whoosh, pump-like sound every few moments.

The light was subdued and the floor shiny. That is definitely Danny’s arm thought Ben. It certainly smells like Danny. There was a note of concentrated, ‘For Institutions Only,’ pine detergent and two slightly stronger notes of Danny’s characteristic hormonal odour. Ben might not say much but he knew his smells.

One of the nurses strolled across from the nurse’s station and was standing at the end of Ben’s bed looking at charts. She smelt of deodorant chemicals. She began sticking forms, each with a little plastic bag attached, to a clipboard at the end of his bed. The nurse then started to tinker with a, ‘Machine-on-a-stick,’ one of many that surrounded Danny and Ben. Ben felt a small whirl of fluid caress the underside of the skin on his chest and then a sudden irresistible drowsiness overtook him.

He overheard a voice say something about dosages and their reduction. Bleary eyed, he watched as another nurse emptied a mini-plastic box of urine into a larger box also attached to Danny’s bed-rail. The nurse made a note. A hint of the second nurse’s perfume wafted across Ben’s senses before he was away - far, far away, from the bed, from the nurses, even from the subdued lighting, but most especially, from the eternal, bleep, bleep, bleep.

Three weeks later:

Cynthia was the senior social worker responsible for Danny and Ben’s welfare. She had a student with her today - Trevor, who was sticking to her like proverbial glue. ‘Damn students,’ she thought to herself angrily as she marched past the nurse’s station. Her long blue denim dress swayed as it highlighted her greying hair. She got a few yards down the hospital corridor and then turned around and promptly headed back. Trevor followed a mere split pace later. Cynthia and Trevor stood by the nurse’s station. Trevor held his head slightly down turned. He was daydreaming again.

Considering the recent spate of hospital visits and her heavy case-load, the explosive tree at Danny’s house had not helped her nerves one tiny bit. But on the outside looking in, she was just a little more bristly than usual. As far as the world could tell, Cynthia had inexhaustible patience.

‘Can I help you?’ asked one of the hospital nurses after she had put the cream-coloured phone back into its cradle.

‘Yes we’re here to see Daniel Sola and Bendhu Dalit, I believe they have been transferred here from the High Dependency Unit.’

The ward manager had put Danny and Ben in the side-rooms attached to ward 2b. The nurse waved Cynthia and Trevor through to the first room. The boys had just had lunch.

‘You two did an *amazing* job of frying yourselves!’ blurted out Trevor tactlessly to the two boys with a huge grin. ‘Hey, you must’ve been doing some weird voodoo on that storm! That was seriously strange - even for you guys, and that’s saying something.’

‘Don’t be so damn silly Trevor,’ said Cynthia matter-of-factly. She gave both the boys a big hug and asked them how they were doing.

The day after the weird storm Page 7 of the Sun had run the following story:

*‘Two Severely Disabled Residents Get Fried Alive by Mysterious Lightning Bolt and SURVIVE! These Guys are COOKIN!’*

Danny and Ben had gathered a measure of fame. The papers detailed their recent emergence as electrified oddities. The strange lightning strike and the suddenly appearing purple cloud had also been the subject of discussion in the local press. However, no one had paid much attention to the fact that the lightning-hit holly tree had turned to a glowing charcoal.

All the grass for 6 foot around the tree had become frozen black silhouettes that crunched into nothingness underfoot. That night the whole tree had shone a frosty electric blue. The next morning the birds were singing and landing on it just as usual. In fact it seemed to be positively teeming with bird-life as far as Nathalie could tell. Bemused, she had seen a number of normally timid sparrows struggling to find a perch on one of the tree’s limbs. The glowing charcoal-tree had become a bird magnet.

Nathalie unconsciously tried to wipe the strange scene from her mind. Human memory is a wonderful thing and everyone would quickly forget the strange phenomena, everyone apart from Sarah that is. She had been alongside Nathalie as they had both stared out the window at the bizarre sight. Sarah had tried her hardest to forget this latest evidence of her house-mate’s incurable weirdness but somehow that black tree nagged at her thoughts. It also reminded her how quiet the house had become with Danny and Ben gone once again. She missed them.

The very next day some men in brand new blue boiler suits had turned up unannounced to excavate the tree and lay some new turf. ‘We’re from the North West Safety Inspectorate Commission,’ they had said - free removal of dangerous trees. Michael had greatly admired their vehicle. His friends in the team would be so impressed if he turned up for practise in something like that. It was a brand new huge 4X4, top-of-the-range, testosterone-mobile in jet black. Bit posh for the council, Michael had thought, jealously, to himself.

Nathalie, forever thoughtful and motherly, had asked one of the efficient fellows if he wanted a nice hot cuppa. He just stared at her with his large hypnotic green eyes and sharply pronounced, ‘No’. That was just a teensy bit strange she thought. ‘Probably foreign,’ she had reassured herself.

In the hospital room, Cynthia looked closely at Danny and Ben once she had finished cuddling them both. They had lost quite a bit of weight and looked hot and restless. It occurred to Cynthia that at least their agitation might mean they were getting better.

‘Would you like to take a stroll down to that little park in the hospital grounds? You know, the one above the car-park,’ Cynthia asked. Danny and Ben were glad of the suggestion. They had been cooped up indoors for what felt like a lifetime and it was a warm sunny day to boot. Cynthia set Trevor to work getting them ready whilst she checked with the nurses.

The lift opened and the party trundled out. Ben turned around in his wheelchair, the slightly flat tyres sticking to the new marble flooring in the entrance lobby. He squeaked something indecipherable at Trevor, the student social worker.

‘Trevor! Don’t ignore him,’ said Cynthia sharply.

Ben had started making increasingly frantic noises and gesturing toward the corridor. Danny began to look worried. Something was up and it was bound to be thoroughly unpleasant. Trevor just stood there.

‘What you picking up, Ben?’ said Danny telepathically.

‘Get out this foyer *quick!* It's gonna go BOOM!’

## **Chapter Ten – Making Michael’s Acquaintance**

The last few weeks he’d been different. Ever since the night Danny and Ben had got fried by that old holly tree in the back garden, things had just not been the same. He could not put his finger on exactly what had changed but something was not right. He dare not even admit it to his wife lest she think he really had lost the plot this time.

Goodness knows his head ached enough beforehand. He had a very pretty, very talented but highly strung wife. Sometimes he wished he had married someone a little more placid and plain. In turn, she sometimes wished she had married someone with a little more, ‘Get up and go’ as her father was fond of saying. Then there were the twins – he adored them but wished for a volume control and an off button.

The shifts as Danny’s carer were not that demanding but they did seem to go on forever sometimes. And they were tiring. So things in Michael’s head had been far from perfect for a while but at least, from Golden Frog’s point of view, there was plenty of room to stretch one’s legs - figuratively speaking. Indeed there were virtually whole hemispheres of Michael’s brain that were hardly used at all.

‘Ahhh, stupid damn human!’ The Japanese accented words echoed around his head as he walked along the corridor to the kitchen. It was that voice again. Michael had recently started thinking in a strange accent, Japanese certainly, but a bit ‘London’ too. Too much late-night TV and one too many 12 hour shifts was Michael’s hasty self-diagnosis.

‘What’s happening to me?’ Michael worried out loud, talking to himself as he approached the kitchen. Even his emotions did not feel like his own. He was usually so calm, bordering on depressed if truth were known, but now he often felt angry for no explicable reason. The anger was not so bad it just did not feel like it was ‘his’.

Michael heard the voice in his head say, ‘Hey woman! Get dinner now!’ but just managed to avoid saying it. Nathalie who was making lunch gave him an odd look, suspicious but curious. Standing at the kitchen door in Danny’s old house he dearly wanted to passionately embrace her. He also felt compelled to order her to cook him a seafood stir-fry. No sane person would ever order Nathalie about. He didn’t even like seafood.

Michael felt his world was becoming more vague and uncertain by the hour. He had been having very strange dreams recently which added to his sense of the surreal. They frequently involved ornamental ponds and lovely cool fountains. And lily pads. He had developed a huge obsession about lily pads.

Driving home from work, Michael sniffed the air, ‘Water, salt, fish?’ he thought. He skilfully parked Julie the Jalopy (Michael felt the need to name all his vehicles). He sniffed the air again and followed the scent around the corner. He was standing outside the pet-shop. He had smelt live fish from a good 50 yards away. The smell had reached him even through the background sensory hum of city and the wafts of nearby Chinese restaurant. Smelling live fish like that: really very strange. And even more bizarrely for the poor misguided soul formerly known as Michael, but who was now merely part-Michael, was the aquatically inspired desire that flooded his mind.

‘I’ll have that one,’ said Michael authoritatively to the astonished shop-keeper. He was pointing at one of their most expensive tanks, ‘And throw the works in with it too.’

Throwing caution to the wind he had decided to treat himself to a top-of-the-range fish tank - just like that, no dithering at all. It had cost him a quarter of a month's wages. That voice in his

head had just said, 'Stuff damn cost!' in that unsettling half-Japanese accent of his. Michael's old self regained the upper hand. His anxiety returned. How was he going to explain this all to his wife?

It had taken some hours to set everything up that evening. Luckily it was his wife's turn to put the twins to bed so he had the lounge to himself. Finally, Michael sat back, cup of sweet milky coffee in hand, and relaxed in the small laminate-floored lounge. He admired the new aquarium that now dominated the room. He was going to tell his wife that the tank was Danny's but he had changed his mind and insisted Michael had it.

As Michael watched the bubbles aerating the tank, a distressing pulsing sensation sneaked up on him like a thief in the night. His entire head began to beat, drum-like, to a dislocated rhythm. His brain became an electrified liquid, firing off thousands of miniature lightning strikes. He tried to call out for help to his wife, she must have fallen asleep upstairs, but no words would come. 'I'm going to die!' Michael thought in sheer panic. The sensation moved continuously like waves of molten sound. Hot sparks of lava slowly spread their red tentacles down from his brain along his spine. Armies of fire began to course up and down his body with a life of their own.

He held his head in his hands and with a crawling horror Michael wondered when a great pain would inevitably stab him like a knife. But the greater torment never came. It was almost more unnerving. Something was about to strike him down forever. He wondered if he was having a heart attack or some strange kind of seizure. All this sensation mere moments later, just vanished as suddenly as it had made its unwelcome entrance.

As Michael noticed his pounding heart thudding in his chest, he observed he was still alive. For the first time in a long time he felt himself flood with feelings of intense gratitude, gratitude for just being alive.

Michael tried to convince himself that he hadn't really experienced what his feelings, shaking hands and cold sweat told him that he had. It was just another figment of his imagination, the kind he'd been having far too often recently. When he had calmed down sufficiently he realised with a numb horror that it hadn't ended.

Something else was going on. This time it was icy cool and was slowly spreading from his toes upwards. Before he knew it an utterly blissful chilled sensation engulfed his whole body. It melted away every trouble, every fear, as surely as a fire-hose entrained upon a small camp-fire. It was as though his very soul was the most beautiful flowing water that had ever existed.

This soul-water was sculptured within an endlessly beautiful ocean. He was separate, but somehow not separate, at the same time. He could think of something or nothing, everyone or no one. It was the sort of wonderful that comes around just once upon a blue moon.

Whilst he was in this beautiful state, Golden Frog appeared before Michael's mind's eye in all his full Biblical glory. There were trumpets and angels and a cloak made of pure golden sun. Golden Frog's voice was as crystal clear as the shimmering air. The frog appeared to be suspended above the Earth in mid-air.

'I am Golden Frog. Congratulations on the loan of your hardware. All you need to do is obey my every command and this, this fantastic feeling, will be all yours, whenever I, I mean you, want.'

'Yes we can!' said Michael feeling as if he had suddenly detached himself. He didn't want to waste a second of the surrounding experience in mere conversation.

'If you want to experience all this again you need to do me a little favour.' Golden Frog knew that Michael would have happily BBQ'd his right arm to feel it again. 'We have to do some, let's say, rally driving, tomorrow. You may have to loan me your body.'



‘Okay,’ said Michael, who was convinced he was getting a fantastic deal. He even felt slightly sorry for poor old Golden Frog. The frog smiled an enigmatic, slightly threatening smile and then he was gone in a puff of yellow smoke.

Of course he hadn't really gone. He had just turned the lights off and retired to his bedroom in the reticular area of Michael's brain stem. The feelings melted away and Michael gazed peacefully at the fish-tank.

Michael really was no match for Golden Frog. Danny, on the other hand, was one of the very few who could have put up a fight. It wasn't easy holding out against a super-charged mind-entity.

Golden Frog was on his third incarnation upon this world and he was only 50 years old at this moment. He could live up to 500 years on a more amenable planet. Here on Earth 80 years was about all he could take in one go. Three lifetimes spent trying to get off this dump and head back home and now he had fallen in with the most sinister secret agency on this whole forsaken planet! What could be worse than the agency with no name? It was an organisation feared throughout the galaxy. But how else was he to get back home? He had tried and failed so many times now. He felt sorry for himself for a moment or two longer before returning to his default mode of righteous anger.

‘That stupid agency. They think they control me! They think I am just a commodity!’ Golden Frog reflected, a little sadness mixing in with his vitriol. He would make the world laugh at them, and then destroy them if they did not hold good to their promise to help him home. If anyone could do it, he could. In the meantime it suited that they believed he was just a potent weapon, a useful tool.

Sure, they didn't completely trust him; he was much too powerful for that. So they had fitted him with a Mindsnapper, stolen technology from the Fargones. The Fargones were nearly as advanced as the Inter-stellar Mind-frogs, of which race Golden Frog was a part. The agency thought that Golden Frog was merely an 'engineered' mind-entity, a sentient mind-programme from a planet unimaginably far away. They did not suspect he had memories going back for millennia.

The agency did know he was lonely and unable to make the journey back home, wherever that was. This, and the Mindsnapper, gave them their power over him. If Golden Frog manipulated Danny in the way required, the agency might reward him. They said they could assist him home. But how much were they promises really worth?

The next day, despite the distractions of the twins, the strange sensations continued to echo in the dark cavern that had become Michael's mind. Michael had felt uneasy that morning. He wasn't quite sure what reality was any more.

The feelings the night before had been thrilling as well as frightening but the sheer awesome newness of it all lingered long in the mind. Maybe he should go to the doctors he told himself. They would probably only give him some pill though and tell him he was working too hard. He didn't feel quite in control anymore, but somehow, that didn't seem to matter.

Michael went to work and as the day wore on he had more of those strange sinister feelings. He observed the moods passing through him but felt detached as if he was a traveller wandering through a train station in some far corner of the world. He'd done his utmost to ignore any intrusions upon his emotions. Otherwise he'd tried to explain them all away, to be rational, to be sane.

Michael, being at the mercy of Golden Frog's merest whim, offered little resistance. Golden Frog simply planted an intense desire to walk out Danny's house and drive. Michael couldn't

help but laugh out loud as he drove off, his part-worn tyres spitting dust on the grey tarmac. With Nathalie out shopping for the boy's return from hospital he was the only carer on duty. Sarah would have to fend for herself.

'And,' butted in Golden Frog to Michael telepathically, ignoring the poor quality of Michael's passing thoughts. 'You can drive REAL fast. Now that'll be REALLY RELAXING'.

Michael's foot caressed the accelerator pedal as he sped away. He began to drool slightly as various sensual hallucinations swept past his mind's nose. Michael was getting hot under the collar and somewhat damp. He gripped the wheel in a confident manner as he sped up Smithdown Avenue past the enormous new supermarket.

'Sod the amber light, I'll just jump it,' Michael thought, acting completely out of character. Michael narrowly missed the front end of a large white van with its contents of one angry builder and a bewildered Alsatian dog. Michael was impressed with his new-found lack of restraint but hoped the man in the van did not catch up with him and give him a good thumping. Michael did not like fighting.

As he passed the Women's Hospital he could feel streaming sensations in his legs and a wonderful warm feeling in his belly. Suddenly, he was overcome with feelings of pure pleasure. A few seconds later it all went black. With his hands still on the driving wheel he passed out cold. The speedometer said forty miles per hour.

## **Chapter Eleven - Where it Hurtz to Hire-A-Car**

‘Demons in my dream,’ hummed Golden Frog singing along to the car radio whilst conducting the music with his left arm. ‘It’s so great having a human body again Goldy Boy,’ he told himself cheerfully. Michael’s mind was completely knocked out. It had been so easy. A child could have done it.

Golden Frog was taking a substantial risk. A mind-entity like him just didn’t have the right amount of energy at the right frequency to run something as power-hungry as a human body.

At best Frog could hope to last out for an hour. If he killed Michael’s body accidentally he would die too. If he left it too long before awakening Michael’s mind Golf could become disabled himself. So he got to do the rally driving personally - but at considerable risk. But being Golden Frog he wasn’t in the least bit ruffled. In fact the next ten minutes or so were going to be decidedly hell-raising.

Michael, being a poorly paid minion of health-care, couldn’t afford a great car. If things didn’t get better financially he might have to start cycling to work soon which would be good news for his belly at least. The means of transport that best reflected his current family situation was a large but aging Peugeot in motorway grey. In other words, dirt coloured - with the left wing mirror hanging at a slight angle. Michael had been promising to fix it for weeks but he never got around to it. However, if one had the reactions of Golden Frog and were telepathic and futurepathic too, a risk or two in terms of mechanical hardware could be afforded.

Golden Frog screeched around the corner into Catharine Street. The back end of the car skidded dangerously knocking out the front bumper of a private cab waiting at the lights. Golden Frog glanced in his rear-view mirror to see an angry, shaven-headed driver getting out the car, ranting and shaking his fists in anger.

Golden Frog smiled an evil smile. He hadn’t had this much fun for ages. Zipping over the amber lights at Myrtle Street Golden Frog was nearly there. He hoped he didn’t kill Michael. That would be such a hassle. He couldn’t be doing with another incarnation - not now when he was having such a good time.

The car wheels screamed as Michael’s body, looking menacingly happy, pulled the steering wheel this way and that. Michael’s vehicle skidded a hand brake turn through the red light and left onto London Road – nearly there. The chassis looking as though it was about to part company with the rest of the car as he screeched down the hill.

Meanwhile, in the hospital at the bottom of that same road, Golden Frog’s frightened prey, namely Danny and Ben, were trying desperately to get out of the hospital foyer.

Golden Frog thought it would be suitably dramatic to manoeuvre the car so its rear end went over the pavement knocking out a bollard or two as he approached the entrance to the hospital. He was building himself up for the grand finale.

He was going to drive straight through the plate glass doors of the hospital entrance. He could then re-enter Danny’s mind whilst Danny was in a state of shock. He had better not hurt him, or the agency would have Golden Frog hung up to dry. With smoke rising up from the rear end of the car and the back bumper and exhaust trailing behind noisily, Golden Frog, and Michael’s body, hurtled toward the hospital foyer. ‘This is going to be *fun*,’ squealed Golden Frog to no one in particular.

Golden Frog had exceptional time-streaming abilities - although the agency didn’t know that yet. Golf could jump through the time-stream by a few hours or even days on occasions. As Golf

was using most of his energy to power the human body he had stolen the best he could manage right now was a remote-viewing of the very near future. Golf checked ahead a few minutes. Everything seemed okay, they were nervous but still in the hospital foyer – it was all on course.

Thanks to disturbances in the 'medium' Danny and Ben had been aware of the situation. Danny was already on the counter-attack. The first thing he had done was to shift zones. His body went into a trance. Danny thought that his best chance to crack the devious frog was to get under his skin and unbalance him. Danny had gone into the Earth-realm of thought - the Thought Realm. This was a mirror of our world, but not an exact one. It is like our world but made from more ethereal matter.

Once he was fully in the Thought Realm Danny homed in on Golden Frog's mind emanations. Danny could do this without being noticed. Danny tampered with Golden Frog's personal effects. He made the smallest, silkiest adjustment. He lowered the frog's personal confidence level by the slimmest of touches. Danny also left a small 'fingerprint' behind. He gave his work an imaginary, fatherly pat on the head. He rushed back to his body and landed with a thump, nearly bursting out of his own eye sockets.

Back in the more material world some action was needed and quick. Danny's body couldn't take many more unpleasant surprises. He felt marginally lighter than a ton of lead. Danny turned to Ben, who was wide-eyed and frightened. His look said it all. They needed action and all he had was syrup-like slowness. Fortunately, Ben always had a unique perspective on things. Danny believed Ben would somehow know what to do.

'Quick, let's have attacks! They'll panic and rush us out of here!' Ben said telepathically. Danny wasn't sure if this was the right course of action but it was too late. Ben had already started.

They both sat bolt upright in their wheelchairs. They looked like sickly goldfish that had been plucked out of the water and electrocuted. Spontaneous, violent jerking of limbs followed. Their faces gurned hideously. Their facial colour turned a whiter shade of white. Their eyes rolled back in their sockets revealing a bloodshot greyness. Next came the full body convulsions. These could be a bit frightening even for Danny. Cynthia and Trevor were appalled.

Cynthia had never seen such acute epileptic attacks happen so suddenly. Danny and Ben's convulsions seemed almost synchronised. It struck Cynthia as quite surreal but she didn't dwell on it. Her reflexes snapped into action. Trevor's face was twitching with fright but Cynthia's cutting voice unfroze him.

'They're going into status, where's casualty from here? QUICK! You run with Ben and I'll push Danny' said Cynthia. Trevor pointed to the corridor to casualty. He scooped Ben up with one arm. Trevor ran down the corridor with a bag of skin and bones that was still fitting. Danny was much heavier. Cynthia pushed the wheelchair's lever to manual and struggled mightily. The chair with its various attachments banged into legs and walls as she half crashed, half steered her way toward the Accident and Emergency corridor.

Trevor had gone into professional mode and ran straight into the double trolley resuscitation room in the main treatment area. Luckily it was empty. One of the casualty nurses was about to shout at him but he explained breathlessly,

'We've got two epileptic patients not long out of High Dependency. They've gone into epileptic status in the lobby.'

The casualty nurse briskly strode off to get the house officer. One of the assistants started preparing syringes and other things that would be needed. Trevor placed Ben on the furthest

trolley, pulling up the padded sidebars to protect him and then rushed back to help Cynthia with Danny.

## **Chapter Twelve - No Body Does it Better**

‘Mind-tricking scum!’ spat Michael who was the unwitting host of a mind-entity in a state of intense hatred. It was a condition Michael’s body was completely unprepared for, but bizarrely found quite refreshing.

Michael was a reserved character most of the time. He was not very good at voicing his inner feelings. He kept them all bottled up, which was a situation his body was less than happy about. Being almost psychotically angry was a step up the ladder as far as his body was concerned. In fact Michael’s body wasn’t at all sure if he ever wanted the Mike mind back.

Golden Frog was speechless. Danny was more of an adversary than he had reckoned with. Somehow he had managed to tamper with his own mind-waves without him even noticing until it was too late. Golden Frog went cold. The pleasure, the confidence just evaporated into thin air. There was but one thought on his mind now. Danny and Ben will *pay* for this.

But now he couldn’t quite trust himself - who knows what Danny had done? Was he too confident? Was he over-compensating? Smashing the car through the plate glass lobby doors suddenly lost all its appeal. He’d been tricked. Golden Frog changed his mind. Instead of gatecrashing the hospital lobby he quietly found a parking space (marked disabled only) and then parked at an angle across it. He made haste for the casualty department on foot.

In the casualty department Danny and Ben had been stabilised. The seizures had finally abated.

‘You’ve got this all under control now Jane by the looks of it?’ said Dr Farma in his baritone voice glancing at the two boys. Jane, the senior nurse eyed his tired, thin frame

‘Yeah no problem. Think I’ll give that next lot of valium now though. They’ll be fine. I’ll page you if Mrs Thompkins goes off again,’ Jane replied. Dr Farma glanced at Jane and tried not to look at her large bosom pressing against her starched white uniform. He had liked Jane for a long time.

Dr Farma tramped off the casualty unit and hoped he’d get an hour or two’s sleep before being paged again.

In his mind Golden Frog tracked Danny and Ben. His futurepathic abilities told him that a Dr Biggles Farma was about to enter the loo by the corridor leading to casualty. A few moments later, after checking that no one was watching, he kicked the toilet door wide open and touched the shocked doctor with Michael’s left hand. Sat on the lavatory was the one place Dr Farma usually got any peace on shift. Golf then suddenly and violently convulsed Michael’s body. The man looked at him with utter fear.

Five years’ worth of Michael’s precious life-force shot straight out of his body, through Michael’s finger and into Dr Farma’s neck. Sure, a tazer-gun would have done the job just as well but Golf was generous when spending other people’s life-force. Plus Michael, being a carer, did not usually carry a tazer. Five years’ worth in one shot should be enough to blow the poor doctor’s mind (and burn Michael’s finger-tip). For a split second Dr Farma’s eyes lit up as though he had understood everything that had eluded him all these years. Why hadn’t they taught him all this at medical school? And then he stopped breathing. He went limp and slid sideways from the toilet.

It was sure tempting - maybe he could just jump straight from Michael’s body into Dr Farma’s. That would be the perfect disguise. But that had one major drawback. Entities like Golden Frog were made to surf the host’s body-mind. The Interstellar Mind-Frogs, the race of

which Golf was part, didn't like to think of their lives as parasitical. They gave more than they took in their humble opinion. However, fully taking over a human body was dangerous. It was a bit like leaving a child to steer a bus - a bus without power-steering. Golf just didn't have enough raw energy to take over another body. He'd have to stay with Michael and hope no-one noticed an additional doctor wandering through casualty.

As Golden Frog was stripping Dr Farma of his theatre gowns, a small jolt occurred and the medic started to breathe again in short, shallow gasps. Oh well, thought Golden Frog malevolently. If this doctor does survive, at least he can be very proud of his beautifully medical, but tragically short death. Shame he isn't aware enough to appreciate it though, Golf reflected. Hanging loose in Dr Farma's surgical trousers and shirt, Golden Frog burst out of the loo. He snapped the doctor's ID card into place and made straight for the resuscitation room.

Danny's done me a favour, thought Golden Frog. My original plan was messy. Danny has put *himself* into a suitable state of shock. I'll just hop along there and jump right in. He won't even know what's hit him. All Golf needed to do was to get close to Danny whilst he was in his current shocked condition. Then he could make the transfer into Danny's unguarded mind. Feeling both more determined and sporting a new found spurt of confidence, Michael a.k.a. Golden Frog a.k.a. Dr Farma, burst onto the scene.

The nurses were way too busy to pay much attention as Dr Farma's impostor quietly positioned himself alongside Danny. The impostor's hands slid without thinking toward the resuscitation trolley and the cardiac-shocker machine upon it. Danny and Ben had stopped fitting now the strong sedatives they had been given took effect.

Golden Frog felt Michael's left foot slide itself imperceptibly under the shocker trolley hooking the wheels and flicking the trolley closer to Danny. He couldn't help but caress the shocker paddles - they felt so good, so smooth.

Golden Frog had intended to jump straight back into Danny's mind. But what harm could it do to teach the horrible little sod a bodily type of lesson first? He would still have plenty of time to make the final transfer. A few thousand volts to the head would do Danny's clarity of mind such good. It was like an itch that just cried out to be scratched. Golf knew exactly how many electrons Danny's brain could handle before frying itself. In fact he could have placed the electrons in neat little geometric patterns *and* counted them if he had of wanted to.

With a smile, Golden Frog activated the charging sequence on the machine. Michael's body was salivating in anticipation as the machine let out its high-pitched squealing sound. This indicated that it was charged up and ready to disgorge its contents of pent-up electricity.

To the utter astonishment of the Jane the nurse, who had just come back into the double trolley area, Ben suddenly jerked himself upright and coolly looked around - but with his eyes still closed. Ben clocked Danny and focused on him with his 'third' psychic eye.

Jane just stood and stared as she saw a blast of chilled blue air shoot straight from Ben's forehead at Danny. Almost in slow motion she now realised that there was also a strange man in surgical gowns stood right by Danny. Why hadn't she seen him before? With horror she saw that the man was about to discharge the cardiac shocker paddles straight into their poor patient's temples. This was definitely against the rules.

Danny felt a crushing shot of mind-numbing ice penetrate his consciousness like a crossbow bolt flying through custard. All of Danny's mind-fog snapped clear as though he had been suddenly tossed into the freezing Arctic sea. Upside down he looked into his attacker's eyes and had three very clear thoughts in quick succession. They were - Michael, Golden Frog, and Quick!

With an almighty push of his heavy body Danny threw himself backward like an angry fish gasping for life on a ship's deck. Danny's hardened head rammed straight into Michael's abdomen.

Winded, Michael fell forward just as the plates were discharging. As he slipped forwards the paddles made contact with Michael's own head, electrifying his brain. Golden Frog was forcibly ejected. A squid-like jet of luminescent yellow shot out of the room and into the main casualty corridor. Although the corridor was well populated the only person who noticed the jet of yellow was a paranoid schizophrenic - and no one would believe her.

Golden Frog was on his own now. He was too far from Danny to attempt the jump. He'd messed up big style and might have to pay with his life. Outside of a host-mind Golden Frog's life expectancy could be measured in seconds.

Ben found his consciousness resurfacing despite the drugs. With his eyes still shut he contacted Danny via the mind-waves.

'Did you manage to get rid of Golden Frog?' said Ben telepathically.

'Yes, I think so, thanks to you. I went to the Thought Realm, found Golden Frog's mind vibes and then tweaked a bit. I lowered his confidence but left a trace, a fingerprint. Figured he'd find it, get angry and overcompensate - make him vulnerable to that little mistake we needed.'

Ben was impressed. 'So he decides to fry you instead of just jumping straight back in?'

'Clouded his judgment I guess. Bought us some time. I didn't know if it would work out but couldn't think of anything else.'

'But you had him figured Danny.'

'Thanks mate.'

Meanwhile, Golden Frog was realising with increasing horror that he was still homeless. Merely a passing vapour in the hospital air, he had also received a menacing mind-message from the agency. The message was all in pictures and feelings.

If roughly translated into language the message would read as follows: 'If by some miracle you survive this complete mess-up of yours, you had better put things right. Get back into Danny the neurode's head and carry out the original instructions. Otherwise you will live to regret it, if you are lucky. Your other option is much, much worse.'

The accompanying pictures hit Golden Frog's psychic soft spot. He felt himself quake in shock. The agency's Mindsnapper was vicious - even a moment of it went beyond any merely physical pain.

Golden Frog had only a few seconds left. He was desperately seeking alternative lodgings. He needed someone in a state of shock, with, at the very least, a Golden Frog sized gap in the neural spacing. Additionally the victim needed to be within a short distance. Golden Frog scanned his environment feverishly. The ultimatums were still echoing in his mind.

Golden Frog happened upon an unguarded mind nearby. He was a professional football player. He had taken a knock to the head in training, suffering moderate concussion. He would be as right as rain in the morning. Or, he would have been, had he not made the acquaintance of a certain frog-like individual.

An hour passed and the police had long since arrived. The real Dr Farma had been found and was now in a bed on the observation ward having his blood pressure done. Michael was slowly regaining consciousness, as himself, on a trolley in a small cubicle off the main Casualty corridor. Sitting outside on a cheap plastic chair was a pretty blond-haired policewoman patiently keeping guard.



Danny and Ben had been rushed straight back to the ward and had been moved to the higher risk beds outside the nurse's office. Neither was too pleased about that but they weren't in much of a position to argue. Cynthia and Trevor were drinking coffee in the canteen: milk, one sugar. The agency was seriously displeased. Golden Frog was sad, mad and dangerous, but mostly the former and the latter.

Michael wouldn't know who had hit him (Danny had, in the abdomen, with his head). Or, who had electrified him (Golden Frog was the culprit, albeit accidentally). Michael didn't even know that his body and mind had been taken for a ride by an alien mind entity, an entity working for the dreaded agency but planning its own betrayal. Michael wouldn't even remember any of the recent action as his own mind had been slammed fast in the freezer during the last few hours.

The doctors had told him he would need a period of sick leave and some Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, maybe some Neuro-Linguistic Programming too if he was lucky. He had suffered a mental breakdown apparently. To Michael, life was just a bit foggier than normal. He was looking forward to getting home and seeing the kids. A bit of time off would be great. He even missed his wife. Bizarrely, he also found he could not wait to see his new aquarium and to get some fish. He still had not told his wife that he had spent the last of his pay-cheque on that tank. Hopefully the current account would get overlooked in the confusion. There were pluses all round Michael was beginning to think.

Danny and Ben, though less than pleased to find themselves back under close observation on the ward were counting their blessings.

## **Chapter Thirteen - On Carrots and Sticks**

Some weeks passed and Danny and Ben had found themselves back home from hospital. The novelty of being home had been short-lived. The best part of coming back had of course been Sarah's face. It was worth going to hospital just to see her beautiful, large brown eyes light up on their return. Danny could still feel the spot where she had kissed him on the cheek as he was lowered from the back of the bus in his wheelchair. Although the homecoming kiss had warmed his cheek for what seemed like hours there was still that sadness in Sarah's eyes, a look that kept haunting him. Just beneath the glee was an unseen grief. A pain that seemed to be asking, 'Why do you keep leaving me Danny?' Reflecting on that, he felt he really should have made the effort to go to school today. He could not pretend any more. He definitely was isolating himself. It was just too busy for him there, he said making an effort to shore up the cracks in his conscience. But he still felt a bit guilty for not going - it would have cheered Sarah if nothing else. Maybe it would have underlined the fact that he did really care about her.

Today was a rainy afternoon with no sunshine to cheer his soul. Sarah and Ben had gone off to school taking the last of the cheerfulness with them. He felt alone. Grey uniform clouds stretched from horizon to horizon like a lid on the sky. Danny's thoughts had drifted back to that dark period he had experienced when he was about fourteen. Danny had known three months of utter hell. He'd lost hope completely. He had stared into a black abyss and an inhuman chill had stared back. Death could be no escape. He couldn't be any more dead than he was already. Dying would be worse, if that were possible. Maybe that knowledge, that feeling, had saved his life, for he carried on despite the pain.

The single worst thing about the whole period had been the inability to sleep. He hadn't had a single moment of peaceful sleep for the whole intense time. The doctors had told him that he must be sleeping a little but he didn't believe them.

Danny had felt completely alone during this time. It was not a normal aloneness. It was an unnatural aloneness, a bereavement of the soul. It left a surgical absence in his heart.

Some disturbing paranormal events had occurred then. Most of them he'd been able to forget or dismiss. The night he had managed to get himself down the road and had seen the rivers of blood pouring from the privet bushes - that had doubtless been a hallucination. He knew that to be true now. But the rain - he wasn't imagining that. Every time he had gone to go outside it had started to rain. His social worker had sighed once, 'Here's the rain again, I should have expected that,' giving Danny a meaningful look. Danny's courage had won out in the end, but there were still aspects of that time that threatened him. Certainly the ever-present rain was no hallucination. Looking back now, it was all just part of the, 'Stuff that happened'.

That period had ended out of the blue. Somewhere deep inside, a spark of soul, a flame of hope came into being. Getting better wasn't anything miraculous; it was just a tiny, tiny step in the right direction.

From that day on he had gathered strength. He soon had a proper nights' sleep. And now, a few years later, his mind was as clear as a hummingbird flying through the sky and as steady as an oak tree's deepest root.

His life was certainly weird. He lived in a half-dozen worlds some of which hardly anyone else had even seen. But he knew he was sane. He'd seen sanity from the outside. He knew what it looked like.

Danny put mouth to joystick and a fraction of a moment later the electric motor turned over and the wheelchair glided forward with a slight hum. He took a glance at the LED light by the joystick, the chair was fully charged.

As soon as Danny's bedroom door had eased itself shut on its hydraulic mechanism the wide screen TV flickered into life. Danny grabbed the electric cord to the TV and with a deft yank of his mouth pulled the plug right out the wall socket. However, out of the sandstorm on the screen materialised a man's face. The eyes reminded Danny of one of the faces from Queen's video, Bohemian Rhapsody. It sat very still but moved its gaze from left to right with a suspicious glare.

Some time passed and Danny slowly realised that the picture screen, which so entranced him, was actually a close up of the inside of a double-barrelled gun. Suddenly, almost as if the screen knew Danny had decoded the image, the picture changed. The double-barrelled tubes telescoped away to be replaced by two blood shot eyes in uncomfortable close up, staring right at him. The eyes had malevolence to them, a certain menacing quality that was hard to define. And there in the pupils of the eyes he could make out the reflection of his deceased mother quietly weeping. He could see the unspoken sorrow in her that had quietly eaten her life away until there was nothing living left.

This isn't funny thought Danny. He whirled his wheelchair around in an angry flurry grabbing the buzzer cord with his teeth and yanking hard. The buzzer sounded, the call box nearly coming off the wall. The red light on the call box deactivated of its own accord.

'Don't be silly,' said a deep, Oxford-educated type of a voice from within the recesses of Danny's own brain. The vibrations of the accent made Danny's nose tingle. A lean, neat, brown-haired man in his late forties with a friendly but deceptive, thin face appeared on the screen surrounded by a background of ocean blue.

'Hello Danny,' it was Alistair Civil, head of a certain secretive and rather sinister agency.

'Spare me the f-friendly routine,' said Danny in a low quiet voice. 'What's the deal now?' he added telepathically with a twinge of tiredness.

'Can we not at least be civil? I would not want to not live up to my name. There is no need to make us into your enemy Danny. There are much better ways to play this game I can assure you Mr Sola. Your skipping the country when our friend, Mr Frog was away on business, caused us some, what can we say? Logistical difficulties,' said the on-screen Alistair scratching his nose with his beloved gold-nibbed fountain pen. Alistair thought that an electric shock might help Danny see things a little more clearly.

'I see, but, what's that to do with *ME!*' cried Danny in considerable pain.

'Whatssup Danny?' drawled Michael who had heard Danny's muted cry as he passed the closed door.

'Nuthin,' growled Danny, who was still trembling from the electric shock his wheelchair had just imparted.

'That wasn't funny,' Danny hissed coldly to the TV.

'It was quite amusing from where I'm sitting, but please, accept my most sincere apologies. But now I've got your full attention, and really that's all I wanted, could I just enquire if our very special offer could persuade you to keep to your end of the bargain? Now I know you're thinking, "Well I didn't make any bargain." But believe me it's all there in the small print if you'd have bothered to read it. This is an offer you can't refuse. I mean that literally of course.'

'Yes, I get your drift but...'

‘Let me interrupt you Danny. You see we're offering you everything you have always wanted. All we want in return is a loan of a little of your consciousness, and your help with a small journey. It would be an adventure. You would have fun...’

‘Mmhm?’ Danny stopped slobbering angrily and looked up from his crouched over position in his wheelchair.

‘It’s like this,’ continued Alistair, ‘Thanks to your little escapade, Golden Frog had to evacuate to the mind of a nearby football player. If you let nice Mr Golden Frog back into your brain we'll give you that whole new, freshly grown body - just as soon as the lab-time is available of course. All that and much much more is all yours when you and the frog entity have finished the mission - which sounds pretty exciting to me. Boy, I wish I were doing it myself. And when you get that new physique you'll have so many girlfriends you won't know what to do with them all. Plus you'll be helping people too. It may not look like it sometimes but we are not all bad you know? We move in mysterious ways.’

‘That sounds okay. I guess,’ said Danny.

‘Be at the big match this Saturday. Golf can hop over to you at half-time. Three VIP tickets will arrive tomorrow. I don't think you'll have a problem finding someone to go with you.’

Alistair hung up the black candle-stick phone telepathically, replacing the vase-shaped receiver back into its cradle. The phone was attached to a black box on the floor, a psychic-interface device. Danny was left staring at a now blanked out TV screen.

Danny was sorely tempted. He couldn't afford to let the agency know that he didn't intend to take up their special offer. Their mind reading thought-tubes would be homed in on him right now. Danny locked his true intentions away, surrounded by glowing violet light, deep within the neocortex of his brain. The agency's thought tubes continued to tumble quietly in space, navigating their lonely satellite vistas. They were none the wiser.

A dark, inhuman rasping voice echoed within Alistair's brain. ‘We cannot trust him. Follow the boy.’

He nodded his assent to the telepathic voice, ‘Yes master,’ Alistair replied very quietly. If you knew him exceedingly well the very slightest trace of sarcasm might have been detected in his reply.

A little while later, Alistair picked up the receiver of the antique candlestick telephone admiring the vintage red cloth that covered the connecting wires. Absent-mindedly he brushed a non-existent speck of dust from the red-leather topped desk. He entered a number using the round movable dial. The analogue phone clicked seven times, and then rang out twice before being answered.

‘What did the tubes pick up on the neurode Jack?’

‘Daniel Sola sir?’

‘We are not monitoring any other neurodes are we? Unless I am not being told something Jack - which I doubt.’

‘Nothing sir. Nothing at all, the neurode must have shut himself off from the thought-tubes. Our best remote seeker got zero too,’ the officer replied hastily.

‘Our friend isn't playing ball. We'll go to Plan B. I want the frog entity transferred to the one who calls himself, ‘The Leader’. Kidnap the footballer if you have to – I'd like that done tonight if you would. I want the Leader to then head up a special surveillance team. Wherever that boy goes we're going too.’

‘Right, sir.’

Alistair hung up.

The next day shortly before Ten AM, a green overall wearing delivery man rang the doorbell. The door was, in any case, wide open. Nathalie took the envelope from the man. She signed in the digitised box on his mobile device. Nathalie was impressed - Danny only usually received letters from the TV company or the RSPCA.

The blue envelope read in expensively hand calligraphed blue Indian ink:

*Mr Danny Sola Esquire  
Number 12  
Zig Zag Drive  
Liverpool  
L18 2HU*

Inside were three gold VIP tickets to this Saturday's football game.

This Friday was the monthly shopping day and it was Fred and Carol's turn to take the boys off into town. Nathalie was going out with Sarah to have their hair done and enjoy some beauty treatments. Nathalie enjoyed going out with Sarah but Danny and Ben were harder work. Danny didn't have family so much as employees. Just in this company some of the employees rather pitied their boss - although all of them admired his sheer stubbornness

## **Chapter Fourteen - An Invite from Another Dimension**

Nathalie was probably the only carer Danny dare not mess around. There was just something about her that made people toe the line. Perhaps it was due to her having four boisterous boys of her own, but she certainly knew how to handle Danny. In a record-breaking thirty minutes Danny had been washed, dressed, shaved and teeth cleaned.

Danny, using a deft combination of wheelchair movements and yanks of his neck and mouth gathered his wallet from under the pillow and began trundling toward the lift in his electric wheelchair. Ben would be along shortly. Fred, one of the part-time carers, would have Ben's morning routine as his first job of the day. Ben could be got up and dressed in a mere quarter of an hour – if he was in the mood to cooperate.

It was a quarter to eight by the time Danny got to the dining room. Craning his head upward like a tired tortoise, he slowly took in the splendid high ceiling of the dining room. The original plaster architrave still curled its way elegantly upon the top of the wall. Danny could look at it for hours, in fact he often did. With a short electric swirl he settled into his usual spot by the far window, next to the fire escape. He looked at the early morning mist swirling like so many tired dancers whilst the damp air still clung to the trees. Danny looked sadly at the bright new green grass where the old holly tree used to be.

Sarah sauntered in cradling a mug of tea in her delicate hands. Everything she does is elegant, Danny thought.

'You okay Danny mate? You look miles away there?' she enquired gently.

'You know me, always d-dreaming,' Danny replied.

'Let me know when they let you out of la-la land then!' she laughed good-naturedly and touched him on the shoulder. Danny smiled.

'Who you taking to the match on Saturday? Can't believe you've got VIP tickets,' Sarah said.

'Oh I dunno. You fancy coming?'

The conversation trailed off and Danny soon found himself reminiscing about the Sapient Realm. Ben wandered off to the Sapient Realm much more often than Danny. Danny was careful - spend too much time there and one might not make the journey back. Or more importantly, one might lose the will to go back - a not insignificant risk in Danny's estimation. But Ben had less to lose. His time was more limited. Danny reflected how Thinking Stone had said that the old holly tree was just pushing through into this realm. The tree's real home was in the Sapient Realm.

Danny noisily ate his breakfast of scrambled eggs, slurped up from the specially fashioned plate. No semi-institutionalised breakfast would be complete without some lukewarm, limp toast. Next was sweet, milky coffee served through a re-usable straw in a spill-proof plastic mug. Breakfast was not good when Carol was in the kitchen.

'Hey Sola, you ready for the off?' boomed Fred.

Fred's girlfriend and fellow carer Carol had come in to help out this morning. Fred looked as though he had run out of t-shirts that would fit him. He was only in his late twenties but sported a good sized beer belly and always looked slightly unwashed. Carol was a pretty and petite brunette. She had only just turned eighteen but she was as bossy as hell. No one knew what she saw in Fred. Together, they assisted Danny into one of the two waiting black cabs via their short foldaway side-ramps.

Ben arrived at the door under his own steam. Sat in his wheelchair, he was also assisted into position in the other cab. The drivers secured the chairs, returned the side-ramps to their respective boots and pulled away along the gently curving drive.

Looking out the cab's window, Danny settled into a daydream of his own, ignoring Fred who was playing on his phone. It was dream populated by the silhouettes of people - the debris of an early Friday morning in Liverpool.

They soon arrived at their destination. Fresh air breezed across Danny's face as he wheeled backwards down the black cab's side ramp. Danny put mouth to joystick and began his electric trundle toward the shopping centre entrance. He took no notice of the departing carer, Fred, shuffling off into the distance.

'Slow down Danny, wait for me and Ben,' shouted Carol above the din of passing traffic. Danny did a nifty turn to face the struggling Carol as she pushed Ben up the slope in his small manual wheelchair. Ben's arms flailed as he tried to shout instructions to Carol.

Carol was angry with herself for letting Fred go off. The effort involved in listening to Danny and Ben's strained voices was tiring. Ben's demands to be wheeled everywhere was also going to take its toll she just knew. She took the two of them down to the open-air-style continental café. There were real palm trees and fountains around the tables. It was all tastefully situated indoors within the centrepiece of the revamped St John's shopping centre. Carol was busy texting when she noticed that Danny and Ben appeared to be in some kind of trance.

'Danny, I'm getting a real funny feeling about today,' said Ben reclining against a rock in the private Danny-Ben mind arena. They had left their bodies in the café. Carol the carer would be there and time went differently here. There was more of it for a start. A minute of Carol panicking would be half an hour here.

'No worries. Golden Frog is up to something but he isn't about to get inside *my* head again,' Danny replied.

'I'm getting a mind message from the Sapient Ones. Do you want to read it with me?'

Danny and Ben had been sitting cross-legged with their backs to a large rock. They were watching a large rabbit-like creature hop past. The Danny-Ben mind-arena was in the Thought Realm. It was their secret place. Here they could talk telepathically, in pictures or in sounds, without being overheard - hopefully.

Their environment suddenly turned to a kaleidoscope of moving colour. It then tumbled away as though a plug-hole had been opened in the sky above. What was left was sheer blackness. Then, in eye jangling white the outline of Thinking Stone, the Sapient tree, became apparent. Clouds formed above Thinking Stone. The clouds went from formlessness to the shapes of words with no seeming step in-between.

The words said, 'I bring love from the Sapient Realm. The hardest part of the journey is shortly ahead, but have no fear for I will be with you. Make haste for the Central Library. The way is clear now and the Sapient Ones invite you to follow the path of which you seek.'

Carol was getting some very strange looks. Why the hell had she agreed to take these two complete lunatics into town on her one precious day off? She must be clinically insane. This just isn't worth the extra cash she thought to herself as she got increasingly angry. In her rush she had knocked the table. Her coffee was spreading in a slow arc toward her expensive mobile phone, which lay discarded where it had fallen.

'Wake up you git!' shouted Carol as she shook Danny by the shoulders. She seized Ben and pinched his cheeks leaving a red mark. The other café customers were giving her disapproving

stares. Ben suddenly awoke from his trance and looked in wide-eyed shock at Carol. Danny woke up next, coughing and spluttering his way back to normal consciousness.

‘Thank God for that! What are you trying to do to me? Give me a heart attack or something?’ breathed Carol in relief. Emergencies weren't her strong point.

‘Well I've had enough of you two fools for one day. We're going straight back,’ she added.

‘I-I got an idea Carol. My Aunt Sou gave me some shopping vouchers.’

‘That’s the mad aunt on your Dad’s side ain’t it? The Chinese one.’

‘That’s her. I’ve got too many clothes as it is and I don’t feel like going round Next. You have ’em if you like. W-We’ll wait here.’

‘Well if you’re sure I guess.’

‘Its the least I can do - after nearly giving you heart failure.’

‘What did you do that for?’ Ben squeaked out-loud as soon as Carol was out of sight. ‘We'll never get to the library now.’

‘Never fear my friend, for I shall drive you personally.’

Danny wheeled himself round whilst Ben awkwardly took the brakes off his chair, nearly flinging himself out the seat with the effort. Danny repositioned his electric chair behind Ben's manual chair. The café customers tried to ignore the unlikely sight of a hybrid Danny-Ben chair collective slowly trundling out of the café. Mothers with prams stopped what they were doing and stared as they made their way along the main mall of the shopping centre. Ben steered his front carriage by positioning his weight from side to side and occasionally tugging at the hand rims on the wheels.

Ben gave Danny telepathic instruction as Danny couldn't see a thing. Ben's wheelchair was flattening his face. Danny reached the end of the mall. Their journey halted - he'd forgotten that there was an escalator there. Danny racked his brains desperately. He remembered the service lift by the side of the Mobile Phone Shop. He wheeled the two of them next to the lift. Danny couldn't use his legs and Ben was strapped into his wheelchair so standing to access the lift call button looked impossible.

Danny went into a trance and entered the Thought Realm. He spotted a skinny, shaven-headed security guard standing outside the shopping centre. He was having a smoke by the pedestrian doors to the car park. Danny entered the guard's personal Thought-space. He then sculptured an acute desire to walk over to the shopping centre escalators - it quickly occurred to the guard that there might well be some good-looking girls hanging around by the Smoothie Bar nearby.

As the guard reached the escalators he thought he would just check that the small service lift was still working. At the same time he could write an insult on the lift wall, which would wind up his tactless supervisor. The guard got in the lift, decided against the graffiti and pushed the button for the top floor.

As soon as the doors opened a strange looking skinny Indian male with the face of a teenager but the body of an underdeveloped child wheeled straight at him. With disbelief the guard realised that an even weirder looking teenager was busy propelling a second chair using his mouth on a joystick. Two wheelchairs, stuck together whizzed straight at him.

The guard jumped out of the way and mumbled, ‘You wanna be more careful you do,’ before promptly disappearing. He wandered over to his favourite spot at the top of the escalator and set to watching the Smoothie Bar for girls to ogle.

When the doors shut Danny panicked. He thought they might not be able to reach the lift buttons. Fortunately it was a new lift and the controls inside it had been put at a reasonably



accessible height. Ben awkwardly managed to hoist himself up a little bit. He raised himself just enough to push the button for the ground floor before collapsing back into his chair. The lift slowly made its way down.

When they got to ground-floor level Danny reversed halfway out of the lift. The automatic lift doors bounced repeatedly against his wheelchair. A young woman noticed their predicament. Danny moved backward out of the lift and the woman helped Ben out. Danny managed to say, 'Thank-you,' and she went. The Danny-Ben chair collective began its slow way up the pedestrianised street toward the central library.

A couple of youths stopped chewing their gum and watched Danny and Ben with bemusement. Danny continued to struggle ahead. He had entered Ben's personal Thought-space and was looking through Ben's vision. His eyes were still obscured by their particular mode of transport. In a grainy black and white Danny could see passing legs and shoes, the black bins with the city crest, the phoenix-like Liver Birds, emblazoned on them. Further ahead was the grand entrance of the central library.

'Nearly there,' squeaked Ben excitedly. Danny noticed a large helicopter circling high above as they trundled forwards. They were just about at the library entrance when a policeman wandered over to them.

'Excuse me sir, you two look like you might be lost. Do you have anyone with you?' said the man in a rounded, syrupy but loud voice.

'Nahhhh, we're doh-kay, ch-ch-ch-shanks,' attempted Danny spluttering. Ben just stared ahead sadly, unable to translate for the policeman.

'I'd like you two to hold it there a minute if you please,' said the somewhat portly policeman, whose name was Phil. He could have sworn he recognised the pair from somewhere. Danny knew he was called Phil because he had already entered his Thought-space. He therefore also knew that Phil was chronically depressed and had an addiction to chips and mayonnaise - a favoured dish in the area. His Thought-space was a right old mess. The policeman pulled off his radio and summoned up base.

'Has anyone reported two...uhmmm...large coffees missing? Sorry I mean, hang on. No, not that! Not another large chips with a side order of mayo! NO! Pleeeease! NOOOO!'

'You OK?' asked base.

'ME? I'm fine. Really, I'm fine. But my head's spinning. I'll just sit down a moment,' said Phil into the receiver. He felt rather sick.

Danny, once he had entered the man's Thought-space had immediately looked for weaknesses. He had just implanted the feeling of having eaten a whole bucket-full of chips and mayonnaise. Phil's body, not knowing that its thoughts had just been manipulated, reacted as though it had suddenly devoured an enormous quantity of its favourite foods. The subliminal image Danny had also implanted, of a large vulture standing over him, hadn't helped his nausea either. The vulture had the face of Phil's reprimanding mother. The trick was in the attention to detail Danny had found.

The policeman, hands-on-knees, noisily spewed the contents of his breakfast upon the city's good stones. The two youths watched the policeman. They were leaning against one of the raised flower bed/chair structures that littered the pedestrianised road.

Danny, feeling somewhat sad for Phil, started to trundle himself and Ben toward the sloping wheelchair entrance to the library. His Mum had been a bit on the harsh side too when he was younger so he knew how Phil might feel. Before turning up the ramp, Danny decided to pop back into the Thought Realm. Unlike the Sapient Realm, which was a long way away and takes

enormous energy to reach, the Thought Realm was literally next door. Popping in presented no great challenge to Danny. Danny manufactured a small diamond looking shape which hung unsupported in mid-air.

Within the diamond Danny put the words, 'I'm okay, I really am!' With his mind-spanner he zapped one corner of the transparent diamond causing it to spin at great speed. The diamond emitted a three-toned low looping sound. Danny changed the setting on the mind-spanner and with another tap sent the diamond spinning into Phil's personal Thought-space. That should help a little bit thought Danny as he exited the Thought Realm. The thought-diamond would boost Phil's mood and make his thinking just a touch clearer.

Danny gave the electric wheelchair a bit of extra power to get them both along the slightly uneven stone paving slabs kept from a past century.

The two tracksuit-wearing youths, having dispensed with their chewing gum, sidled up to Danny and Ben.

'You look like you could do with a push,' the smaller one said.

'Ta,' said Danny backing himself up from behind Ben's chair. Ben appeared to flop about in his chair but he wanted to say thanks. The youth pushed Ben up the ramp, through the marbled entrance hall and into the library itself. Danny propelled himself along shortly behind. The trainers the youth wore formed the better part of Danny's stooped view. 'See you!' said the youths in unison, departing the time-worn marble foyer of the ancient and wonderful city library. As they moved out of sight the youths glanced up at the imposing structure with its round dome sat on a square Roman styled building. The slighter of the two youths wondered what treasures might be found within its ancient walls. He also wondered what on Earth the strange disabled lads had been looking for.

## **Chapter Fifteen - The Central Library**

On the marble floors of the library building Ben could wheel himself quite easily. Danny and Ben softly made their way toward the science fiction section. All was quiet apart from the hum of Danny's small electric motor. The industrious quiet of people reading echoed against the book-lined walls.

Danny loved books: they made him feel secure. He would turn the pages using a combination of his nose and tongue. Danny even loved the smell of books. Danny was one of the few people who actually tasted all his books as well as read them, not being a person to do anything by halves. Danny could tell if he was going to like a particular book just by its smell.

Danny and Ben hung out for a while at the young-adult fiction aisle. A beautiful female librarian, with poorly dyed short blondish hair and the tiniest crook in her petite nose smiled at Danny. Danny felt a little rush of warmth travel right through him. He looked up at the ancient skylights. They were the antique kind that has long wooden sticks with which to adjust their opening.

The sun came out from behind the clouds momentarily and shone its dappled light through the old windows and down upon the books. Danny spotted a new title by his favourite author and made a mental note to return. But first, he had business to attend.

'Can you see that Ben,' whispered Danny.

'See what?'

'The blood Ben, the blood,' continued Danny telepathically.

'You mean that red stuff dripping out of that book there?'

'That'd be it. What do you think it means?'

'Don't think anyone else can see it. That old guy just stepped through a puddle of the stuff and never even slipped.'

'And it's not on his shoes either.'

'It's not marking 'cos it isn't of this realm Dan. Its ethereal blood.'

'Oh,' replied Danny quietly. 'We've got to follow that trail then Ben.'

'Had a feeling you'd say that.'

Danny and Ben noted the book which was dripping blood. Once there, they could see a larger pool coming from two books, sat side by side in the next aisle - history. Once they reached the history section, Danny stopped. He could see that Ben was thinking, 'and now what?' Danny felt a brief wave of sadness for Ben. Here was a young man with the patience of a wasp, trapped inside the body of a human – a body that hardly worked.

Danny waited. Right now, there was no need to rush. A guy in his fifties wearing a formal grey jacket was ambling down the next aisle. He pulled a book off the third shelf down. From behind the book came a great rush of blood sweeping over the man. It formed a quickly growing flood upon the floor.

'Quick, Ben, the actual entrance is in the next aisle.'

Danny and Ben made their way as quickly as Ben's tiny arms could propel him. Danny waited anxiously by the top of the aisle. The red-jacketed man walked obliviously through the raging torrent of blood to emerge bone-dry by the astonished Danny. When Ben caught up with him, Danny leant across and put his weather-worn, slightly over-sized face right next to Ben's ear. The sound of blood rushing in an avalanche of fluid poured over them.

‘Just wheel right into the blood-fall Ben, then look up and open your eyes. We’ll do it together. You must open your eyes at the exact same time as me. And we must be in physical contact. You hold my hand. I’ll squeeze three times then you should open your eyes. Otherwise there is no telling where we might end up. The blood of the cosmos – it could take us anywhere.’

‘How’d you know all this?’ said Ben, who was nearly in tears.

‘I don’t know, I really don’t know. It comes from somewhere. We’ll just have to trust me I guess.’

‘Mmhm,’ thought Ben, who although he trusted Danny more than anyone, was never entirely convinced of anything.

The two wheelchairs inched into the flowing torrent of blood, that only they could see. The boys were soaked to the skin, their clothes as heavy as molten iron. Ben reached out to Danny and in unison they slowly craned their heads upwards and opened their eyes. Their chairs seemed to rise up into the blood-filled air and it felt like they were spinning. The blood pulsated.

Completely unaware of the nearby drama the junior librarian was calmly returning books to their rightful places. Turning a corner she noticed the two young lads. Their wheelchairs, though stationary, appeared to be shaking. The metal frames were glowing white-hot. Their eyes were open but moving around in their sockets alarmingly. She could see a red glowing see-through field that pulsated all around them.

Heart thudding fast she backed away and then ran toward the returns desk. She picked up the phone and dialled for an ambulance.

‘Emergency, which service do you require?’ said the calm, female voice.

‘Ambul..,’ the phone-line had gone dead.

The daze the librarian felt was pierced by a loud roaring noise from above. She looked up through the sky-lights to see a black military helicopter circling low above the library. The phone fell from her hands emitting radio fuzz. The receiver swung like a pendulum against the side of the desk. A sudden thud of military boot against door and some half dozen black-clad men burst through into the library. The leader jumped over the turnstile, kicked her feet from under her and flung her forcefully to the ground.

‘ON THE FLOOR! FACE DOWN! Nobody moves! Anybody moves and you’re all bloody DEAD’ yelled the leader.

The men moved away from her. Her face scratched against the dust of the floor. She could just about make out that the men had now surrounded the red force-field that was around the two boys. They seemed totally intent on the field and its occupants. She wondered if there was a man stood guard behind her. Chancing it she began using the tips of her fingers, elbows and toes as she edged herself backward toward the rear of the returns desk. Any moment now she thought, they’ll see me and riddle my body with bullets. Something deep inside, despite her frozen terror, told her to move as if her life depended on it. She knew she had to hide. She would never have considered herself brave normally, yet here she was disobeying a gang of armed men.

The leader of the group reached into his backpack and pulled out a strange tube-like gun device. It had odd-shaped buttons and luminescent red geometric lines, vaguely silicon chip-like in appearance, etched upon its silken steel surface. He snapped it open and extended it.

The military helicopter continued to hover above the roof of the library. Four black clad men jumped from the helicopter and set up a white dish with a long white tube extending from its middle. They appeared to be listening to instructions on their headsets as they aligned the tube. One of the rooftop figures took a thick wire from the white dish. He put his boot through the skylight and dropped the wire down into the library.

The leader of the men in the library took the other end of the wire and fed it into his gun-type tube device. 'Remember. Timing. Get it RIGHT!' the man bellowed threateningly.

'Position ONE,' the leader yelled. The men all stuck their left feet into the red force field. The men screamed internally but only beads of sweat revealed their pain. Each man had been trained in hypnotic mind control techniques and could withstand pain without blinking an eye. The enormous energy of this field threatened to overwhelm these soldiers.

'Position TWO'

The men held their hands one to the next forming a circle around the force-field. The field turned to an angry incandescent white that flowed over the men. Blue glistening fiery liquid throbbed slowly down the wire from the roof light and into the gun-like tube the leader held on his shoulders. The men were sweating and shaking slightly. Their leader was stood slightly back from the others. The tube-gun he held was pointed into the centre of the field.

'ENERGISE!' shouted the leader. The men closed their eyes and braced themselves. Blue energy shot out the gun and propelled its way furiously into the force-field containing Danny and Ben. The field now alternated between white and red. It showered angry sparks of molten green across the library. The leader battled for control of the snaking arm of energy caught between the gun-tube and the field.

'WAIT FOR IT! Wait for it. OK. Enter-on-THREE, TWO, ONE. GO!'

The group of men jumped as a single body into the field. Immediately afterwards the leader threw the gun-tube to one side, yanked the skin from his forehead to reveal a black oval eye with a red diamond shaped pupil. He pressed it. His aura became an incandescent white. He dived head first into the energy-field following his men. The library filled with a blinding yellow light. Simultaneously the helicopter took off into the sky trailing the wire and ripping the skylight to shreds.

Outside the library, two metallic black Nissan Navara pick-up trucks screeched to a perfectly synchronised halt on the cobbled road. The darkened-windowed doors were flung open in split-second co-ordination. Four men in black overalls jumped out from each vehicle and marched quickly into the library. They were carrying various bags and cases. Seven of the men split up and marched through the library sections. They walked from dazed person to the next, barked, 'Emergency services,' and administered what looked like an oxygen mask. The person was immediately unconscious.

The eighth man had been in the basement and had found the piping he was looking for. He attached a small plastic device to the pipe, pressed a button on his wristwatch and ran. At the same time the wristwatches of the other men beeped loudly. They stopped what they were doing and ran toward the entrance. One of the men scooped up the discarded tube-gun on his way out.

The junior librarian was still hiding under the returns desk. The men in the black overalls hadn't seen her on their rounds. The next thing she knew there was a massive explosion, the blast knocking her off the floor where she knelt and slamming her into the underside of the desk.

## **Chapter Sixteen - To Boldly Go Where No Man has Gone Before**

They sat naked as the wind whistled gently through the twilight-shadowed trees. Danny twitched and took a sniff of the air. Ben was scratching his leg absent-mindedly. The sun was beginning to set in the distance.

Ben had been less fazed by it all than Danny. The kaleidoscope of tantalising smells was wild beyond memory. Ben just accepted the new menu of experience. Danny found it unsettling.

The last thing Danny remembered had been the unending waterfall of blood. There had been an enormous explosion. Books were flying everywhere, randomly at first through the blackness in which they were held suspended. The books then took some order from out of the chaos. The books were flying around them in the sea of blood that poured through the surrounding blackness. They looked like little winged creatures in a dance.

One book had suddenly flown straight into Danny's head and his whole body had dissolved into the red mist. He experienced a sense of flying apart - a peaceful disembodied unity. For a moment his consciousness had continued within the separate flying chunks and then it too deserted.

What he imagined constituted his soul had awoken, in one piece, within the body of a large moth-eaten black Labrador dog. There was more than a hint of Alsatian to him also, noticeable mainly by the large upward-pointed ears. Ben was a small, fierce, brown and white terrier missing part of his left ear.

'Is that you Ben?' Danny projected his thoughts at the small, ragged terrier. The look the small dog gave him was unmistakable.

'Hungry? I can smell rat! Let's go,' Ben replied telepathically.

'Ruff,' barked Danny and the two dogs set off in hunt of food.

Eventually they caught a small rat and they both smelt faintly of fresh blood, a few drops of which still clung to Ben's snout. Hunger had been a powerful canine thought - one their possessors could do little about. A few hairs were all that remained of their rodent quarry. It appeared to be late afternoon by the red of the setting sun. The forest had an ancient, faraway air to it.

It was some time before Danny and Ben had fully remembered their former more human selves. They had both been surprised to find their self-consciousness was still there, a little sharper and wilder perhaps but the same otherwise. In fact the telepathy seemed quicker, smoother somehow. Danny asked Ben telepathically if he remembered anything of their journey. Ben just sniffed the ground. Danny knew that meant, 'I'm none the wiser about it than you'.

Danny cocked his head to one side and listened. He could hear large footfalls against the softly hollow forest floor. His human mind wanted to stay, rooted in fear to the spot where he stood. His dog body ached to run. He was about to unleash himself into the darkening forest when the footfalls grew louder. A pause of silence preceded by a split-second the leap with which it appeared.

There, right before him, stood the most terrible, fearsome looking dog he had ever seen. Its grey and white wolf-like hair was steaming from expiration. The dog towered over him. Danny's animal instincts kicked in and he launched himself backwards only to find his path blocked by a tree. Ben reared off to his right cowering and growling simultaneously. For such a small dog he looked very aggressive, as if he'd bite and not let go though death might pass him by.

The giant wolf must have been five-foot-tall at the shoulders. It looked like it could bite a man's head clean off. Yet it just stood still, calmly surveying. Its coat was white with tufts of grey here and there. It was a magnificent animal, like a giant Siberian husky.

The dog's eyes locked onto Danny's. He'd never seen eyes like this before. They seemed as old as a millennium, if not more. The air between them seemed to thicken and crackle with expectation. Danny heard an echo from deep inside his own skull, a slow buzzing sound, like a thousand bees buzzing in harmony. The dog's eyes hypnotically 'unwound' him as the circular sound slowed. The black pupils moved in a tiny circle in time to the internal noise. The sound stilled and all fear was gone, all calmness restored.

Danny edged back from the tree and looked up toward the giant. A voice issued forth. It was the dog talking but the sound was neither telepathic nor coming from a body. It seemed to issue directly from the air surrounding the animals.

'I am Zafearon. I am not of this realm but I have come to you in your hour of need. You entered the Etherial Blood, within the artery of the One Mind and have become lodged halfway through your journey in this forest. You are upon a planet that has never known humans, at the very edge of this Sapient Realm galaxy.

'There is a gate device within this forest that allows its keepers access to the fabled Akashi realm. From there you will be guided onto the Akashi library itself. Here you will find something that the Sapient Ones, the eternal intelligence of the trees, wishes you to have. Apparently it is essential to the future of your mission, or your world, or something along those lines. I forget which, to be honest. I have come far and I wish to go now so I will take my leave. It takes much energy for me to be before you like this. I must go whilst I still can. Do you have any questions?'

'Yes. Why me? And why are we dogs?' asked Danny intending the sound to be telepathic. However the surrounding air spoke his words.

'Why ever not? Is my reply to the latter. And to the former I say, you are but the tip of the iceberg, no more important than the rest, but the tip nonetheless, my friend.'

The giant dog turned and ran toward the open moors beyond the forest fringe. It stopped just before it went out of sight. Speaking telepathically the giant warned Danny and Ben about the pack of man-dogs. Seven men from the feared agency had followed them through the ethereal blood portal. The Sapient Realm had transformed them into a vicious dog-pack. The men wanted to acquire the gateway to the Akashi realm. Their masters craved possession of that which is not rightly theirs. They had used Danny and Ben to get this far.

A whiplash of white light shot past Danny's head. A small translucent orb about one and a half feet wide appeared. A delicate, high-pitched humming sound accompanied it. Zafearon said to follow the orb. She would help them find the Akashi gate. The man-dogs must not be allowed to acquire it.

Danny and Ben watched the little orb with deep concentration. It pulsed, at about the rate of a human heartbeat, whilst it hovered in the air just a little above and beyond their heads. Danny could see inside the cloudy white orb to its blue heart. Something about the way the globe pulsed made Danny think it was a little impatient, grumpy even. The glow brightened and the orb moved slowly off. It followed the giant dog's path out onto the moors.

Danny thought, 'Hello,' toward the orb. The blue heart of the orb seemed to pause for a fraction of a second as if taken by surprise by Danny's communication. Another pause, then a brighter surge which seemed to mean, 'Follow me'. When Danny and Ben had followed the orb uphill and out onto the moor she took them to the hill summit. All around them they could see

forest and hilltops, some green, some bare. The wind whistled as the clouds passed quickly overhead. The odd bird sang in the distance.

The panting of the two dogs, Labrador and terrier kept company with the deep murmur of the surrounding mountain streams. As the team made their way down the hill the orb positioned herself in the middle of a stream some few inches deep. Instinctively the two dogs followed, treading their way through the icy water. The stream gathered strength as they made their way down and soon they found themselves above a rock pool.

The orb hung above the pool pulsing faster – this was the way to go. Ben, the terrier was the first to dive in. The cold water felt warm with sheer body-shock.

‘C’mon dive in!’ encouraged Ben, following the telepathic message with a small bark.

Danny pawed the ground then dived in and was amazed that he too felt warm not cold. The two dogs swam over to the other side of the rock pool and scrambled out onto the grass-tufted rocks. The slippery slime upon the rocks was no match for the supple leather of their paws. As they got out a chill wind blew and the coldness hit them full-force. They shivered and shook the damp from their coats.

‘You won’t catch me,’ communicated Danny, wagging his tail in excitement. The two dogs shot off as one across the grassy upland moor.

The moor led back down into the forest. By the time they had reached the safety of the trees they were nearly dry. They kept on running, dodging through the increasingly moonlit trees until they came upon a large burrow entrance.

They had nearly forgotten about the orb in their excitement. Now she hovered calmly above a large hollow near to the burrow entrance. The whole place smelt abandoned. Nearby a crow was picking at the remains of a large rabbit-looking creature. It was too big to be a rabbit and its ears were too small. The carcass was recent, less than a day old. The crow flew off and the two dogs ate their fill.

The two small moons above them communicated a mixture of yearning and fear. They fell asleep in the dark hollow under the watchful glow of the orb. Once they had fallen soundly asleep, she left them.



## Chapter Seventeen – The Akashi Gate

A rancid stench of burning preceded them. The orb could feel the deathly aroma of these alien creatures, not man, not beast – the man-dogs. They did not belong here. They were wrong. There was a feeling of fear, and of a strange power in the air. The orb did not give into fear easily but she was frightened now. There was no turning back. There could be no avoiding this fight.

The sound of sharp, regular breaths and a drumming of paws had indicated their presence. The sight was both eerie and hypnotic. The orb hovered above a large pine tree waiting for them to come into view. The pack turned the corner along the wide mountain path, worn by water and animal. They moved like a flock of birds, twisting, turning, supple movements flowing as one. The leader stopped and sniffed the air; he seemed to suspect her presence. The orb slowed her pulsing and contracted into a small ball, barely visible amongst the pine needles.

The pack of man-dogs was completely enveloped by a red glowing field that pulsed. The field appeared to be alive. When the leader turned his head, at the exact moment the other five dogs did the same. The leader crouched down low and edged toward the tree. All the time he was sniffing the ground. Saliva dripped from its muzzle. A black oval eye with a red slit pupil glowed ominously upon the creature's forehead.

The orb gathered her energy for the attack. She launched herself at terrifying speed toward the lead animal. A moment later, the leader sensed the attack and reared up on its hind legs snarling frantically. The other dogs pulled in toward their leader in a circle. Their protection was not enough. She made impact with the leader's skull. He was thrown backwards. The red glowing field that enclosed the pack blinked twice and contracted.

The man-dogs turned toward each other frightened and bewildered. Someone had just wiped their group mind. The thought-field that controlled them was no longer stable. They started snarling and attacking one another. They ignored the lead animal who was writhing on the floor trying to bite and scratch his own head.

The orb suddenly found herself transported. She was underwater in a frozen lake - a foot of ice barred her escape. A round hole was being cut in the ice with a petrol chainsaw. A muscular man in combat uniform stood above the hole. He had a black oval eye with a red slit pupil upon his forehead. A telepathic voice boomed,

‘You FOOL! You dare attack The Leader! Get out of here NOW, foolish ORB, or I will trap you forever. FOREVER! You will suffocate for *all* eternity. GET OUT NOW!’

Terrified, the orb shot out of the hole in the ice and found herself back in the forest. Where was she? What had happened?

She realised too late that she had been tricked. There was no danger. She had merely been within the mind of the one who called himself ‘The Leader’. But it had been so real, so frightening. The dog pack was still fighting amongst itself. None of them were a threat to her. But the Leader, in his dog-form, was already far away up the path. He was still surrounded by the red force-field but now its glow was considerably weaker.

Sensing her stare on the back of its large black head the animal turned around and stopped for a split-second. It gave her the same cold, venomous stare she had seen just before from the man in the nightmarish vision. He flew off along his way.

The orb was too tired and frightened to follow. She had not really wanted to help the human boys in the first place – but when Zafearon asked she felt she had to comply. She had done her best. The man-dog pack was considerably weakened. The rest would be up to the two called

Danny and Ben. The man-dog that took the label, 'The Leader,' was still strong and still angry - more so than ever before in fact.

Danny yawned and sniffed the air savouring the depth of perception. His sense of smell played a kaleidoscope of colour, perfuming his mind. He stretched and itched, surrendering to a reflex of his hind leg. Ben turned around in circles following his tail. He's enjoying this Danny thought to himself. Danny's mind was on other things and there was no orb this morning. He guessed they were on their own now.

Danny rose up onto his hind legs and put his paws upon the tree near to the burrow in which they had slept. He put his white Alsatian-like ear to the tree and listened intently. The tree roots were all interconnected forming one huge net under the entire forest. Danny's mind became a small yellow orb and entered the forest-net.

He hummed around the pulsating network of trunks and roots listening and observing. He could sense fear, something animal, yet not, and a sharp dangerous intelligence. He could also sense the orb who had first taken them on their way. Her energy-field was weak. She was resting by the top of a hill in another reach of the forest. Healing energy was surrounding her from a nearby stone. There was a deer with the orb. The deer was also sick and had been attracted by the healing energy.

Danny's curiosity prompted and he homed in on the source of the fear. Before he could realise his mistake it was too late. The 'fear' had locked onto him instead. It had been waiting for Danny's move. Whatever it was that frightened the forest so much, it certainly had huge fangs, four legs and a strange affliction within its mind. That much he could tell for sure. It had been a pack of entities not long ago, but now it was just two, or was it one? He couldn't be certain. The thing now knew exactly where they were. Danny was angry with himself. How could he have been so stupid?

Before he could stop him Ben had jumped into the forest network too, leaving both their bodies completely undefended. Danny's energy gave an unfriendly pulse toward Ben's newly emerged vortex.

'You've forgotten something important Danny,' messaged Ben telepathically, 'we need to find the Akashi gateway.'

'You're right - sorry. I'm afraid I have given our position away too. What can we do?'

'Right, don't worry. You go and energy-bomb the thing that is seeking us and I'll find the Akashi gateway. Meet you back here.'

'You will,' Danny said quietly.

Ben's green energy vortex stretched and shot along a dark tunnel into the heart of the forest-net. Danny's golden entity whizzed around in a luminescent circle until it had picked up sufficient power. Danny then homed in on the source of the fear, travelling to it almost instantly. He attacked in a blaze of blinding white light. Danny held the light attack for a few seconds. Suddenly, a mind message arrived. Ben had found the gate!

Danny withdrew from the tree-net and both he and Ben landed simultaneously with a gut-wrenching thump into their respective dog's bodies half a second later. Both of the dog's bodies started fitting from the shock of the sudden occupation. Some seconds later the seizures subsided.

Danny and Ben sniffed the air. The fearsome presence was near. They could smell it physically now. Danny felt sick with fear. The man-dog was very angry. Saliva dripped from its hefty, powerful jaws. It had a long jaw, large head and dark, short fur. It had been thrown

headlong into a tree by the light attack. It wanted vengeance, to tear them apart, but something else was subduing it, giving it a ruthless cold direction.

Danny, with his large Labrador eyes, looked thoughtfully at Ben. Ben indicated the way with a tiny nod of his terrier head. They both set off as fast as their legs could carry them.

Ben took them along the narrow deer track through the forest and up toward the open hillside beyond. Danny was amazed at his body's strength. A tenuous power resided in his limbs and torso. As the two dogs reached the open land the feeling of being pursued increased. The moor sloped around in a wide arc to reveal a mountainside. Its peak shrouded in fog. Ben led the way, his young terrier self not even beginning to tire yet. They had begun the steep incline, bounding upwards in great leaps, when Danny caught a glance behind. His stomach froze but the fear didn't bite as expected, he just ran for his very life. Their pursuer was within a hundred yards and fast gaining on them. The dark brown lean body was almost graceful. Its long powerful legs bashed the ground whilst its huge gleaming white incisors were bared ready for attack.

For a moment or two Danny found time to reflect on the beauty of his surroundings. His body was flooded with courage despite the approaching bearer of destruction. It was Ben's turn to glance backwards. His body was pulsing like a liquid machine. He felt fire in his legs but it wasn't painful. The two dogs banked left, then sudden right and left again. They looked like racing bikes connected by some invisible force field. The glistening, saliva-drenched teeth of the man-dog were closing in, but were just out of immediate sight. Danny's body was screaming with effort when the Akashi portal finally came into view.

The relief of finding their destination quickly evaporated. Danny felt a deep panic spread through every muscle and sinew infecting his mind with despair. He wondered what was worse: being torn apart by the man-dog or being shredded by the Akashi gate itself.

## **Chapter Eighteen – A Dog Eat Dog World**

Ben was ready to face the fight. Their canine hearing could distinguish every single paw-fall upon the damp mountain ground despite the hush of rivers and the icy mountain wind that sang its continuous low lullaby. Danny allowed himself a last brief look at the portal.

They were standing in a large plateau about a quarter of the way up the mountain's side. In the centre of the ground stood the diamond portal – half the size of a house. It would have been beautiful beyond compare had it not been for the fact that the diamond was spinning at such a speed it defied even canine vision. Danny and Ben, being neurodes by birth, could slow the scene down mentally. They saw the diamond's beauty despite its raging movement.

Just at the edge of their hearing was the humming noise the diamond made as it sliced through the thin mountain air. It seemed to be chanting a mantra. The tone was at once both very high and very low and once you noticed it, it grew louder. Danny tore himself away from the sound and faced the rocks edge from where he knew the man-dog would any moment appear.

The creature sprang around the corner and braked its passage forward with a single great bound. This took him within a few feet of the cowering, snarling dogs that were Danny and Ben. Danny backed away toward the whirling diamond. All he could see, all his mind could focus on was the dog's massive dark-brown head, the saliva dripping from its snarling jaws and the evil black pupils in its unforgiving eyes. For a moment, Danny left his body and in his imagination saw his Labrador body and his terrier friend ripped to shreds, limbs strewn in a bloody mess over the blood-wet mountain grass.

'Don't be weak!' screamed Ben telepathically, 'We can do it! Don't give up!'

As they backed away Danny's tail got caught in the spinning diamond portal. It was sliced off cleanly midway along its length. The blood-spattered scarf of bony flesh was flung at the man-dog hitting it square across the eyes. Danny snapped back to reality. There was a sharp stinging in his tail but amazingly, it didn't really hurt.

Danny launched himself at the creature whilst it was still blinded with shock and tail. Danny plunged his sharp yellow incisors into the animal's neck, aiming for its jugular. He hit. Blood spurted everywhere.

The animal's strength was incredible and its massive jaws clamped shut upon Danny's pelvis. A burning electrical pain flooded through him. A high-pitched canine scream tore through the air as the beast flung him away. Danny came to rest against an outcrop of rock with a damp forceful thud. Danny could see the man-dog's red aura. It was pulsing like an angry fiery liquid. But in there, amidst the blur he could see a faint yellow. It was Golden Frog! His eyes, legs and body seemed to be repeated in a random pattern throughout the creature's aura. The creature's strange aura formed itself into a ring around the animal's neck. It was staunching the flow of blood from the animal's artery. A trail of thick, strongly scented blood had soaked the grass. Finally the blood flow stopped as the huge beast now stood towering over the terrified terrier. Ben was snarling, backed up against the rocky outcrop, there was nowhere to run.

The animal paused for a cruel second. Then the great head shot forward with terrifying speed and encased Ben in its teeth. Ben held his breath, all fear having long since departed. He waited for his spine to crunch, to exit this brief but exciting canine life. But it didn't happen. He waited for another moment. And still he was alive. The man-dog was cradling him in its jaws, as gently as it would its own puppy.

The man-dog walked over to the stricken Labrador with the terrier held securely in its jaws. Danny got a look at his helpless friend. The creature, when it spoke, had a growling, menacing voice. There was an air of insanity to it. The words, which came from the environment, flowed over Danny.

‘I’ve got your friend. So, don’t try *anything*. You’re going to do *exactly* what The Leader says, or I kill both of you. Your stupid friend here first. Open the Akashi gate. OPEN IT!’

Danny crawled on his front legs dragging his broken body back toward the whirling diamond. Pain seared across every inch of flesh. The man-dog took pleasure in it.

‘This is going to take a few seconds,’ Danny murmured. Instinctively once again, Danny knew what had to be done. He focused his mind on the almost imperceptible sound the diamond made and tuned in to it. He became the sound. Once he had become one with the vibration he started slowing the sound’s echo within himself. As the echo slowed the diamond’s rotations gradually decreased.

‘FASTER DOG! You can do it faster than this! Stop the diamond NOW!’

‘I’m going as fast as I can. This diamond’s huge, if I was stronger...’

‘YOU LIE!’

Ben yelped as the creature tightened its grip.

‘I HAVE TO CONCENTRATE,’ yelled Danny. ‘Leave Ben alone and I’ll do it.’

Danny slowed the diamond some more. He could have stopped it in one go but he had no other card to play. No other avenue to explore. The thought that maybe he had done his best and should now just accept defeat flashed through his mind. Before he had time to witness the doubt he overheard a telepathic communication: it was the dog-thing.

‘Golden Frog, is he lying to me? Tell me now!’

‘No he isn’t *master*,’ Golden Frog spat with curt venom.

Golden Frog screamed.

‘You forget that the agency gave *me* the Mindsnapper! You’ll do whatever I damn well tell you!’

Golden Frog screamed again.

‘And make sure you heal that neck proper good,’ added the Leader. ‘I’ve got enough scars on me neck don’t need no more. You got that, slave?’ The commander of the agency’s team for gaining the Akashi gate felt he had victory in his sight. He had waited so long for this moment. He wasn’t going to let a stupid mind-programme get the better of him. If he had time to kill the two human-dogs before he gained the gate so much the better.

‘Agency no tell you it take time to still diamond gate?’ said Golden Frog with a tone of condescension.

‘You’re stalling. Does “Mind-snapper and Unlimited Use,” mean anything to you?’ snarled the Leader in reply.

The man-dog held its cold nose to Danny’s Labrador abdomen in the soft flesh below the ribs. Danny could feel the warmth of Ben’s fur mingled with the cold breath of the man-beast. The terrier was still dangling in its jaws. The air spoke its words, ‘It’ll be your kidneys next. I’ll rip them out after I’ve killed your friend here. And I’ll do it *nice and slowly*.’

Danny swallowed his fear. He held his breath, this was it, I can’t hold out any longer. Danny tuned into the repeating sound of the diamond and slowed it right down till the diamond stopped spinning altogether. It turned to a fluorescing watery substance held within the diamond shape. It emitted a fantastic yellow light that seemed to ignite the entire mountainside from within.

The man-dog flinched. In the sudden light he couldn't see very well but he knew it was just a matter of stepping into the diamond. The gateway would then transmute itself inside his body and be his to do with as he pleased. With a sweep of his oversized paw he swept Danny's dog body aside and spat Ben into the grass with a sickening thump.

'I don't need you two losers now,' said the creature venomously. 'And there isn't time to kill you neither so I'll keep my promise,' the Leader wanted to smile triumphantly. 'You thought you could outrun, "The Leader!" How pathetic you are. Maybe you can think on that when you're in spirit!'

The Leader tried to laugh but he had forgotten how. Embarrassed, his mind searched within his host body but that didn't harbour memories of laughter either. The blood-fragrant air echoed with a hollow half sigh, half growl, both menacing and pitiful at the same time.

Just as the man-dog was about to step into the fluorescing diamond portal a streak of fire swept across the sky and hit a nearby tree. With a sizzle the green wizened mountain tree branches turned instantly to charcoal. The whole stooped tree then burst into flames. A limb fell igniting the Leader's tale with its tip. The creature knew he had very little time. Ignore the pain. Step into the Akashi gate. Yet he had to know what had dared to confront him.

Just one look and then he would accept his victory. He took a glance backwards. Orb had calculated this. She knew the Leader's need to know, to control. Immediately she left her ball of fire amongst the blackened branches and shot straight into his skull. She hit him square between the eyes. The creature howled in pain and fell backwards, away from the watery diamond.

'I'm free, I'M FREE!' shouted Golden Frog. The Mindsnapper field that had been controlling him had collapsed with the man-dog's state of shock. There must be a Fargone involved in this thought Golden Frog.

'Are you are a Fargone?' cried Golden Frog telepathically to Orb. She was still encased around the creature's head as a halo of fire.

'Yes! Aren't you on their side?'

'I just slave. I hate them.'

'No time for this. Get rid of this thing and you can come with us,' screamed Orb as she struggled with the great creature.

'I'm in,' said Golden Frog. 'Release the beast. Now for REVENGE!'

Golden Frog had little power of his own but he could undo his own handiwork. The severed jugular of the man-dog had been held together by Golden Frog's own field emanations. Golden Frog viciously pulled the remains of the field apart and tugged at the artery. Blood spurted from the animal's neck in great torrents. The animal walked around in circles half-out its crazed mind.

The Orb had been waiting just above the creature. Now she could see the animal posed no further threat she flew into Danny's dog body and disappeared through his 'psychic eye' spot on his forehead. A few seconds passed and Golden Frog, after kicking his enemy with a burst of energy, followed Orb into Danny's body. His golden yellow field entered smoothly through the large Labrador ears.

Danny could not move but Ben the terrier managed to crawl. Once Orb and Golden Frog had entered the Labradors' body a glowing, pulsing blue field reached out from Danny's mangled blood-struck torso. It formed a molten hand-like shape held out toward the struggling Ben. The man-dog noticed what was going on. He summoned his last departing reservoirs of strength and tried to pad toward the diamond-portal. The powerful blue field emanating from Danny's body reached out with a second pod-like arm toward the diamond and steered it out of the Leader's way. The creature collapsed, exhausted from lack of blood.

The diamond started to rotate. With an increasing high-pitched murmur it engulfed the two dogs, Labrador and terrier. In a moment the water turned back to the hardest diamond and began spinning at an unimaginable speed. Within the diamond there could be seen a blue fire. The fire held four connected minds. Their bodies had become pure energy. Orb and Golf together healed Danny's crushed vertebrae and Ben's broken ribs whilst they were in this intense state of energy-fire. A moment later the diamond shot off into the sky leaving the dog-thing alone and bleeding.

The dog-pack had recovered from Orb's earlier attack. They had regained their group mind and were busy searching for The Leader.

## **Chapter Nineteen – A Medic, a Mad Boy and a Mini**

She awoke in the Royal Hospital. A large boy in an electric wheelchair was staring straight at her. He looked like he'd been there for some time. Why is this unhinged person looking at me so intently she wondered? She pulled her bedclothes over her chest and stared back frightened, 'Who are you?' she blurted out suddenly. She recognised him from somewhere.

'This g-going to sound s-strange..' The boy had then spoken for a while but the words had merely drifted over her meaninglessly. Then his tone seemed to change and it gave her a jolt. His strangled words became clearer and the sounds and phrases suddenly clicked in her mind.

'..W-what you saw. It's all t-true. It wasn't a dream. It never was a gas explosion. I know who you really are. We need your help. My name is Danny. See me w-when you get out-please.'

She took the business card that Danny held out with his teeth. With that the boy put his mouth to the joystick and trundled back to his own ward. Jodie watched the back of the boy's head recede. She watched him fade into the distance until he had blended into the hospital walls from which he appeared to have sprung.

The days had become weeks, and she wasn't sure if the weeks were becoming months. She didn't want to think about all that. She wouldn't think about it. It was too uncomfortable. Once she had recovered from the rude awakening and the strange boy, she began to settle down. She looked at the white hospital clock on the far wall. It said 6am. She wondered about the boy. Why had he said such strange things? How could he have known so much about her? In fact, she seemed to have forgotten more about herself than she cared to remember. Maybe she had lost part of her mind in the library explosion.

She felt her nose. It was still slightly crooked and a bit too big. A perfect nose job from the blast was too much to expect. She let out a small sigh. People tell me I am beautiful, she reasoned. Somehow she knew though that it was a quirky beauty. She had her life and should be glad of that she told herself.

The hospital stay had increased her sense of loneliness, and her sense of comfort, simultaneously. She had always been strong as far as the outside world could see. There was good reason for that. She had lost her mum when she was six and had never fully recovered. She had swallowed her anger at having to look after her own father. The bitterness she felt at the emptiness of her own life rarely surfaced. She didn't want much after all.

Following the explosion she had slowly recovered the use of her limbs. Most of her memory was still intact. Her former life, as a junior librarian in the library, seemed more than a million miles away right now.

What the boy in the electric wheelchair had said greatly disturbed her. She had just about got used to being a random, senseless, victim. But the strange, cold dreams just wouldn't leave her alone. Her mind was not at peace with the reality she had been led to believe. And then the full realisation hit her head on. He was the one the newspapers had talked about. The boy in the wheelchair was the 'explosive' local celebrity. She remembered seeing one of the nurses, Jane, talking about him.

The papers had described how the boy had been right next to the strike of the immense and bizarre lightning. The powerful, oddly coloured lightning strikes had destroyed a large tree and illuminated the entire town. Yet, it had left Danny more or less intact.

Everyone in the city had seen the fabulous weather phenomenon. Not only did the boy survive the freak storm but on a visit to the Central library there had been another massive



explosion. Again the boy, and his friend, had lived through it. But afterwards, if you looked at it in a half-focused way, the whole library appeared to shine a beautiful soft blue. The newspapers steered clear of reporting on strange nocturnal glows. The odd passer-by, that cared to see such things, would guess such effects were not due to a gas explosion.

Someone, other than the emergency services, had been seen dumping people in the library foyer. They were merely dazed - but entirely without memory of the incident. Then there was the military helicopter hovering above the building. The strange dish and tube device on the roof had also been noted. Rumours and speculation were alive and well.

Jodie turned over in bed, which was quite a feat in itself. Most of the tubes, drains and drips had been taken out before she had left the High Dependency Unit. Her body though, still ached and groaned.

'Want an early cuppa?' the night nurse asked. She was a big Jamaican lady in her late fifties. The nurse straightened her bed and left her a nice cup of hot tea.

The early cup of tea always made her feel special. The night-nurses didn't make that one for everybody. Jodie was very easy to nurse. She regained her self-care quickly and she waited patiently for the nurse-in-charge to come round before she asked for painkillers. Jodie always smiled for the world.

In some ways she quite enjoyed being on the ward. As the nurses said, she was, 'Out of the woods,' physically and not in too much pain now. It was like being in a big extended family. The disabled boy had, somehow, prompted the courage to think about the disturbing dreams.

No two of the dreams were ever quite the same but the theme never varied. There was something dark and menacing about them that chilled her to the bone. They would start off by her being chased. She would trip, but then instead of hitting the ground she would fly. She found she could vary her own gravity with her mind.

Next she would be soaring high above a dark industrial landscape. She'd spot the dome of a nuclear reactor and feel a longing to escape through it. The mysterious entities chasing her would try and follow. She was terrified but sad. To add to her pain she would notice, next to the dome, that there was a forlorn looking scrap metal yard. The muted shapes of twisted metal caught in the yellow twilight. Here her poor father would be sat alone, lost and aimless.

She would attempt to escape the entities that followed her by moving through an old fire-escape door set into the nuclear reactor dome. Inside, Jodie would be transported back to the library. It was brightly lit in stark contrast to the bleak industrial landscape outside. Where there should have been books there were now supermarket items - but they were old and mouldy. She would wander over to the next aisle, completely alone within the library. There she would see the wheelchair bound boys tied by their wrists to their chairs. She would look at her hands only to discover she had none. An awful feeling of falling would grip her and then she would suddenly wake heart in mouth, in a cold clammy sweat.

Soon one of the nurses would come and mop her brow, providing a comforting arm. When she calmed down fully she yearned for someone she could tell her dreams to. Who would understand? Who would listen? Somehow she knew that despite forgetting most of what the strange boy had said, he would understand her. He would know why.

And so she had made up her mind. The early shift domestic picked up her empty tea-cup and scuttled off with a cheerful, 'Morning love!' She would go and see that boy, as he had requested, just as soon as she was able.

The following days passed much as they always did, though sometimes the time flew by and other times it marched past slowly. Still she liked being a bystander, looking at life snugly from the outside.

The seasons were changing and it was no longer high summer. The doctors were talking about the need to discharge her. A couple of the days ago the consultant had asked the registrar why she was still on the ward, 'Does she not have a home to go to?' he had asked bluntly.

Before she knew it, she was leaving. Two plastic bags, one full of clothes and the other full of dressings, made up her entire worldly possessions, or so it felt.

The nurses on shift all made a point of coming to say goodbye. They would be sad for a bit. They were losing their little star.

Jodie Temple passed the heavier of the two bags to her father who was making inane conversation with a student nurse. He seemed a bit nervous. He had never been good around authority figures. Hospitals and their staff made him especially ill at ease. She ignored his chatter. Instead, she chose to stare out the tower block window, observing the pigeons going about their daily business.

When Jodie got home to her small flat on the council estate she noted that her carefully tended flowerpots on her balcony were lying in pieces. The cream-coloured concrete walls still had that weathered and unloved look. At least the thin trees, in front of the three storey flats were still there. The council had planted them a year or two back to try and brighten up the area. The rubbish bins she tidied up every week were askew amidst floating bits of rubbish and broken glass. The place had sorely missed her influence.

Now she was out of hospital she would be expected to cook the Sunday roast for her father. It was Saturday night, she'd been out of hospital just hours, the neighbours were blasting the telly and she'd just about had enough. Life was a comfortable cocoon back on the ward. Maybe she could just go back there and explain she felt unwell.

'Well that's enough day-dreaming for you,' Jodie told herself. She packed an overnight bag and trundled downstairs. Getting into her small and battered old British Leyland Mini she motored over to her father's house on the other side of the council estate. She wished she had one of those new and powerful German Minis. She would look good in one of those, though her own car would have been a valuable antique if it had of been in better nick. At least she'd get a decent night's sleep she told herself. It was quieter at her Dad's place.

The next day she made the Sunday roast whilst her father watched TV.

'I haven't half missed you, you know love,' he'd said during the adverts at half-time.

'I know you have Dad,' Jodie grabbed him a can from the yellowing fridge. After the match, Jodie and her dad ate their meal. Her father didn't notice her unusual level of silence. She'd always been a quiet girl.

After eating Jodie picked up her car-keys and headed for the address Danny had given her in the hospital. She pulled away from her dad's two-up, two-down, cream-walled semi.

It was a small miracle that the twelve-year-old light-blue car was still going. She had expected it to be burnt out at the very least. It even had all four wheels. Her dad had thoughtfully lent the car to a mate of his from down the pub, just for safekeeping, during Jodie's stay in hospital.

## **Chapter Twenty - Five Go Through the Veil**

It was coming up to 5.30pm when Jodie eventually pulled into the driveway of Danny's home. She pulled up on the crunchy gravel outside the large bungalow.

The autumnal nights were drawing in and dusk, in its gloom, lay all around. Jodie parked her car next to the vents from the basement laundry. She walked the short slope up to the front door. Michael answered.

'So you're a friend of Danny's then?' Michael asked in a jolly tone as he led Jodie down the hallway.

'You could say that. I was in the explosion at the Central library. Anyway, I met Danny whilst I was in hospital. We became friends.'

'Mmhm. Lucky to be alive really, by the sounds of it. Danny's been talking about you a lot today. Well he sure needs his friends does Danny. Before you go into his room, let me show something.'

Michael took Jodie to the fire escape door in the dining room that looked out to where the old holly tree used to be. There was lawn there now. But over the patch of newly laid turf there was a ghostly blue glow shimmering in the fading light of dusk.

'That's where the strange lightning happened. Weird, huh?' said Michael with some pride in his voice.

'Well, I am getting used to weird right now I must admit,' replied Jodie diplomatically.

'Well if it's weird you want, you've got the right man there.' Michael chuckled.

He indicated Danny's door. Jodie briefly watched Michael disappear before proceeding to knock at Danny's door. Just before her hand made contact with the wood the door drew itself back. Danny had pulled it open with his mouth via a cord attached to the inside handle.

'I saw you c-coming,' mumbled Danny in his low and slightly strangled tone as Jodie entered his room.

The bedroom was a long L-shape, half of which was dominated by the wardrobe and the electric tilting bed. There was a central gangway that was just about wide enough for Danny's wheelchair. The other side of the room was completely occupied by electronic equipment of the entertainment variety. Odd-looking control boxes sat here and there. These had orally activated switches that were fitted for Danny and little flashing rows of lights. One touch of the oral switch would start the lights flashing through a sequence and another touch would stop them at the appointed function.

Jodie wandered over to the window at the far end of Danny's room and looked out over the gardens. Dusk was turning to night and she couldn't see much. After a short period she turned around to look at Danny. She made herself comfortable on the edge of his bed. He brought himself closer and whispered, 'I guess you want to know the f-full story?'

Danny had to push the words through his reluctant vocal cords and out into the cold world beyond. Danny persevered, 'The events in the library caused me to spend n-nearly as l-long as you in the hospital. But we went somewhere else too. There was an entrance to another world inside the l-library. That was why the Special f-forces were there. It was a world very far away. It is a world not of this realm. We retrieved a gateway. A gateway to an even m-more fantastic realm called the Akashi. That gateway is now inside my head!'

‘I would like you to tell me all about that Danny. I really would. I know you're not mad. But first I need to tell you about these strange dreams I've been having. I've waited a long time to tell someone...’

Jodie told Danny all about the dreams that had been haunting her during her time in the hospital. About the surreal, dark industrial landscapes, the reactor dome, the evil entities she was trying to escape. She told him about the flying through the air, the horrible supermarket version of the library. She described the sad image of her dad all alone in the scrap-yard.

‘When you are n-near to the opening of another realm it can play havoc with your m-mind. It p-pulls things up from your past, like your dad and the sad f-feelings.’

‘What about the reactor dome?’

‘That may r-represent the energy needed to open the portal.’

‘And the scrap-yard?’

‘Not sure. The main thing is about going to a new realm and how that makes you feel.’

Danny went on to describe his journeys to the Sapient and Akashi realms and the two mind entities that had helped him.

‘We went to a planet on the very furthest edge of another reality called the Sapient Realm. It is a nature realm, a place where no h-human has ever lived. The Sapient Realm is a difficult v-vibration to enter. To travel to the far side of the Sapient Realm is nearly impossible.

‘When we were there we found the Akashi diamond. The diamond is a gateway to a deeper realm still, the Akashi. Within that special place is the great g-g-galactic library of the mind. Anyway Jodie,’ continued Danny, ‘to cut a long story short, we're back now and we've got the diamond gateway to the Akashi realm.

‘I have also visited my friend Thinking Stone. He is a tree who lives in the Sapient Realm but in a part that is much closer than where we went before. Thinking Stone told me that you are the key we need once we have opened the Akashi portal.’

‘Really? That sounds so bizarre.’

‘My life's bizarre. And it just gets w-worse. I have two mind entities camping out in my head at the moment for instance.’

Just then there was a knock at the door. Danny put his mouth to the joystick and motored over pulling it open with the cord. Ben was sat there with his usual look of startled surprise upon his face.

‘Come on in Ben,’ said Danny. ‘M-meet Jodie.’

Ben looked at Jodie rather seriously. After some time, and the failure of small talk to lighten things, Jodie felt a subtle force begin to move her. The energy lifted her hand right up and moved it toward Danny. Jodie didn't fight the force and her hand made contact with Danny's chest. Ben reached out and placed his hand upon Danny's chest too. Energy could be felt crackling in the room. The air was stuffy and close.

A blue laser light suddenly emitted from the top of Danny's scalp. It pulsed around the ceiling in a circle and then flashed up and down. It formed a hologram of the Akashi diamond. It was the size of a large man suspended in mid-air. The holo-form became steel-like. The diamond surged forward, turned momentarily to water and enclosed the three of them. It then resumed its impenetrable diamond surface.

A loud deep sound could be heard as energy surged through their bodies and the diamond started to spin. The sound got quicker, higher, louder, all consuming. Jodie felt her mind exploding to the size of the whole solar system, and then back again, explode again and back again. All was blackness and power from horizon to eternal horizon. She felt exhilaration, then

blinding lights and then fear. The fear dissipated. Consciousness imploded. All was dark for a moment or two.

Jodie looked around. She was in a dark subterranean passageway. Water was dripping relentlessly from what appeared to be a stone ceiling six-foot above their heads. She had been asleep on the slippery wet floor. Jodie noticed the walls and ceilings of the tunnel were giving off a dark greenish vapour. The vapour was hardly distinguishable in the pitched darkness. There were four others with her. They appeared deep in thought.

‘I think we’ve all died,’ thought Jodie. The words just floated out of her mind and effortlessly became sound. She could see Danny and Ben. Adjacent she also saw a semi-transparent orb of milky-white colour with a round beating nucleus and a brightly golden frog about the size of a small child. The frog hovered just above the floor. Those must be the two mind entities Jodie figured.

Orb bristled in her newly found freedom. Her beautiful translucent globe sported a blue glowing heart in the centre. She could have been a deep-sea jellyfish. Her thoughts could almost be seen swimming within her plasma. She was about the size of a large beach-ball.

‘It’s not very posh for the entrance to the Akashi library,’ said Ben telepathically. The environment softly spoke his words.

‘You just silly boy,’ butted in the mind entity, Golden Frog, imperiously.

‘Can you please all be quiet? Go hang out with Orb why don’t you Golf. This is serious business,’ chided Danny.

‘Poor, poor child! Danny, you really are a Class A fool,’ telepathised Orb helpfully.

‘Too right!’ added Golden Frog.

‘If that’s how you both feel, when we get back you can find someone else’s mind to hang around in. Mine needs some more elbow room anyway. And you Golden Frog, if I remember rightly, were more than happy to invade my mind once upon a time,’ Danny noted.

‘Sneaky agency, they tell poor Golf big lies. They say Golf big boss and Danny very very bad. Say I must use Danny to get them what they want. Then they will send me back to my own world. And in meantime they give lots of nice things to Golden Frog. Make out me best thing since gunpowder. When I took over human’s body, whathisname?’

‘That would be Michael. The one you nearly killed. You trashed his car too.’

‘Ah yes! It was too much. Too much power. I went mad!’

‘So what happened?’ said the Orb.

‘When Danny escape from me, they punish poor Golden Frog with Mindsnapper. They had stolen Mindsnapper from Orbs of Fargone. It awful. They made me into a kind of psychic energy-shield to protect the evil one they call, "The Leader". I was locked into his mind, forced to obey. They said they had tried, "subtle". Now ‘cos Danny very bad, force only option. Only a Fargone can stop a Mindsnapper. Orb is Fargone. So, when she attack, I escape.

‘And anyway, I help save your life *and* heal broken bones after man-dog attack. Though Orb did most of work.’

Orb was definitely feeling something for Golden Frog, but exactly what she wasn’t sure. Being a Fargone, she knew just how powerful the Mindsnapper was. The device on full beam was like experiencing the pain of complete and utter madness beamed directly into your mind. There was not a millisecond’s respite. Nor the smallest chance of escape - usually.

‘Hello,’ said Jodie out loud. ‘Has everyone forgotten me! I’ve never been to another realm before.’ The words boomed out across the environment.

Everyone stopped talking telepathically and just looked at Jodie.

Danny and Ben's bodies looked real enough. In fact, they were just as real as they looked normally but lighter somehow, a little less material. Their clothes were not made of cotton and polyester any more but threads of light. In the etherial realms their bodies were fully able.

Danny started to move down the tunnel. Ben followed next and Jodie trailed behind, lost in her own thoughts. It was only after some time had passed that Jodie realised that it was completely pitch black here. Despite it being completely dark she could actually see.

Darkness was not completely blind after all. It was just a very deep shade of blue. Just wait till I tell people back home about that one, Jodie thought. Then she remembered. The people back home would never understand where she had been or why.

Jodie was enjoying seeing in the near-blackness when she sensed the outline of two tunnel entrances some distance before them. As they approached she noted that each tunnel was marked overhead with a green glass box. They looked Victorian. Within them sat a single gas flame. The boxes themselves bore the words, 'No Return,' and 'Return,' respectively.

Above the two glass boxes, between the tunnels were some further words. Carved into the wall in a beautiful flowing script was a statement. It read, 'Welcome To The Akashi Realm,' the words morphed from English into a hieroglyphic font. It was as if the sign was reading their minds and choosing the most appropriate languages for them all. The shapes glowed blue against the green cavern walls.

'So which is to be?' Danny thought to the group.

'That easy,' said Golf. 'Akashi realm contain mind of entire galaxy. To enter is to be reborn. If choose, "No Return," you no return to former life. On leaving you reborn in new body. To enter Akashi realm is to die - and to live.'

Ben reflected on Golden Frog's words. He was hoping that the group would go through the tunnel marked 'No Return'. Part of him even considered just scooting off that way on his own account. But he knew, deep down, that easy way outs were not really an option.

First Danny, then Golden Frog and Orb, Jodie, and lastly Ben entered the 'Return' tunnel. As each person moved into the tunnel the whole entrance spun 360 degrees to the right and lit up with a piercingly brilliant blue-white light.

## **Chapter Twenty One - Enter The Akashi**

They were all suspended within a dazzlingly pure, infinitely soft, sky-blue light. It was both light and material simultaneously. It stretched from the horizon to the last recess of the mind. It did all this without so much as a gust of effort. Yet despite this power it didn't hurt the eyes. It simply stretched on forever. It was also delightfully cool. Cool to the innermost core of the body but with not a touch of cold. The coolness seemed to dispose of every last worry. The five of them gently lilted in space as if held by an invisible force.

It was as though the environment had been tuned to a new frequency. Visible currents revealed themselves. Rivers of pulsing yellow emerged from out of the space surrounding them. From afar a shimmering object could be seen. At first it looked like a miniature Earth but it was an incredible distance away and moving hypnotically fast.

As it approached it could be seen that it was also revolving. The currents were emerging from it. These streams of sunshine looked like a pulsating root system. The streams seemed to be sensing, enquiring, and sucking up nourishment. At first Danny had thought that the approaching entity was a spaceship. Then as it rapidly drew close he could see that it was too huge for that. It was more asteroid or moon than ship.

Finally it became clear that it was a tree-like shape. It was gently spinning as it moved forward, soundlessly, toward them. Then Danny had second thoughts. It can't be a tree; it's a ship. No, it's simply too big. What tree, or ship, is the size of a small planet? Ben realised first. It was both.

It drew near. They could hear the space around them reverberate into new shapes as the enormous entity disturbed the energy field in which they were suspended. It went from a speed beyond comprehension to stationary in little more than an instant. It was now spinning slowly about its axis as though it had never moved at all.

The space-tree was a golden brown colour with fluorescent glowing deep green leaves. The leaves moved as though there was a gentle breeze. The whole thing had a light-blue aura, just visible against the deeper blue of the surrounding space. Within the intricately patterned leaves veins of fast-pulsing silver shot darted. The whole edifice glowed like the Earth seen from space.

After some time, like a fierce arm emerging from the sea, a yellow bolt burst forth from one of the upper branches of the space-tree. It made its way down to the group in a long slow arc. Another stream of energy was making its way simultaneously in an arc from below. The streams of energy were like rays of solid sunshine. The second arc had emerged from one of the great tree's roots. The roots could be seen in their entirety. This gave the tree the appearance of a neural network - more brain than tree. The roots reached out and then around on themselves in great swathes around a central shorter vertical root. The upper branches reached outwards gracefully in the mushroom shape of an aged oak, or perhaps a venerable ash tree.

As the arc closed in from above the five persons held in the Akashi jet-stream were silent. Their minds were united in awe of the sheer beauty around them. It was a beauty that defied the senses. The upper arc resolved itself into the shape of a bird. As it approached the energy transfigured into a golden bird with a wingspan the length and breadth of three men. It flew in a perfectly drawn curve without a single beat of its wings. The lower arc hardened into a golden branch, upon which the great bird alighted. It had a beak like an eagle and a head smooth with golden feathers. It radiated a powerful golden light and seemed to grow and shrink with each breath.

The creature spent some time watching them. Some minutes later it spoke in a magnificent, silky-deep voice,

‘Welcome to the Akashi realm, children of the galaxy. This is the realm of realms, the consciousness behind every other reality in this galaxy. The great tree-ship you see before you is not in any one realm but in all realities. My name is Garuda the Golden Guardian.’

Garuda waited for a few moments whilst its words were absorbed, ‘We are in all the realms here. There is, in truth, only the one, quite ordinary space. But there are many different layers within this single being my friends. Each layer has its own way of life, inhabiting entities, environments and cosmic laws and so on. Some realms are so fantastic as to be beyond all imagining. Some appear ordinary – at times.

‘The galactic tree-ship you see before you is a mind-ship. It contains a deep secret, a secret of life itself.

‘Every thought, every deed, every ripple on every wave in all the realms throughout the galaxy is contained herein. This ship, the Akashi library of which you seek is not easy to enter. It cannot be so, for within you will find the story of "mind" itself.

‘There is the final security device through which you must pass. A mind steeped in evil has barriers that it has erected to protect itself from destruction. It cannot allow itself to simply be in case it would lose itself in the chaos that is the light. Such a mind must always be thinking, scheming, controlling.’

The bird looked even more fearsome now. It continued.

‘Do not be afraid. I give you my word you will enter the Akashi library unharmed if you can just answer the simple question I pose with all honesty. Reply from the heart with the first thing that comes to mind. If you fail, you will of course be vaporised instantly.’

Quietness fell heavily upon the group. A short repose as fortune would have it.

‘Danny Sola, you are first. Please bring yourself forward, good, good. Danny, the secret for which you search, is it inside or outside one's self?’

Danny breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't so hard after all. The right answer popped into his mind.

‘It is inside, Garuda.’

‘Good that is what our Akashi records would indicate to be your first choice. Now Jodie Temple it is your turn. Are you looking for love or for meaning?’

Jodie went pale with fright. She wasn't sure what to say. Just go with your intuition, she told herself. But was she really looking for love? That was what everyone would expect her to say. But is it true? I mustn't think. I mustn't try to work it out. Jodie couldn't help but be harsh with herself. At last Jodie said, 'Love'. Garuda seemed pleased.

‘Orb of Fargone, please bring yourself forward. Good. Now Orb, do not worry, this is a simple question. You are sure to know without effort. Orb, is it life or death that frightens you most?’

Orb felt ashamed, and a little angry. Her innermost soul was being exposed to all and sundry. However, such exposure was a lot better than vaporisation. She knew the honest answer. Orb didn't like being around people at the best of times and now she was being asked to reveal herself to these half strangers. Orb resigned herself and said, 'Life,' very quietly with a little sigh. Garuda permitted her to take her place next to Danny and Jodie.

‘Golden Frog of the Ancient Interstellar Mindfrogs. Come forward.’ The calm tone was now absent from Garuda's communication.



‘If I were to offer you power beyond your wildest dreams or the mere faintest possibility of the love of just one other soul, what would you have?’

‘The love,’ said Golden Frog without hesitation or thought. He’d have preferred the others to think of him as having a slightly evil side rather than simply a lonely old mind-entity. The truth was out there.

‘Bendhu, Earth human. Make yourself known.’

‘It is I, Garuda’ replied Ben.

‘Whose fault is it?’

What kind of question is that? Ben thought in anger. Everyone else gets a proper question. Saved the weirdo riddle just for me. Ben replied via a private telepathy (not an easy thing to do in the Akashi realm).

‘That is correct. But out-loud please,’ said the great bird, ‘The security device requires a witness.’

‘My fault!’ Ben replied grumpily. He then took his place with the others.

‘Excellent, excellent! You have all entered through the final security device. Now you must present me with the key.’

Danny nudged Jodie and she bobbed forward within the Akashi current that was still holding them.

‘She is but one half of the key,’ said Garuda.

Jodie understood intuitively and immediately turned around to face Danny. A golden sun-like energy swirled forth from inside Jodie’s body and fused together with Danny’s equally flowing energy. Yellow streams pulsed all around them and connected them together at centres along the midline of their bodies. From above the eyes, the throat, the centre of the chest, the solar plexus, the feet and rising from their tops of their heads, it swirled together in a symphony of movement.

‘Energy is wonderful,’ stated the bird shifting slightly on her golden claws.

Jodie and Danny felt their bodies explode to nothingness as the energy rose and swirled. What there was of their selves was everything and everywhere, scattered out across the universe. Every pulse of movement was an indefinable chorus of being. Then suddenly they were aware of their previous bodies. Their bodies were calling to them like a mother drawing back a wandering child. Fusing toward their previous bodily form was pure exhilaration.

They were now in their own auras watching themselves. The energy of their bodies was rising in vibration, taking on a new and different incarnation. The scattered field that was Danny and Jodie suddenly drew itself back together again. They felt a surge of physicality. It was the same form but a totally different feeling. Their bodies were made of a material light. They both looked at their beings of light substance in wonder and fascination. They played with movements of their hands and arms. Wherever they moved their limbs, an after-glow was left in the space previous.

After a short while, Danny reached out and touched Orb. Her body immediately rose in vibration till she was similarly embodied. Jodie touched Golden Frog and then Ben. They too entered this new state of being.

Jodie noticed a heavy glowing feeling in her abdomen. She looked at herself and saw a golden key floating within her abdomen. The key had 5 teeth and ended with an orb inscribed with a curving wave-form. Jodie reached into her energy-body. She grasped the key bringing it forth with a loud gasp. As the key left Jodie’s energy-body it grew in size until it became big enough for five sets of hands to grasp.

Garuda motioned to them to hold onto the key, ‘You can follow me now,’ she said.

The five entities flew behind the key, behind the great golden bird, out through the soft blue light of the Akashi realm. The bird approached the ancient cosmological tree. The blue and yellow streams of energy that bound her to the ship shortened like telescopic umbilical cords.

Just as they were approaching the tree a huge fanged snake with black and white diamond patterned skin reared itself. Its body curled endlessly around the great tree-ship's roots. It bared its fangs, each one the height of a man, glistening with a silver sheen, dripping with poison. Garuda screeched violently at the creature and the snake retreated back into the tree's roots.

'That is Technis, he can do you no harm whilst you are with me.' Garuda stated serenely.

Nearing the landing knoll of the tree Garuda stretched her wings backwards to slow herself and as she did this multi-coloured light sparked from the edges of her feathers.

All five alighted on the knoll. They paused briefly before entering the wood-lipped portal. They were now at the very heart of the Akashi realm. Jodie held the key with both hands. She watched as the key diminished in size until it dissolved into her own flesh, leaving nothing but a slight purple mark in the centre of her right palm.

Danny thought briefly about why there were here. What was the real goal of this journey he wondered? He tended to question everything. He enjoyed the process of doubting, turning things over in his mind, finding new angles. He was a natural born scientist in a sense – always inquisitive, always childlike, wanting to discover new things.

Thinking Stone the ancient Sapiient tree had assured him that Danny and his friends could retrieve the Ruro, the powerful unique substance that gave its bearers super-charged psychic powers. Danny had a sense that perhaps even Thinking Stone wasn't telling him the whole truth. Maybe his journey to the Akashi realm and to the great tree-ship was about something more than just the ruro.

They were now in a large cavern within one of the main branches of the great tree. The branch itself must have had a girth a mile thick. It was dark but the light from the blue-white Akashi realm seeped deep within. The golden bird returned to the edge of the cavern. Following, they all stood at the edge of the hollow, watching, as the great tree tumbled through the endless blue of the space below.

After some time had passed the great bird turned to the others, bowed, and flew out into the tree's surrounding space without so much as a departing word.

'How's the key?' enquired Golden Frog. His mind projected the sound onto the environment. 'That was quite a pregnancy. Impressive.'

Jodie felt embarrassed, she looked at the purple mark on her right hand – all that was now left of the key.

'Your lights were really something too Jodie,' added Orb.

The group waited quietly.

## **Chapter Twenty Two - Going to the Dogs**

‘Are we going to hang around here forever?’ enquired Orb after some time.

‘That won't be necessary.’ The deep voice seemed to echo within their bones with a tremulous power. As one, the friends spun around, toward the source of the voice. Danny's heart was thumping madly and even Ben, who in times of stress tended to retreat further into himself, looked panicked. The fear soon passed as they recognized their canine mentor from the far-off Sapien Realm nature planet. The others were terrified. It had a foot wide beautiful grey and white furred head with pointed ears and inch long fur. It had incisors that could drip saliva in quarts. Its breath hung, sweet but threatening, in the air. The dog's electric brown eyes sparkled with raw power.

‘Do not be scared,’ said Zafearon kindly, his telepathy loud and clear as sound. ‘I am a friend of Danny and Ben. Perhaps you could say I am a guide who appears in times of great need. That is one of my roles anyway.’

His eyes locked on to theirs and a magnetic power burst through into their minds. A deep reverberating sound could be heard. Zafearon physically reversed their fear with his eyes just like he had done when he had first met Danny and Ben on the nature realm planet.

Danny stood back from the edge of the wooden cave and watched the two mind entities. Their auras had gone red and purple with fright. They slowly resumed their normal soft-blue glow.

‘It's never easy introducing myself,’ said Zafearon. ‘This organic, cosmological tree-ship is named, like all the great Sapien trees after a stone.’

‘It's the Arkstone isn't it?’ returned Danny, ‘don't ask me how I knew.’

‘That's right my friend, the Arkstone. For this is the original Ark, the great holder of the eternal forms. I am the "form" of “Dog” of course. All dogs in the galaxy are an emanation of myself.’

‘But who are you an emanation of in that case?’ Ben asked.

‘That is a good question Ben, one that would be worthy of an ancient philosopher. I am an emanation of myself. Of many, many canines, their thoughts come to me and from me. We are one. Some even call me the canine librarian. As a guardian of this great tree-ship I am entrusted to hold all the canine memories of this whole galaxy.’

‘That's a lot of memories. Is there no other great dog here with you?’ said the Orb, ‘are you all alone?’

‘The only loneliness I know is the loneliness of peace. I am alone with my awareness of nature's great expanse. I have my companion of course. Come in Marla.’

With a great leap from the darkness at the back of the expansive wooden hall came another great wolf-like creature. Like Zafearon she was some 5-foot high at the shoulders. In contrast to his grey bristle she had softer longer fur of a light cream colour. Still, looking into her deep brown eyes was like staring into the abyss of wolverine death. Yet strangely she was also profoundly comforting.

She sniffed at the little group for a while and then with a deft flick of her nose tossed Ben onto her back. Using her eyes she motioned Golden Frog to follow Ben's lead. Zafearon knelt down and gathered up Danny, Orb and Jodie.

‘Although we'd like you to stay with us, the felines hold a key for your journey within the Arkstone. We've going to pay the feline librarian a visit, hold tight!’

Marla barked in excitement, the sound echoed off the old wood, stone-like walls. Orb caught a glance at Marla's incisors. I wouldn't like to see those in anger she thought, quaking ever so slightly. The two dogs began to run toward the back of cavern. By the time they'd reached the back of the cave they were travelling at what felt like a hundred miles an hour. At the end of the cavern was a single tunnel entrance. On through the darkness they spun. They were as swift as an arrow shot forth from the strongest bow, inevitably toward its target.

The tunnels were gently curving and dark. Root-like veins could be seen along the walls. They flew along the passageways banking left and right. Dark green light glowed quietly from the curved wooden walls as they flashed past. Ben leant his head down. He watched the graceful fall and rise of Marla's enormous grey, long-furred paws as they strode down the corridors of the Arkstone. Great pants of breath left Zafearon's nostrils. He looked like an ethereal steam train cutting through the cool misty air.

The two dogs shot along the cavernous tunnels. Their tunnel appeared to be opening out. At the same time the roof was narrowing down. They continued for some seconds until Danny thought he could feel the brush of the cavern ceiling upon his wind-swept hair. Holding onto Zafearon's bristly mane, Danny risked lowering his head to see out beyond Zafearon's jaws. The cavern would shortly come to an end. Yet the dogs didn't seem to show any signs of slowing down. If anything they were actually speeding up.

'Hey, this is great Zafearon but isn't that a solid wall we're steaming toward?' telepathised Danny quickly.

'You're in safe paws,' returned Zafearon chuckling with a wolf-like growl.

Danny just about managed to look past Jodie and the Orb to take in Marla and her travellers. Jodie and the Orb seemed oblivious to their impending doom. Golden Frog looked like he was having the time of his life. He probably wouldn't care if they all got smashed to pieces. Ben was clinging on for dear life.

The wind tugged Danny's head back round. He made himself open his eyes. Zafearon's front legs paused for a microsecond as the two great dogs simultaneously launched themselves into the air. They hurtled toward the solid wall at the end of the cavern. As Zafearon's nose touched the wall the near-black wood rippled outwards as though a rock had been launched against a lake's surface. It was as if a spirit had flown straight through her, Jodie reflected. Danny and the others had similar feelings. They appeared to have shot straight through the wooden wall of the Arkstone as if it were water. They were now submerged within a light, breathable yellow liquid. Zafearon commanded them not to panic, 'Breathe the liquid, you will come to no harm,' he said.

It felt tingly all over like an electric current was running through the substance. It was cool yet somehow this liquid didn't seem to penetrate their clothes. They felt light, buoyant. Danny could see through the clear sunny liquid, which had a slight glow of its own, to the dark, veined walls of the tunnel.

'Welcome to the great Arkstone's internal navigation system.' remarked Zafearon proudly. 'We are now in River-Sap One or R1 for short. We'll be taking this channel for a while before diverting off on to the R2 for a bit and then we'll catch the R45 over to the top limbs.'

The crew still clung to Zafearon and Marla but instead of breathing the cool air of the tunnels their lungs drew in golden yellow liquid light. It was too light to be a just a liquid - but too heavy, and supportive, to be air. It pulsed rhythmically as though it were itself alive. It didn't run downwards. It ran up. Straight up. The liquid had poured into their lungs suffusing them with undiluted raw power.

‘Maybe I am dead and this is all just a spirit world,’ Jodie wondered to herself. ‘Everything is just too weird to be real,’ she thought.

‘You’ll get used to it,’ Zafearon added in his deep telepathic tone.

‘Don’t think I’ll ever get used to broadcasting every last thought though,’ she replied. She could hear Danny chuckling in the back of the mind.

The bodies of Zafearon and Marla arched and curved as the river swam its way ever upward. Danny watched eddies of amber light gather and then disappear into the liquid. He glanced at Ben, who was smiling broadly. His black hair was slicked backwards from the current of sap. He looked more alive than Danny could ever remember seeing him. Ben didn't smile that often. He tended to keep his emotions to himself.

The river of yellow light branched out ahead. With a deft flick of his entire torso Zafearon moved against the main upward current. He edged into the lesser stream. Marla followed, a little more elegantly. Soon the flow eased and the volume of golden-light slacked off.

Eventually, they left the yellow liquid altogether and emerged into an air-like atmosphere. They were at what appeared to be a beach. Yellow snakes of light oozed their way across the sand. The beach however had no real sand. It was too perfect. It was composed of a plastic-like shiny substance. The ceiling of the cavern had a slight blue colour to it which gave off a gentle blue phosphorescence. Toward the edges of the cavern the ceiling resumed its dark brown wooden colour.

The two great dogs knelt still within the sand. Their large front paws indented massive prints into the plasma-beach. Danny felt himself sliding down from the dog's back. His naked feet came to rest on the beach.

Ben landed with a soft sound by Danny's side. Marla had just shaken him off as though he were an annoying puppy. Orb hovered beautifully, lightly above the ground. Golden Frog's skin seemed to glow a more intense metallic yellow after the excitement of the journey. His eyes, a striking green, had a thoughtful expression to them. He appeared to be sat on the beach but was actually hovering just above the plastic substance.

The plasma curled itself around Danny's feet, the cool slime licking at his toes. Ben just stared. He was sitting cross-legged quietly watching the plasma-beach gather around him. Ben seemed to have gone within himself, in a quiet meditation. Danny glanced at Zafearon who didn't speak but his look said not to worry.

Danny glanced around the cavern, inquisitive as usual, soaking up information like a sponge. The cavern was the size of a large hall, enough space for a hundred people to mill around comfortably. The ceiling rose to about the height of house at the centre and its blue glow lit the cavern. It then tapered down toward the side-walls which had the same dark-brown, veined appearance as the first tunnels they had seen in the Arkstone.

Zafearon and Marla were edging backwards from the beach. Suddenly they turned tail and leapt toward the side-walls. These melted as the animals hit and in a mere flash of the eye they were gone. The wall healed itself immediately and returned to its former state.

‘We were just waiting for the return current, Danny,’ remarked Zafearon telepathically. The quiet echo of increasing distance measured in Danny's mind. ‘The feline ones will see you now. They wish you to know their domain. And then you must travel onward to the human zone, Danny. Learn the things you must learn and gather the ruo, as the Sapient Ones have intended.

‘As the dog librarian I have special powers to travel with humans through the Arkstone. I cannot take you all the way to the human zone however. For that you need the help of our feline friends. But their zone is inaccessible to humans. You will have to change form, which is why I

have brought you here, to the plastic beach where the miniature sea of changes laps at its shore.’  
And with that he was gone.

## Chapter Twenty Three - Ariel the Cat

'Oh my gracious aunt!' screamed Golden Frog. Golden Frog was sporting a frog-like head but had a scrawny lion-cub body. Frog fought the morphing force. One moment the frog's face, and then the lion cub's predominated. However, his body was all scrawny feline.

'I'm turning into cat! NOOOOO!' yelled Golden Frog.

'Yeah you're right. We all are,' remarked Ben calmly. 'There's nothing you can do about it either,' he added.

'This no right! I demand this stop! STOP NOW!'

'You do not like your transfiguration, my golden friend?' remarked an enormous ginger cat. The dislocated head of a huge smiling ginger cat hovered above them. It shimmered as though it were being projected onto the blue ceiling which shone down above the Arkstone's little plastic beach.

The silken-voiced feline continued, 'If you are to enter the feline library, which is the secret domain of all things cat-like, you must become as I am. And you must enter this zone in order to proceed to the human one. The human zone is a very long journey from here. Cats are very powerful psychic creatures. This is why I am entrusted to access the Arkstone vortex. This teleport vortex can send you right to the human zone in a flash. You won't have the most honoured form for long, little frog.'

'Don't call me little frog.'

'Shall I eat you instead?' said the cat grinning from ear to ear.

'No, he'll pass on that,' added Jodie.

'Join me then, my friends,' purred the cat in its deep chocolate voice. Jodie was too busy admiring her new black panther-like body to pay much attention to the feline's invite. Jodie would have been almost perfectly formed had it not been for her slightly askew snout. Danny thought the imperfection suited. It emphasized her attractiveness.

Danny was slowly turning into a scruffy looking tabby cat. Strange compulsions, urges to chase and bite drifted through his mind - alongside a gnawing hunger.

A wind started up. The cat smiled, 'See you soon.' Its image began to slowly disappear. The plasma beach began to whirl around in a great circle turning in upon itself like kneaded dough. The strange plastic substance gripped the four cat-humans, one cat-frog and the cat-orb. They stared into the smiling eyes of the enormous ginger cat whose face had now disappeared altogether. It was watching them in amusement, floating above them. Another wink and then even the eyes vanished.

They found themselves still spinning but the plastic cocoon was now gone. Walls of wind tore at them, the spinning forces pinning them to their position. They were inside a small, revolving grey tunnel made of nothing but air and wood. Twigs, branches and leaves were all hurling around them at breakneck speed in the freezing cold wind. The five entities had the thought as one: 'Hurricane!'

'Do not be alarmed. I am Vortex of Arkstone. Where do you wish to go?' a quiet voice said in their minds.

'The realm of cat is awaiting us thank you Vortex,' transmitted Danny.

'Wise choice. Prepare for landing.'

One by one, the five creatures were flung from the Vortex into space. Arms and legs flailed searching for solidity. They were descending through a bright radiant sky - except there was no

sun. Nor was there open sky above them. Or rather the sky was a great tube of blue-glowing material. They were in a self-lighting mile-wide blue tunnel, a hollow branch, some miles across. The five descended from the inner sky.

As they tumbled five mighty flying lions came into view. They were a golden colour. They arched and banked their eagle-like wings as though imitating World War I biplanes. The creatures had no sooner locked onto their targets than their great talons were upon them. The great cat-birds, for that is what they truly were, carried the five to the ground. They swept past an enormous grinning ginger cat. He must have been at least the height of two men.

They each dropped their prey a little above the ground. The last one held the strangely transformed Golf. There appeared to be some distaste from the great flying animal. Golf found himself dropped from a height. He bounced unhurt but his dignity took a tumble. Golf scowled before turning his attention to the towering cat sat smiling before him.

He found himself in a large summer meadow filled with wild flowers and irresistible aromas. Old gnarled trees were spotted here and there. Over in the distance were rocky outcrops and the entrance to an abandoned Hindu temple. It was guarded by a half-cat half-human female form. The meadow was surrounded by the beginnings of a dense wood. It was a cat's paradise.

'Ahh! You have arrived. How grand. Hello my friends. I do trust you are enjoying your more, what-to-say, cat-like, forms,' communicated the great cat to the group.

'We do appreciate you taking us into your realm here. We don't even know your name,' said Danny.

'How amiss of me! It has been so *very* long since I last saw a two-legged in the flesh, even though you now have a cat-body here in my realm of course. Oh what a treat!'

Orb felt annoyed. Obviously the great ginger cat was much more impressed by humans than mere mind-entities like her.

'What was I talking about dear ones? Oh yes, my name. I'll just translate it into "two-legged" for you. It is...Ariel.'

'We're very pleased to meet you Ariel,' said Danny.

'Likewise I'm sure. I must thank Garuda, Zafearon and Marla for bringing you here.'

'They were kind to us.'

'We've been preparing for this for some time.'

'Really?'

'Well the best part of 20,000 Earth years, if you call that a long time. My partner, Venus, is on planet leave. She reincarnated as a black house-cat in a place called the Bronx, New York. She loves field research. Always curious about two-leggeds she is.'

'So, let me show you around. I am the feline "Keeper-Of-The-Forms", a kind of cosmic librarian I guess. Just as Zafearon and Marla keep the form of "dog", I store the entire "mind-of-cat" throughout this little old galaxy. As you might well have gathered of course,' Ariel winked at the others.

The cat's galactic meadow was a dream-like place – it didn't look like any library the friends had ever seen before. It occurred to Danny that perhaps books are not the only place to record one's thoughts. Everything here was so intense, the smells, the sounds, even the colours. A vivid violet blue wild flower attracted Danny's attention. It seemed more real than he had ever noticed a flower being before. As Danny turned to look at the flower its petals opened and he thought he saw a glimmer of a cat's face within it. The sun warmed the back of his dark gray furry neck. It was wonderful.



Everything here had a strange catlike quality to it. Even the grass and the trees seemed to mew softly in the wind. A butterfly flitted past. Danny was a little shocked. The butterfly fixed him with its tiny cat-like eyes in its micro-feline face. It wasn't a particularly friendly butterfly. Cat-butterflies were a little sinister, truth be told. Even the whimsical clouds drifting beneath the sky-tube were shaped like cats in various poses - leaping, cavorting or pouncing.

'My "once two-legged" and "mind-entity" friends! I see the complete feline nature of this, my great domain, has you puzzled. Am I right?' whispered the great cat telepathically.

'Just a little,' agreed Ben out loud.

'Well then. I shall explain. What you see here is in fact the inside of the cat branch of the great Arkstone. This before you is the galactic mind of cat itself. Everything in any cat's mind on planets near and far is right here.'

Danny watched as one of the flying creatures swooped above a tree. It held a young lion cub in its talons. The golden-maned cat had its claws out and was taking swipes at the air with its fist-sized paws.

'Don't worry Danny,' said Ariel. 'She is training our young lion cub here. He needs to get used to heights. Some time from now we'll be dropping him, and a little tribe of his friends, onto a mountainous spot of a life-planet right over on the far side.'

'The far side?' stuttered Ben.

'The far side of the galaxy of course. This here, is the very mind of our galaxy. But this is not the only Arkstone. But it's the only one for a very long way. All the best galaxies have one of these library trees I believe. Anyway, as super lovely as my domain is, sightseeing isn't why you've visited. So you guys have a little wander about and we'll get straight down to business in an hour or two.'

With that the great ginger cat heaved himself to his feet and padded off into the meadows beyond. The self-lighting sun-tube was in full shine. The group relaxed on the slightly mint-fragranced grass. The grass was green but had slightly furry sides to its stalks. They took in the mewing of the cat-trees in the warm sweet breeze. Every now and then kittens would tumble past play-fighting.

There was a large, yellow- striped tiger a little way off hanging idly from a huge tree limb. The tiger, like most of the creatures apart from the librarian, was of a normal size. It seemed to be watching them intently but without a great deal of curiosity. Ben had known immediately that the creature was there as a bodyguard just in case a passing lion took a fancy to them as a tasty treat. It looked a rather fierce looking example even from half way across the meadow. They were glad that it showed no inclination to move itself away from its perch.

The five relaxed and chatted in the sunny tube-shine for a while. Jodie particularly enjoyed her feline form. She ran and tumbled about with Orb and Danny, neither of whom had anything like her agility. Orb kept some of her previous transparent, spherical form but in addition she was now vaguely cat-shaped and had sprouted a tail. Ben pattered about on his own sniffing at things.

The strange looking Golden Frog sat by the tree and sulked. The only highlight for him was the discovery that he could mark his territory, or a passerby, with an extremely pungent odour-spray. Some hours had passed in this fashion when there appeared before them a large ghostly image of the great ginger cat's head.

'Please excuse my appearing like this. I've got rather taken up with business. There's a lot to sort out at the moment.'

'The Earth humans, in fact all of the two-legged species, like to think of themselves as the single greatest apex of all evolution. They are all, in fact, merely creation's common factor.'

Danny, Jodie and Ben, you are but a part-reptile, part-mammal, part-everything creature. If you took every single animal in creation and boiled it down to the absolute average, you'd end up with a human - or something quite like one. Humans are merely God's common ground. Obviously cats are the pinnacles of creation. Anyhow, now you know that about humans, it is sensible that the human district of the Arkstone must be located right at the very centre of the space-tree. That would normally be a long journey from here.

‘Incidentally, have you noticed how all the great human tales have cats in them somewhere? This is because we are very psychic creatures. Even ordinary house-cats can see things that only the rare Earth human can.

‘Anyway, only the cats and the human realms have access to the great teleport Vortex of Arkstone. So prepare to be transformed!’

The cat's image gripped them. Suddenly their minds were as clear as Antarctic ice. No obstacle seemed great. The gate of mind was flung wide open. The moments passed like shooting stars in the brief night sky. The great cat averted his eyes and a hushed silence descended upon the group.

They waited for the Vortex to appear. The wind gathered from all directions and the hurricane took them in its certain embrace.

## **Chapter Twenty Four - Mountain Spirit**

They were held within the all-consuming wall of wind. A sharp, metallic crack broke through the noise. A moment later, a steel wall, suspended from nowhere, snapped loudly into place. Another sharp metallic snap, and a second, then a third wall was summoned. A few seconds later six walls defined their space within the newly-formed cube. Contained within these walls, they were still spinning within the relentless wind of the Vortex. Gradually the Vortex loosened its grip. They found themselves standing, a little dizzy but remaining still, in a grand, 1920s style maroon elevator. They stood for what felt like quite some time.

Danny steadied himself against the mahogany wood-panels that formed the lift walls. The dimly lit elevator had room for twenty or thirty people comfortably. In one corner stood a fold-down velvet-lined chair. It was stowed in upright position awaiting the absentee lift attendant. The electric lights, two on each side wall, were of the pretty, curving 'Art-Deco' style. However, what was most puzzling was the entire absence of push-buttons.

There was no floor indicator, no doors, and no controls at all. Beyond the pull across, old-fashioned metal trellis was just dark-grey steel nothingness. There wasn't a view, not even a trap door in the ceiling, no discernible exit. More minutes crawled past. Danny spoke out-loud to the elevator. Ben spoke to it telepathically. No response, no change, nothing. Claustrophobia and panic began to edge its way into the friend's minds.

The Orb, who was relieved to have her old non-feline form back, tried to float through the metal walls. She bounced right off. She put out a pod, for want of an arm, but it seemed to float a millimetre from the surface of the material. She wasn't happy at all.

'I kick wall,' said Golden Frog, confident he would quickly find a way out. He tried to kick the walls but found he couldn't contact the material either. He did succeed in looking foolish. His last kick slid upwards over his head and he bounced backwards.

Jodie was tired and didn't want to sit on the floor. She wandered over to the elevator attendant's chair, pulled the maroon velvet seat out and sat down. The lights flickered. Then they flickered again. There was a sound like a very elderly engine clearing its throat.

'I thought you'd never ask,' said the elevator disinterestedly.

'Hi,' intoned Danny, who like the others was nearly lost for words.

'We're pleased to meet you,' added Danny.

'Really? I'm just a machine you know. I've been in this form for nearly 500 years now and they have no intention of dismantling me. You couldn't vandalise me beyond all repair could you?'

'It's not really our scene. I hope you don't mind.'

'I'm protected by all sorts of special fields anyway. It's a killer. By the way. I can only follow the instructions of whosoever sticks their talented behind on that attendant's chair,' said the elevator to Jodie. 'The human librarians probably think that's funny. I don't like them much.'

'I like being the lift attendant,' smiled Jodie.

'My waking time doesn't last long these days. So if you don't mind, can we just get on with it? I want to go back to this lovely dream I was having. Makes a change mind. I had a nightmare for 100 years once. No one even cared. I'm called Albert by the way. Anyhow, let's get going.'

'I don't know how. Sorry. You tell me please,' Jodie hesitated, 'Albert.'

'It's not hard. You just use your psychokinetic powers to move the control orb down - that's the small blue glowing sphere that should now be hovering just below my ceiling. One sticks

one's hand in it. I read your energy field patterns. Then off we go to the floor where your life-book is stored. Easy.'

'I don't think I have any psychokinetic powers I'm afraid. Can Danny help me?'

'Please. Be my guest.'

'Albert, I think I've brought the control orb down now,' said Danny.

'Oh. Right-ho then,' intoned Albert in his deep gravelly voice. He sounded a touch disappointed.

'Well, when you're ready just stick a body part into the control orb. You go ahead then.'

With some fear Jodie reached toward the small, slightly pulsating yellow orb. It hovered in front of her invitingly. Her fingers reached a hair's width from its surface and then she hesitated. Finally, she shut her eyes and plunged her hand right in. Nothing happened immediately. Slowly, a cool fluid sensation, not unpleasant, took over her hand. The fluid chill began to make its way toward her elbow. At the same time a light blue force field could be seen around Jodie's arm.

'Mhmm yes, I had my suspicions I must admit,' Albert said thoughtfully. 'Definitely a floor 11,212 kind of a girl. I guess that's where you all belong.'

'Jolly good,' said Jodie.

'Yes, floor 11,212. Quite a trip. A good let's see, 799.9 miles. Estimated journey time, going nice and slow, 11 seconds. Hang on to your hats, ladies, entities and gentlemen.'

Obviously a show-biz elevator thought Ben as he crouched down and braced himself for the worst.

The walls started spinning. Slowly at first, then blurring and patterning into a barely comprehensible speed. The hazy spinning walls seemed to be singing a soothing Latin samba. Yellow strobe-like colours accompanied the rhythmic humming. As the colours changed toward blue the temperature dropped. A still, ornately styled pointer cream-coloured hand appeared above the elevator door as if by magic. The pointer crawled sedately from left to right. Everything else around them was in a state of chaos.

Danny felt himself expand and contract. It was almost as if the whole elevator were one huge creature, crouching, ready to pounce.

'Right then. Prepare for the leap folks,' said Albert's deep gravel voice.

It was more a change in consciousness than an actual physical sensation. Albert kindly had opened a window, where previously there had been nothing but wall, for them to view the floors as they flashed by. The pointer hand began to move faster now. Danny felt as though he was as swift as light. As though he could move anywhere effortlessly. He was a gold-plated, super-smooth piece of lightning. The pointer hand above moved faster still. Then it jumped to the right. No sooner had they adjusted to the sensation of movement than they were there and all was calm again.

The pointer above the elevator doors now indicated the right hand side of its sweep. Ivory coloured flip-cards above the pointer had appeared faintly - as though they had been there all along. They read 11,212. The viewing window which had appeared from nowhere became wall once more. The colours returned to their previous muted mahogany hues. The walls had stopped spinning and the elevator was so still it was hard to imagine it ever moving. The only thing telling them their journey had been real was the reverberations of the speed in their muscles. The trellis folded in upon itself and the smooth doors opened.

Outside, in tall holographic letters, a display said, '*Welcome to the Akashi Library, Humanoid Section, Floor 11,212. Sorry but no human-librarians are available to take your query right now but please feel free to have a wander around.*'

‘They probably think that's funny too,’ said Albert. ‘Anyway, here you are. Have a nice day.’

Albert disappeared leaving only wooden veined wall behind. The travellers stood in awe of their new surroundings. The highly polished wooden floor stretched onwards far into the distance. The dark brown parké tiles formed moving patterns of spirals and sine waves. The movement was subtle. When looking at the floor directly the constant changes could not easily be seen.

The atmosphere was deliciously crisp, the feeling studious. Thousands of 30-foot high marble bookshelves stood, dotted here and there in an understated, yet definite pattern. The ceiling was at the height of a four-storey building. It seemed to be formed from a canopy of very large dark green leaves.

Superbly polished and oiled wooden stairs on castor wheels stood all around. Danny discovered that they were so well made that the merest touch would move them. The slightest pressure on the stairs themselves caused the wheels to retract into their housings. The stairs looked like they could support a tonne or two. They were made of a deep red and aged mahogany wood. The stairs were in a spiral form.

There were no windows and the walls were too far away to be seen in the subdued light. The elevator shaft had come up in what appeared to be the exact centre of the library. The part of the elevator shaft visible above the floor stood like a wooden artery veined with threads of a yellow liquid light. Much of the grand floor itself was shrouded in darkness. The floor was more or less flat but every hundred yards or so a supporting column went from ground to the high ceiling. The columns looked like the trunks of old oak trees. They had occasional small stubby branches and small dark green leaves.

Orb first noticed that what little light there was in the library was provided by the occasional electric glows that passed like water through the thread-like veins on the ceiling leaves. There was certainly some pattern to the lights but it was not immediately obvious.

Danny looked down at the floor and then headed off toward one of the marble bookcases. Each one was as tall as a house. The others, not knowing where to start followed happily. They looked quietly left and right. Danny neared the bookcase. As he approached, light blue holographic letters appeared suspended in the cool mid-air. The letter shapes appeared to morph between languages and symbols until they settled on English and read the following:

*‘Reference; General, Planet Earth, 20-21st Century, Current Era.’*

Danny proceeded toward the case. The books looked ordinary. Some had bright covers whilst others were cloth or leather-bound. The writing appeared to be a mixture of Chinese and English characters yet to neither language did they belong exactly. It was entirely foreign, yet he understood it. A part of him could comprehend this strange language easier than his own. It almost translated itself.

He ventured toward one of the moveable wooden spiral steps. He pushed the grand structure effortlessly, positioned it and then climbed to the top of the ancient staircase. Each step had a slight spring to it. The wood of the staircase seemed to Danny to have absorbed the wisdom of centuries. He reached for a book. It had an interesting cover and the title caught his eye, *‘The Meaning of Evil: A Collection of Thoughts on the Current Crisis facing Planet Earth’*. Danny was entranced in the book for some time. Finally he put it down and moved to another part of the bookcase.

Danny saw a book that looked different to the rest. It didn't seem to be made of paper at all. It was some sort of liquid light. The title didn't seem particularly amazing, *‘Night Buses of England’*

- *My Journeys and Experiences*'. The liquid light pages turned over like ordinary paper. The words, despite the strange language, seemed understandable. He looked at the edition date. It said 2099 CE. A voice inside Danny's mind softly said, '*It's from the future Danny, it's future light*'.

'Yes that's right, future light. It'll turn into paper when its time comes.'

Danny turned round suddenly to face this new voice as fast as he could. The voice continued, 'Your inner voice guessed correctly friend. Books of the present and the past are made of paper or leather. Which slowly turns to dust. Even the universe forgets - eventually. The future is still pliable. The books from the future are made of heavy light.'

'I see,' said Danny.

'I should introduce myself. I am one of the human librarians, a guardian of the human zone of the great Arkstone tree. I am 10,000 years old and I've had this job since I was a thousand years young. We've got every reference book, every novel. We have a personal life-book for every human-type mind, carbon or silicon, in the entire galaxy. Incredible, I know. It really is a great job. If you'd like to follow me I'll show you a little more of what we do.'

'We'd follow you even easier if you had a body,' Danny added quietly.

'Why yes. What sort of body would you like me to have? I guess I'm just kind of everywhere in this old library all at once.'

The permanent night-time cool of the library seemed almost to caress the friends. There was a natural silence as the librarian slowly became more discernible. At first he was simply a ghost-like, vaguely human-shaped blob. Then arms, legs, a body could be seen. For a while he was naked. Then gradually brown leather clothes were grown from out the skin. Eventually a man, some 8-foot tall, in Native American head attire walked at the front of the group. He paused to address the friends.

'How's this body for the Chief Librarian? I was once chief of a tribe that lived upon the West Coast of what you now call the U.S.A. That was many aeons ago now. It was the height of the first great enlightened epoch of life-planet Earth. I was known as Chief Mountain-Spirit. Now I am the Chief Human Librarian of the Akashi Arkstone. My real name is still Mountain-Spirit. We really are honoured to have you here.'

A jet of light shot past. It could be vaguely discerned that the light held a number of books. The jet curved and arched its way swiftly between the many bookcases. It paused for a split second near the group. A face within it smiled and then the jet shot off depositing its wares at various points.

'That jet of light was Valentina, working hard as usual. I'll introduce you to her later - if there's time,' explained the librarian.

'Now firstly I shall take you to the Pool of Minds from whence come the books.'

Mountain-Spirit explained that they would have to walk to the place he wanted to show them. It was at least a two-hour trek to the pool of minds, which was at the very edge of the great floor.

He handed each of them a leather pouch. It had a strap for hanging from the shoulder. It was filled with the most fragrant and refreshing water they had ever tasted. Just a drop seemed to go a long way. A mouthful satisfied all thirst. It could even quench the heart it seemed. The liquid was called Amrita Water.

They walked past the endless high marble shelves. Some of the books were made of liquid light other books were paper or leather. The light from the leaf veins in the ceiling moved about here and there above them but the illumination seemed to follow them intelligently and discretely. Spotted about were large oak desks with green leather tops. There were deep

sumptuous red leather high-backed chairs by the desks. Surrounding the desks were old-fashioned card-file indexing systems. The card-files sat in dark mahogany cases as tall as a man. Each case must have had several thousand tiny drawers. Each drawer had an old-fashioned brass label holder that held a tiny hand-written card with a single pictographic symbol inscribed upon it.

As they walked Danny listened to his feet echoing upon the deeply polished parké tiles. The tiles continued to play their constantly shifting patterns. Orb and Golf hovered slightly above the floor. The group continued in self-absorbed silence. The hours passed quietly by.

Eventually they reached a surprisingly small pond with a wooden, root-lined embankment that reached to about waist height. It would have been just about big enough to be home to a family of ducks – had the surface not been so furiously choppy - it bubbled continuously in great angry belches. The water looked black and cold in the half-light of the library. Danny knew that the waters within would be exceedingly deep - and dangerous. Danny and Ben stood around the pool. Jodie, Orb and Golf observed from a few foot back.

The gnarled, dark-brown and uneven outer wall of the grand floor was nearby. Broken roots and branches poked out from the wall as it stretched upwards toward the high green-leaved ceiling above. They had walked a long way to be here.

‘I wonder if each of the floors of the human section has its own pool just like this one,’ thought Danny, forgetting the subtle telepathy of this realm.

‘That’s right Danny. Each of the 13,000 humanoid-type floors has its own entrance to the Pool of Minds,’ Mountain Spirit replied.

After some time it could be seen that there was movement. Silver letters, shapes and images appeared and disappeared. Symbols were swirling in the water. Mountain-Spirit took a test-tube from his pocket. He scooped out some of the liquid. It looked crystal clear in the glass. Words started to form in the tube. Mountain-Spirit raised his eyebrows. He murmured thoughtfully and returned the water to the pool.

‘The time approaches my friends. One of you will have to go into the Pool of Minds. The powerful treasure of the Sapient Ones awaits you. Their gift lies deep within the Arkstone and this is the only way to retrieve it. Wait, there is something else,’ breathed Mountain-Spirit. Once again he put the test tube into the pool and examined the water.

‘Danny, you must go. And while you are gone, Ben can show us his life-book and share a little of his story.’

Mountain Spirit had a dignified upright posture. His brown tunic moved slightly in the cool night-time breeze that swept across the library floor. His bright green eyes were piercing and intense, though kindly. Danny watched the white feathers move in Mountain Spirit's head-dress. He noticed a faint glowing aura around them.

In a flash that barely registered to the eye, Mountain-Spirit leapt round to Danny's side. He grabbed him hard by his scruff and the back of his trousers and slung him like a sack of rocks into the dark festering pool. Danny let out a breathless gasp of shock. The icy cold waters penetrated deep into his flesh. He shot Mountain-Spirit a bewildered, desperate look. Something very sharp and powerful had a hold of his feet. The waters swirled around him, a dark bubbling vortex. The twisting wild waters swallowed him under in one swift, unforgiving movement.

Ben was numb, his hands clenched. What was he to do? He gasped in horror as Danny dropped like lead shot down through the dark, mysterious waters. He felt helpless and lost, a sick queasy feeling growled uncontrollably in his belly. Ben couldn't move, his world felt like it was collapsing. He tensed every muscle, ready to leap after Danny but he was frozen to the spot.

## **Chapter Twenty Five - The Life-Book of Bendhu Dhalit**

‘I’m sorry my friends, it was the only way. To delay his entry would have been cruel. It is not easy to enter the Pool of Minds. I have known just one other person who has ever done so. And that is in all my many centuries. I only wanted to spare Danny the fear of waiting. To put your mind at rest I will show you how he is doing. Do not worry.’

Mountain-Spirit took the test-tube out from his white gown pocket. He held it between his hands and went into a deep meditation. An intense blue light immediately surrounded him and the small glass vial. He then dipped it once more into the pool and held it up for the group to see. A small but incredibly clear picture was apparent.

Mountain-Spirit appeared to summon something with a motion of his eyes. A rainbow-coloured flash of light shot forward from nowhere. It circled near to the test tube in an impatient figure of eight. Within the flash of light a child-like wide face could be seen. Her face was framed with golden blonde hair. She had oval green eyes that seemed just a little too large for a human. The rest of her body was a mermaid-shaped blur within the light. A laser emerged from within Valentina's light-form and struck the test-tube. The picture in the test-tube was enlarged until it formed a 3D hologram. The images appeared at chest height in front of the group and were in black and white.

Within the images, Danny was swimming downwards. He had a dolphin at either side. He was breathing from a bubble of lighter liquid that surrounded him. Sensing the presence of the watchers Danny looked to one side and smiled faintly. The dolphins flipped an ever so slight turn in acknowledgement. The picture faded.

‘So,’ said Mountain-Spirit to the group, ‘we should not worry. It looked worse than it actually was. I would never want to harm your Danny. I’ve been preparing for the success of your visit for thousands of your Earth years. The Sapient Ones, the eternal intelligences of the trees, have told me we must go and find Ben's Life-Book. There is something in Ben's past that is essential to the future. His book is also on this floor.’

The group followed Mountain-Spirit. Some of their fears gently dissolved. The echoes of their footsteps drifted away into the library’s peaceful, cool darkness.

Jodie noticed a book as she passed another tall marble bookcase. It was by someone named Johann Olive. *‘The Mounting Importance of Nutrition for Children’* was the title. Most of this area seemed to be filled with books related to planet Earth. Mixed in with them occasionally, were books on civilisations and worlds far removed from the Earth. Jodie noted that there seemed to be no order to the location of the books. There wasn’t even an alphabetical placing of authors or titles. Politics nestled next to Childcare. Architecture sat with Zoology.

‘You may find Jodie that there is rhyme and reason to each book’s location,’ said Mountain Spirit. ‘They are organised by life-state, in other words, by their spirit. Johann Olive's childhood nutrition books share a depth of vision with the political insight of Zebedieh Groatsmith. That is why those books are together. The filing system takes a little time to master. A few centuries and most get the hang of it. Here we are now.’

The group followed Mountain-Spirit to one of the filing-card cases. Jodie still found it disquieting that her thoughts could be read so easily.

Mountain-Spirit looked at Ben. He indicated for him to sit down. Ben positioned himself in the sumptuous leather office-chair by the desk.

‘Yes, let me see. Mhmm. I’m getting a definite late-1990's vibe for your birth. Am I right?’



Ben nodded yes to the question.

Mountain-Spirit brought over one of the large wooden steps. He climbed nearly to the top and retrieved a small wooden drawer. It contained a couple of hundred small and yellowed cards. He passed the drawer to Ben. Ben nearly attempted to take a card out but then an intuition stopped him. Instead he placed the drawer on the leather surface of the oak desk and placed his left hand over the cards and opened his mind instead.

Ben shut his eyes and drifted off. He could feel hundreds of tiny electrical jolts hitting his palm. His hand seemed to pulse and grow in size. Ben opened his eyes just as the cards flew up into the air. They circled furiously around his head. Just as suddenly they all dropped to the desk as though someone had cut the power supply. One card however remained stock still in front of him. Ben reached out, took the card and handed it to Mountain-Spirit.

Mountain-Spirit examined the card intently. On it was constantly changing shapes. Absent-mindedly he swept his other hand over the loose cards on the desk - they flew back into their drawer. The symbols on Ben's card appeared to repeat as if they were silently following a musical score. Mountain-Spirit held the card between thumb and second finger and deftly rotated it in a full circle. Before the movement ended a streak of multi-coloured light zoomed in, took the card and disappeared.

'Well I did want to introduce you a little further to Valentina but she is a little quick on her feet. Maybe on her return perhaps,' said Mountain-Spirit cheerfully.

A few minutes later the streak of light was back. Within the light was a golden, leather-bound book that was glowing brightly. As the rainbow of light slowed the form of a slender woman, looking about 16 years-old, could be seen within. Her clothes were scruffy and patched together but she was very beautiful with long blonde wispy hair. Valentina, the light-woman placed the book on the desk, smiled, and shot off again.

'She's a little shy I'm afraid. Very good librarian though, especially for one so young.'

Ben just watched the book for a short while. It was the size of a large hardback. It had impressive leather covers with metal clasps. The volume was some 8 or 9 inches thick. The title script was a hybrid of Western and Oriental text. It kept subtly changing shape.

'That's your original name Ben: the one that you always have lifetime after lifetime. It is written in an ancient galactic language. The name "Bendhu" is just a temporary interpretation of your true name,' added Mountain-Spirit, reading Ben's thoughts. 'Look within my friend. What you are about to see is very rare. This is where the human-like soul records each bodily adventure. This book is the physical house of your soul.'

Ben leafed through the book. It was like nothing he had seen before. At the beginning was an earthy substance. At some indeterminate point the pages began. Some pages were clay-like, some almost dust. Others were like moist earth with vague patterns discernible. The middle portion of the book was made of thousands of wafer-thin slices of a leather material. It was a strange sort of paper. Instinctively, he knew that it would not tear or burn. What was more, each page was extraordinarily thin. Despite this, the pages were matte in that they allowed no light to pass. The last third of the book was composed of pure light, but a light with differing degrees of substance.

Ben turned to one of the light-crafted pages.

*'Joseph Carrigon, Forty One-years-old, New Light City, Central Earth Plain, Era of the Diamond, Year 4012.'*

*'It is a great celebration today. And she is just so beautiful. The smell of her skin, the way she holds herself. She mesmerises. But wait, here come the children...'*

Ben read on. He was a farmer in a small community of about 500 people. Their village was surrounded by a thousand-mile wide, old growth forest. He tilled the land by hand. Every few years he went away for some time in the community's space ship. His brother would do his farming jobs then. His brother's name was unclear but it reminded him of the word Danny in some way.

'Well that's just amazing,' thought Ben. He felt comforted. And glad that his friendship with Danny would follow him to future lifetimes.

Ben went way back to an early portion of the book. He turned to a yellowing leaf of a page. It consisted of a luxurious leather material.

*'Jambud, 9 years old, Kingdom of Ashoka, The Age of The Four Wheel Turning Kings, Lesser Period of Ascendancy, Year of the Ox.*

*All day, my friend and I have been making fantastic mud-pie. Very tasty, messy much. Laughter and sunshine! So much fun having we. Dhrimitti thinks best cooking ever this is. Our mamas and aunties will be so proud.'*

Ben read how all day long they had been making mud pies and pretending to be at feasts. Then they saw a beggar passing by. But he was no ordinary beggar. He was the wisest person in all Ashoka. Jambud and Dhrimitti offered him their best mud-pie.

'Truly fascinating Ben. But there is a serious side to all this. Well it is all serious and amazing stuff I know, but right now we need to know something vital for our mission so to speak. We need to look just a little way into the future. I've been reliably informed we need to find myself talking to you back on planet Earth. That, along with what Danny will be given, is why we have come here, I think,' stated Mountain-Spirit solemnly.

It took Ben a good deal of time. He kept getting side-tracked into various past-life adventures. Eventually he found what he was looking for. The story read that he was at home, sat cross-legged on his bed looking out over the gardens. However, in the story he was feeling frightened. There was a sense of foreboding, a sense of being surrounded. There was an approaching, all-powerful threat. It was daytime yet it was dark. He could see night sky and clouds, then he realised why - the ceiling was missing and bits of plaster boarding hung in trails. Something was very wrong. Perhaps they should have been dead. Yet they had something, something that could change everything. Out in the back-garden of the house, near the rockery and the fire-exit from the dining room, stood Mountain Spirit. He was standing tall on the newly laid turf where the old holly tree used to be. He began to sing.

Ben felt himself drifting into a dream-state at this stage, the book lying open on his lap. He could hear the actual sounds Mountain-Spirit spoke. They etched themselves into his mind. He couldn't make sense of them and he didn't try to do so. It was almost as if the words were bypassing his mind, going straight into his soul.

In the library the others were all transfixed on them. Mountain-Spirit smiled at Ben. They had got the message they were looking for. Instinctively, Ben knew that the content of the message was not important at the moment. The information was where it needed to be. Ben had only to retrieve at the right time. For now it needed to be secret. Ben gradually came round and then wandered off through the nearest bookshelves in the great library. He just wanted to be alone for a while. Jodie started to read through Ben's Life-Book with Golf.

## **Chapter Twenty Six - The Akashi Dolphins of Yin and Yang**

'My Goodness!' thought Danny, 'now *this* is speed.'

The light-blue dolphin had pulled him underneath the freezing cold waters. He wasn't sure what had come as more of a shock. Was it the fear of death or the strange wonder of the dolphin? Perhaps the greatest shock of all was finding he could still breath.

'Breathe the liquid, breath human boy,' the dolphin had said to him telepathically in a strange high-pitched tone.

'You will come to no harm,' a second dolphin added in a deeper tone.

Once underneath the dark freezing cold water, Danny could see the two dolphins that were with him. He was in a fast-moving water-tunnel but he could not see the bottom or the top and the dark sides were as yet indistinct. The dolphin who had grabbed him had a glowing light-blue body but jet-black eyes. The other was a darker blue, almost black, with bright white lights for eyes. Apart from the dolphins Danny could see little in the gloomy waters. He even wondered if the dolphins were some kind of advanced organic machine, with their strange headlight eyes and glowing bodies.

The dolphins were making a strange sonic whistle which produced an egg shape of lighter blue liquid within the darker waters of the tunnel. This liquid appeared to emanate from their beak area. It was this that Danny breathed.

The two dolphins shepherded him between themselves and gradually increased their speed. As his eyes grew accustomed Danny could see that the tunnel wasn't big, perhaps a quarter of the width of the pool above. Danny could have swum from one side to the other in a couple of seconds. The walls were dark green and were etched with a smooth spiral shape. Down through the black water Danny could just about see a faint blue circle in the distance.

They were working against the current, creating spirals in the water. The spirals helped push them in the opposite direction to the water flow, which was rushing up past them furiously. They gained momentum for some time until their travel was quite phenomenal. Danny tried to gauge their speed. At the very least it must have been some hundreds of miles an hour. After some minutes, they slowed gradually to a halt and passed through some kind of invisible plastic-like barrier. They had come to an enormous water-filled cavern.

What looked at first to be stalactites and stalagmites probed a few metres into the waters from the walls. The edges of the protrusions were smooth like roots made of ancient wood. The pure blue, bright clear water stretched for perhaps a quarter of a mile in each direction. The walls were dark green like the tunnels but the water itself seemed to be luminous. There was a gentle light source in the centre somewhere. Everything felt in slow motion here compared to the adrenaline of the tunnel. Danny felt expansive and peaceful as he bobbed within the water. There was a fragrant smell, perhaps of sandalwood, or maybe lotus blossom, it was impossible to tell exactly. Tunnels led off darkly, presumably heading toward the many floors above. The water itself was silky to the touch; it was almost as though the water was not even wet. Danny felt a sense of lightness from the water's caress. All around him, flowing like atmospheric jets, were the shapes of thoughts. Words, symbols and pictures were in constant stream. Here and there pulsating squares of light bobbed in the waters - the Akashi books waiting to be born.

Danny guessed the whole place must have been big enough to fit many an international stadium comfortably inside. A body of water this size should have been pitch black and bitterly cold. Yet, unlike the cold tunnel, it was a Mediterranean, translucent blue. It was warm. Danny

didn't even want to guess the depth of the waters. They're might be ancient creatures down there the size of a building. He thought of himself as an irritating fly, about to be snapped up.

At the centre of the cavern was a blue-green globe, which pulsated and shone. At first Danny thought it was the Earth, or a miniaturised version of it. But no, the patterns were different. The continents were constantly shifting.

The dolphins brought him steadily closer to the globe. The two creatures chattered on and off in their strange sonic language. Telepathically, by homing in on their emotions and ideas Danny could pick out the rough themes. They were intent on trying to explain something to him, something about an engine. With much effort they spelled out a word letter by letter. R-u-r-o, ruo. This was what ran the blue-green globe. The globe itself was an engine. It used a self-generating fuel. The more it was used, the more powerful it got. The ruo-powered globe ran the whole organic ship, the Arkstone. Ruro was the most powerful material in the universe they said.

The two dolphins wanted to tell him more about the ruo but there was neither time nor ability. It appeared, in the language of emotion, common to both dolphin and human language, that it was made from evil that had been transformed into good. A speck of ruo could power a whole planet for a year. Apparently, humankind had possessed ruo once but it had been misused. The mysterious elders had reappropriated it many aeons ago.

The two dolphins formed themselves nose to tail to each other. The light-blue glowing dolphin, with its onyx eyes was uppermost. His head lay parallel to the tail of the dark bodied dolphin, whose eyes shone like lights. Together, they formed a shape similar to the yin-yang symbol. Slowly, they started to rotate in this formation. They then pressed themselves firmly against the side of the globe in the centre of watery cavern.

An unbearably bright light issued forth from the globe. At the same time, a powerful and deep humming sound tore at Danny before easing. The bright light lessened. Then the dolphin's bodies flushed a brilliant golden light. Electrical swirls of many colours, like miniature auroras, flamed out of the shining dolphins. The humming sound could have been a scream, but it was low-pitched and longer. The dolphins moved apart. From between them, a small egg-sized version of the original globe emerged. Within the small blue globe could be seen a molten yellow core, a core of pure ruo.

A cord of light, like a protoplasmic umbilicus attached it to the main globe. This cord stretched and then snapped as the small egg travelled purposefully toward Danny. It attached itself on the central line in the middle of his chest. Little wriggling blue legs drilled their way into his flesh as it positioned itself.

It was horrible watching something wriggle its way inside his body like an overgrown tic. But there was no pain. Perhaps even warmth. One of his greatest fantasy fears was of being eaten alive. There was something of this in the whole experience. Yet he could sense that it meant him no harm. In fact he felt so alive he could barely contain the feeling. He was on fire. He was ice. He was everything.

The dolphins left their positions and guided Danny toward the top of the cavern. He could see the tunnel entrances dotted here and there. It looked like they were heading back for the one that had brought him here. Where the tunnel entrances converged on the great cavern there was a glassy, black smoothness which broke up the irregular, organic look of the cavern walls. There was a membrane closing off the tunnel entrance, beyond which only darkness could be seen. The stalactite root formations that grew out of the cavern walls a yard or so were shorter toward the tunnel mouth. The mouth itself was a rough-drawn oval big enough to admit a truck. It had a dark, small rim of wood.

It was then that Danny realised exactly what the dolphins were planning to do with him. He didn't like it one bit. Before he could struggle the light-blue dolphin had hold of both his feet in its vice-like mouth. He was being steered into the tunnel entrance as though he were a prize fish. The dark dolphin appeared and moved its head next to Danny's. Without warning it promptly engulfed his whole face between its jaws. It breathed the blue breathing-liquid straight into his lungs. The other dolphin then pushed Danny's head through the plastic-like membrane which felt like it was an inch or so thick. His head poked through into the tunnel itself.

The speed of the icy cold water rushing upwards in the tunnel immediately tried to tug his head off from his shoulders. The water in the tunnel shot upwards faster than a speeding train. It was as if the waters sprang from some invisible geyser. The dolphins pushed him through the tunnel membrane up to his ankles and promptly let go.

## Chapter Twenty Seven - Au Revoir Akashi

And so they waited.

After reading Ben's Life Book for some time Jodie felt as though she was intruding. Golf treated it as a cross between reality TV and a soap opera. He was heavily engrossed, reading over Jodie's shoulders. Jodie had insisted they return the book however and Valentina had soon appeared to collect it.

Shortly afterwards Mountain-Spirit gathered them back together. Ben had wandered off some distance. He was immersed in a novel about a young girl who was born in a shanty-town in southern India.

And they waited. Ben, Jodie, Golf and Orb. Mountain-Spirit had told them to keep guard around the pool.

'I hope he doesn't throw me in next,' Ben thought testily. Mountain-Spirit gave him a sharp look.

Golf had long since fallen asleep. Orb fluttered up and down, feeling a little anxious. Jodie was dreaming. Only Ben quietly sat there, alert and waiting.

A long gurgling rumbling sound, like an approaching underground train, broke the silence. Bubbles were breaking the water's surface. The rumbling grew louder.

Danny shot out the surface of the water at such a speed that he travelled 12-foot into the air. At the apex of his travels Danny seemed to stop in mid-flight. He looked like a cartoon character about to fall into a great roadrunner canyon. He gulped a lung full of air in a single gasp before plummeting to the ground. A moment later Danny was nestled in Mountain-Spirits arms like an oversized baby.

'Catch!' exclaimed Mountain-Spirit cried happily.

The tension broke. Ben laughed. Everyone relaxed. They were glad to see that Danny had returned safely.

Mountain-Spirit escorted them on the long walk back to the central elevator. Albert the sentient elevator wouldn't talk to Mountain-Spirit when they returned. He did seem glad to see all of them though, especially Jodie. As she walked in the art-Deco light came on illuminating the pull down lift-attendant's chair. It gave a warm, subdued arc of yellow light.

'You have a nice seat,' said Albert in his low, gravel voice. Jodie wasn't sure if Albert was offering her the only seat in the lift or commenting on the attractiveness of her behind. She had never had a sentient machine take a fancy to her before.

The small control orb descended. Jodie entered her left hand into its coolness. She felt like she had just put her whole hand into a large pot of jelly straight from the fridge. Then the swirling started – first within the hand and then it spread to the rest of her body and lastly to the room around her. Her body felt like it was plastered against a spinning 'Wall of Death' like one might find in a fairground. The sensation was giddy but not unpleasant.

The orb felt strangely fearless. Fantastic pulsing colours spun in her mind's eye, mainly purple. The strange sensations of super-physical travel then overtook her completely – everything, all awareness briefly disappeared except for a certain sense of self. Then, no sooner had it got into full flow than it was all over.

Albert seemed sad to see them go. The swirling Vortex was waiting, like a tame hurricane, in the lobby. Soon they had returned to the feline realm.

‘So nice of you to drop back,’ said Ariel after the flying lion creatures had scooped them up from the sky once more. ‘Goodbye Vortex,’ added Ariel quietly as the swirling hurricane disappeared over the horizon. ‘Welcome back to my feline library. I trust you enjoyed the pool,’ he said to Danny winking.

They spent hours being entertained by the great smiling cat – laughing at the impossible tales that the statuesque orange moggy loved to tell. Inbetween tales they would play tag in the fields – the sheer energy of their cat-bodies made them feel like children again. They flexed their newly regained feline bodies. Back in this realm they had reacquired the feline forms they had before.

Eventually the time came to take their leave. Only the strange half-cat, half-frog form of Golf was glad to be going, the rest of the group felt quite sad, not knowing when they would ever see this special place again. Ariel led them back across the great plain which spread its wings out below the sun-tube sky. It was a whole environment contained within a single branch of the Arkstone. They watched a passing pride of lions, saunter lazily in the shade of a tall tree. They felt safe in the knowledge that Ariel was by their side, protecting them. The lion creatures flew overhead in a V formation cutting up the bright blue 'sky'.

Passing through a stone, ivy-trellised gateway, they found themselves transported back to the plastic beach. They were now wearing their usual bodies. Zafearon and Marla were waiting patiently. Both dogs seemed to be smiling and excited to see them. Great pants of steam were leaving their huge nostrils. Climbing onto the animal's backs they were soon at the wooden mouth to the great tree itself. It was here that they had first entered the Arkstone.

The huge golden bird, Garuda, was sat there, contemplating. It said not a word but it was not unfriendly. Garuda indicated Jodie's hand. The key grew out from her palm. It continued growing until it was its original size, a foot or so across. The key was gold and had five large teeth and ended with a globe inscribed with a simple curving line. The five friends held onto the key. Garuda took off first and then the key followed. They flew back out through the gentle blue space of the Akashi realm. Silently they followed behind the elegant wing-beats of the owl.

Garuda hovered in space. It was time to go. They said their final farewells to the Akashi realm and the great bird, the guardian of the Arkstone. Then, reluctantly, they descended through the blue stream that held them. The five emerged back into the dark wooden tunnels that had first brought them to the Akashi realm. These were the tunnels that led back to their own time and space. This time however the tunnels felt eerie, more sinister than they had on their way here. Something was wrong.

They walked along the ancient wood-stone flooring until they felt tired out, eventually heading back out the ‘Returns’ tunnel entrance. Now they entered the last length of tunnel before the Akashi gate. They plodded along the brown, damp flooring, occasionally letting their eyes wander to the slightly glowing greenish walls. Soon they would approach the diamond portal that would lead back to the Earthly plane.

A cold feeling of dread overtook Danny, surging up into his stomach from nowhere. He noticed that their energy bodies were fading fast. The others seemed to be half-asleep. Seeing the diamond light at the end of the tunnel Danny yelled for them all to run. His voice called them sharply back to reality. The five, now ghostly apparitions flung themselves forward and into the light of the gateway.

Just before Danny entered the diamond portal the ruo globe that had nestled in his chest boiled down deeper into his flesh. He could still see it shining underneath his skin. Danny had no time for pain or fear. He plunged headlong into the watery diamond. He was the last to enter. As

soon as Danny's right foot had been enclosed the diamond spun and disappeared. They left behind just more stone-like wood tunnelling, stretching on for miles.



## **Chapter Twenty Eight - Frognapped!**

It was an autumn night on a Sunday evening and no one was around in the quiet leafy suburb of south Liverpool. The rain was falling in short bursts of drizzle, dripping softly down from the trees.

A short way from Danny's home stood a large blue hi-topped van in the car park of the Territorial Army training centre. The trees from the nearby churchyard overhung the car park obscuring the van from view. The van itself was a brand new silver Mercedes with a sloping front. It looked as though it could outrun a small sports car. Hidden in the upper cavity of the van was a mass of gadgetry, mainly satellite equipment.

Inside the van were two men in military uniform poring over a computer screen. The regular officer knew the other man only by his nickname, 'The Leader'. This man was one of those people with no distinguishing features who somehow still managed to always look menacing. He had dark blonde hair a little spiky with gel, was clean shaven and well built. He looked like he worked out. The Leader's light blue eyes were just a little too fixed. The officer thought he didn't blink enough. He wondered if his pupils were fixed due to drugs, perhaps steroids given his muscular bulk. The Leader somehow sensed the officer was thinking about him, as out of the blue, the Leader fixed him with a slightly manic, slightly threatening grin. The officer decided that this was one seriously unhinged man. He wasn't happy being involved with a so-called black op. But someone with extreme mathematical sharpness was needed at short notice.

'Okay,' growled the Leader in his harsh, nasal, London accent, 'Fire up the sequence.'

The officer typed in a number of codes.

'NOW!'

The officer hit the enter key. The roof panel of the van slid open to reveal an umbrella device. This device gracefully folded outwards. The umbrella then flipped inside out to become a large white dish. From the middle of the dish a four-foot long white tube a few inches across telescoped outwards toward the sky.

Both men watched the screen. It was a mass of whirling colours. It didn't make any sense to the officer. The patterns were hypnotic and danced before his eyes. Their movements seemed to anticipate his thoughts.

The Leader suddenly jabbed his right middle finger at a blob slowly traversing the screen. 'There they are! Time to flush me some scum. You're not going to get away *this* time,' he hissed menacingly.

On his lap the Leader held what looked like a gun. It was covered in symbols that glowed and moved. A wire connected the gun to the dish and tube on the roof of the van. The man moved his hands over the figures on the gun without touching it. This seemed to change their position and shape.

At last, he aimed the gun at the screen and squeezed the trigger hard. Instead of anything coming out the gun it appeared to be sucking clouds of swirling energy into itself from the screen. Soon the gun and the Leader were showered in a storm of incandescent plasmatic blue. Yellow sparks flew off from the glowing blue cloud. The officer was frightened but he didn't say anything or move. He was too well trained to give away any sign of fear. Minutes passed and the energy field died down.

The Leader reconfigured the gun and took aim once more. By tapping on the touch sensitive screen the man homed in on a yellow glowing figure. As the screen enlarged it became clear that

it was the outline of a large golden-coloured frog. The officer looked away. Somehow he knew that the less he saw, the less he understood the more likely he might get things back to normal. Being so gifted at maths had turned out to be a serious handicap. This assignment could make him a liability. A gargled phlegm-coated scream issued from the screen. The Leader smiled,

‘Got ya you scum! Come home to daddy, you nasty little...’ The Leader nearly said, ‘mind-entropy,’ but managed to restrain himself at the last minute. The officer might have to quietly disappear at the end of this mission. Still, there’s no point telling him stuff he doesn't need to know. He had wasted five good men just in that strange nature realm. Although maybe they were still there, running around on all fours, barking and scavenging like animals. As far as being human was concerned they were as good as dead. The agency had no plans to retrieve them. The Leader didn't care. He just wanted to avoid a reputation for not getting the job done.

A mobile phone strewn on the floor at the back of the van started to ring.

‘Pass me that,’ barked the Leader with one hand outspread. The officer picked up the phone. It looked ordinary enough but he couldn't help noticing it had only three buttons. One marked ‘A’, one marked ‘E’ and one marked ‘U’. The button marked ‘A’ was flashing impatiently. The officer passed the phone over. The Leader jabbed at the button and held the phone to his ear.

‘I hope you didn't mess that up,’ said Alistair, head of the powerful and mysterious agency that gave the Leader his orders.

‘I've powered them down. He's got the material. We've captured the entity.’ replied the Leader curtly.

‘Good,’ said Alistair, his voice sounded distant. ‘I'd hate for things to mess up again – not now we've got so far. I've lost track of how many times we've rewritten our plans,’ he paused, ‘Though, “The Leader” always delivers so they say.’ Alistair’s voice dripped with venom.

The Leader didn't like Alistair, or his warped sense of humour. Besides, he had never failed before. He might have come off worse when he followed those two disabled lunatics into that strange realm - but he was still here and still fighting.

‘So, how's the non-human entity then?’ enquired Alistair, referring to Golf. Alistair was using his posh, fake-friendly tone, which he knew the Leader absolutely hated.

‘It's alive. What else do you wanna know?’

‘Be nice to him. "The power that is" needs him on form so try not to take out your considerable talents on it. Find some other outlet. Or we might have to find an outlet for you.’

‘Is that all?’

The line went dead. Alistair knew not to waste niceties on the Leader.

The Leader opened a hatch door in the floor of the van. Inside the black leather-lined cavity was a small transparent box containing what appeared to be a 6-inch diamond. The leader placed the nozzle of the gun to the top of the diamond box and squeezed the trigger. A wet, screaming sound could be heard for a moment.

The Leader picked up the box and held it close to his face. Inside the diamond, some three inches tall was a swirling yellow, frog-like mass. It seemed to be venomously angry. The leader tapped the box hard and shook it a little. He smiled broadly at its inhabitant and placed it back.

He felt a cold anger rising in his chest. He yearned just to smash the transparent container and destroy its occupant. A metallic, non-human voice inside his head harshly said ‘No’. He controlled himself.

The officer noticed none of these events. He was intently staring out of the front windscreen busy studying the overhanging trees. He itched to take a look.

## **Chapter Twenty Nine - Aleya's Discovery**

It was a cold winter's night in 1957. The house that one day would belong to Danny, was gleaming in the moonlight. A star appeared in the far north. It got larger and brighter till it could be seen that it was a glowing, soundlessly moving, white disc. The only witness was a fox by the lawn but she merely hid where she lay.

The ship hovered over the house. It extended a single white metal tube a few feet long. The tube stopped just short of the central chimney stack. Above, the disc-like ship continued to hover silently. The liquid orthonium metal then flowed through the tube and into the brick and stone of the building.

The cold, living metal arranged itself according to a specific structure. This pattern was encoded within a faint yellow field also emitted by the disc. The field surrounded the building like a cloud of almost invisible water. Finally, an urn-shaped device, about 12 inches high, descended from an opening in the undercarriage of the ship. It was made of the highest quality crystal quartz known in the galaxy, yet it passed straight through the brick and stone till it lodged itself within a wall in the attic. The ship withdrew the tube, resumed its spinning, moved off and promptly vanished.

Some 60 years later, a beautiful urn-shaped device twelve inches high continued to nestle in its secret cavity. It was made of a single piece of flawless crystal quartz. The urn was positioned within a load-bearing wall deep inside a large loft. It ran its yearly self-check programme, it's time was finally drawing near. An electric shiver of excitement passed through the urn as it contemplated its release.

The urn was a part of the most advanced technology the galaxy had ever known. It was safe here in its hiding place as the house had no stairs to the loft. The loft hatch was particularly awkward to get to. It was just too much hassle to put the area to any serious use. In any case there would always be ample storage in the larger, bone-dry basement. Even when the roof was replaced it wasn't obvious. No-one wants to mess around with a load-bearing wall. Even Danny had not sensed its presence. Neither was Danny aware that his mother's desire to purchase this particular house had not come entirely from her own mind.

\* \* \*

'Surely not,' remarked Hevel incredulously.

'See for yourself,' said Aleya, the ship. She was a 600 year-old sentient being. She knew strangeness when she saw it.

The ship's far wall became a beautiful fluorescent blue. The image of a large ivy-covered cottage slowly resolved into view.

'I only discovered it last night. It's definitely at least a class 8,' stated Aleya.

'That's amazing. Let's see it.'

The image of the house was bathed from above in light of different colours. First there was a shower of orange which turned to red and then to a cool violet. When the violet illuminated strange structures could vaguely be seen. Slowly the images became clearer. Inside the walls of the house were dozens of shiny metallic structures interlaced at odd angles. Pulsing, glowing tubes ran everywhere between them. The structures reminded Hevel of the metal implants used on Earth for repairing hips.

Hevel had more than his fair share of rebelliousness. This had been partly why he had stolen the ship. The desire to confuse the Earth people and mess up the Confederation's first contact plans also figured high in his plans. He had decided to become the galaxy's most infamous interplanetary reporter.

No one was going to laugh at Hevel any more. None of those happy little sods were going to call *him* a delinquent. Cosmic love and horticulture was about all his fellow planet-folk seemed capable of thinking about.

'...And 100% pure ortonium, you sure? But a Y-Factor drive too - no one on our planet has even seen one of them,' stated Hevel.

'It's all true. I did some internal scanning too. Found this little information-entity hanging around a far corner of my mind. I knew I hadn't put it there as it had a strange accent. One I'd never come across before.'

'It better not be the Federation trying to tamper with us again.'

'No, don't think it's them, but I've a good idea who it was. The entity that left the mind-trace thought it was very clever. Didn't figure that I could find it. The mind-entity had hopped aboard trying to install a homing beacon for itself. Sometime in the future it could hitch a ride inside my mind. Whoever it is, whatever could do that is not of that planet. I followed the pathway back to where the entity beamed up. What I found is really going to interest you. I tracked the mind-entity to this little island off the coast of Western Europe...' Aleya stated calmly.

Eventually Hevel looked up, 'Well if that building really is hiding the most advanced alpha-force space-ship we've ever seen, who could've put it there?'

'No idea. But it's been there at least 60 years.'

As his mind schemed, Hevel's eyes began to lite up with a devious fire.

Hevel had been working on his version of the Confederation's first-contact video for the planet Earth. They were using a very advanced form of movie. It was an emotionally-connected, holographic film which can be played using the sky. It is almost impossible to tell such a film from reality – unless one had specially trained vision. Certainly it was better holo-tech than most individual civilisations could access. Hevel had stolen a copy. He was going to beam his re-edited version, starring himself, out to the people of the world. The skies of the whole planet would be illuminated with his happy, holographic face.

His motive was to make trouble, and a name for himself. Hevel had never got over the fact that most of his fellow Gaiyans considered him a rogue mutant. He itched to prove himself the wise one, the hero, the conqueror. He wanted a place in galactic history. However, Hevel was haunted by an uneasy feeling that he had been born in the wrong place at the wrong time.

'That'll do for now,' said Hevel grumpily. 'Do you think it'll upset the humans Aleya?'

'I expect the Confederation and those who think themselves current masters of this globe will be furious. As for the Earth humans, who knows? Once upon a time the Foo Fighter Globe Spies recorded all of the inhuman wars afflicted upon this poor planet. The humans have known nothing but war and the threat of war for generations. They might think they are about to be attacked from beyond the Earth.'

'Aleya, do we really have to wait before beaming my version out across the Earth?'

'Yes Hevel, trust me!'

Hevel was quiet for some time pondering things over – the ship had recently told him of something amazing she had found on the Earth, hidden deep inside a human house.

'So let's get this straight,' Hevel intoned. 'You followed the path of that mind-entity. Then, not only did you find a self-assembling space-ship made from pure ortonium, the rarest living

metal in the galaxy, but it has the fabled Y-Factor drive too. And you say the whole thing is hidden away in some old human house sitting in the middle of an Earth colony?’

‘In a little island off the coast of northern Europe,’ Aleya continued by way of reply. ‘But there was something even more amazing. I nearly missed it. It has an extra cloaking device all of its own. It mimics the properties of the surrounding cloak and of its immediate surroundings. Up in the centre of a weight-bearing wall in the loft part of the building there is a small urn shaped crystal device. Nothing less than a genuine, Urnie device!’ stated Aleya proudly.

‘Amazing! Who’d have thought it? We could do anything with one of those things. I didn’t think they really existed.’

‘I assume you’ll want to put both the sleeping spaceship and the Urnie to some anti-social use.’

‘Of course Aleya. Do you think you can power them up?’ questioned Hevel.

‘The commencement rhythms seem fairly straightforward surprisingly, though of course that could be a trap.’

‘Let’s poke it and see what happens. Take us just above that building and then cloak us in a cloud. A dark thundery one please Aleya.’

Hevel’s left eye was twitching ever so slightly in eager anticipation. This was even better than his wildest plans. Discovering the sleeping spaceship was one thing, but an Urnie as well. This was unreal. He was reaching the point he had patiently worked towards for so many years. Now fate had just dealt him the greatest hand he could imagine.

An excited Hevel settled down onto his bunk. He looked around his light green sleeping room, set off to one side of the small interstellar spaceship. Closing his eyes he fell into a light sleep.

Hevel’s race was of a slender and tall build, usually about 6 to 8 feet tall when mature. They were dark-haired people with slightly larger heads than humans and deep oval-shaped eyes. They tended to be kind and peaceable by nature. They had child-like voices which they used for singing. Communication was mostly telepathic. Fortunately for them, the planet Gaiya was remote and well protected. They had a glorious history with little outside interference from other races. They had crossed the technology barrier all by themselves. This is when a humanoid race masters technology to the point where they are no longer governed by the material world.

Aleya waited until nightfall, and then powered herself up. She pulsed with a blue and yellow dancing glow to above a town known by its human inhabitants as Liverpool. Once there a small hatch opened near to the top of the spheroid ship and a tube emerged. The tube pointed toward a small cloud nearby. The cloud rapidly grew until it became a dark mass of thunder cloaking the small spaceship. Hevel slept on. Tomorrow was going to be his - all his.

## Chapter Thirty - One of Us is Missing

‘Danny. I think we have a problem,’ whispered Ben. They switched to telepathy, travelling to their secret mind-arena where they could communicate in private.

They were on a small, bleak island, the only sounds coming from the rustle of a few lonesome trees, the wind and the sea. The black ocean surrounded them, the steady beat of its tide somehow felt ominous. Night was falling and a couple of creatures could be heard scampering off into the distance but otherwise they were alone.

‘This is all a bit sombre,’ thought Danny. His words instantly became extra darkness within the scenery of the island. This reality was after all, just a telepathic projection, a secret place for Danny and Ben’s communication. ‘Well I hope this doesn’t reflect the general ambience of *my* mind,’ Danny added.

‘It could be our situation, not your mind. Golf has gone missing. An intuition told me to look for him. Someone, or something, must’ve snatched him when we were moving between the realms,’ Ben noted.

‘I *knew* we were being powered down! Someone *was* sucking up all that alpha force - I could feel it. That can only mean the Agency is involved.’

‘Trouble,’ agreed Ben.

‘Let’s get back. I’ll see if Orb can help us. Let Jodie know. I should have noticed that green slimy guy wasn’t around. I thought he was just sleeping. Travelling wears him right out. There wasn’t any of those nice cool-water effects when I went to bed last night - took me ages to get to sleep. Almost missed him. I should have noticed really.’

‘The agency could only have snatched Golf if they are nearby. They could be on to us at any moment. Jodie, any of us could be next, we should warn her – but they’ll be watching our every move.’

‘It’s all right, there’s a way of getting through to her.’

Ben faded slowly from the mind-arena. Danny watched him go. He then switched himself out of the arena and back to mundane reality in a split moment. Ever since that strange ruuro material had been in his chest he was super-powered psychically. Those strange but wonderful dolphins, the gatekeepers of the ruuro, did not have great manners. But they had done him a major favour.

A little while later Danny was in the dining room pondering. Here I am - one disabled boy, not particularly popular with anyone, trying to save the whole world from the vast forces of fundamental darkness.

Ben was sat with Danny around the far table at the end of the dining room. Ben appeared to be staring right through him. Danny looked as though he was daydreaming. In fact he was now being harassed by the mind-entity, Orb.

Before Orb could continue berating Danny Sarah sauntered into the room. She was cradling a hot chocolate in her delicate small hands, ‘What’s up guys? Hey Danny, is he okay?’

‘Ben? Yeah he’s fine. I think he’s just a little t-tired.’

‘Well, *I’m* tired of being on my own in this house so I hope you two aren’t planning on any more weird stuff.’

‘N-Nope. None of that,’ replied Danny.

‘Explosions?’

‘I promise.’

‘Better hadn’t,’ she clipped him on the side of the head playfully and headed for the lounge.

‘So let me get this straight, you've known for how long? I'm not happy about this. Why didn't you tell me before?’ Orb paused but before Danny could reply she continued, ‘So where is he? Who's got him?’

‘The agency probably,’ replied Danny telepathically. It hadn't helped to improve the Orb's mood that Danny and Ben had voted her, ‘Most-Annoying-Mind-Entity-Of-All-Time,’ that very morning. She hadn't found that very funny. And now she was seriously unhappy for a good reason. She had become quite attached to Golf.

‘Well if they've used the Mindsnapper on him again I'm going to hold you two personally responsible’ Orb barked in her shrill mind voice.

‘It's not my fault,’ grumped Danny.

‘You could've noticed earlier. Anything could have happened to him by now.’

‘What can we do?’ interjected Ben.

‘I could enter Jodie's mind and tell her. I'll visit Thinking Stone, the Sapient tree too. He'll know what to do,’ Danny offered hopefully.

‘Gosh, that's good Danny. We're in an emergency up to our eyeballs and what do you do? Go and visit a talking walking stick in another dimension.’

‘It's another realm actually.’

‘Whatever.’

Although Orb was usually placid there was no telling what she might do if she was really riled. Orbs were powerful creatures.

Danny wheeled himself, with a quiet electric hum, over to the lift and went back up to his room. He released the magnetic door catch by a deft flick of his chair and prepared to enter the realm of the Sapient Ones. No sooner had he thought that than he appeared in the realm itself. His body was quietly and instantly asleep, slumped in the wheelchair.

## **Chapter Thirty One - The Elif**

‘Danny, you surprised me there! I do not think I have seen anyone shift realms that quickly before,’ Thinking Stone remarked in his beautiful mahogany voice. ‘I can see it glowing now. You succeeded. You retrieved the ruro!’

The tree that was Thinking Stone appeared to be smiling. Perhaps it was the way the warm breeze lightly moved its branches. Or perhaps it was something else altogether. The sun shone, illuminating a clear, bright blue sky. Here was a beautiful, gently sloping hill-side overlooking a wide valley of woods and rivers, an unspoilt paradise. Overlooking this grand vista was Thinking Stone's home rooted in the soil of this land that he loved so much.

Danny looked down. In this realm things were at a higher intensity, everything felt faster, more energy-like than the denser environment back home. Here everything was a little more vibrant, each sensation a little stronger. The colours were brighter, each sensation intense like a strong dark chocolate. It was both more real yet somehow more dream-like than the normal Earthly realm.

Danny's chest was a translucent gold in the centre. It was lit from within. He could see his heart pumping and his lungs engaged in their steady work. There in the centre, just forward of his organs, lay the ruro globe. It was pulsing slightly. It had constantly shifting gold continents surrounded by a misty swirling ocean of blue.

‘You and your friends did well to reach the Akashi realm,’ said Thinking Stone. ‘And it is a great honour to visit the Arkstone. She is the mother of all trees. There is so much to tell you. One day you will discover many secrets. But now you must face the future. For that, you must know the past. It is a terrible past, my friend.’ Thinking Stone stopped.

In this higher energy realm Danny had the use of all four limbs. Danny began to climb Thinking Stone's branches. Soon he had reached the first ledge in the branches some six feet up. He had about half that distance to go before he would reach his favourite cradle higher up in the branches. Here, he and Ben would often sit and watch the world drift by. A few minutes more and Danny had reached his nook. He sat back and allowed the limbs of the tree to encompass him.

The soft telepathic voice of Thinking Stone said, ‘It is better I show you how it all happened. Fall asleep and come with me my friend.’

Danny soon fell asleep. He felt himself lifted up from his energy-body in the Sapient realm. He followed the spirit of Thinking Stone as the two drifted out into space. Danny and the tree spirit travelled for some time till they approached the Earth. They stopped and looked, watching the beautiful Earth spinning. Danny gazed at the Earth's aura. It was a marvelous cloud of whites and blues extending brilliantly into the inky darkness.

Thinking Stone's spirit self looked the same as his usual oak-like form but not quite as solid. The colours were replaced by a ghostly outline. A line of light-blue energy drifted away into space connecting them to their distant, sleeping energy bodies.

Suddenly everything Danny could see went into a great blur of backward flowing movement. The next moment it was as if a car made of pure energy had run straight through him. And then another and another - impact after impact, yet he stayed where he was. He was unhurt. He yelled out to Thinking Stone in alarm. Thinking Stone sent him a beam of blue light that instantly pacified his mind. Danny's out-of-body self went icy cool in response as the light hit and penetrated. He felt detached from the situation and just observed. As the blur slowed down



Danny noticed that he was now still but the Earth itself was spinning backwards at an incredible speed. And then as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. The Earth resumed its slow rotation forwards. Everything looked the same, but it felt different, like he had stepped into a completely different reality.

‘Welcome back to life-planet Earth Danny - minus just over six thousand years.’

‘Have we gone back in time?’ Danny asked.

‘No, not really. Time does not really exist. There is only the eternal 'now'. A now that contains the imprints of the past and the meandering dreams of the future. However, I have accessed the Earth’s Akashi record. And rewind it about 6000 years.’

‘So this is about 4,000 BC then?’ Danny observed after a moment’s pause.

‘That is how Earth-humans in your own realm might describe it I believe. Now watch Danny. Look over your left shoulder.’

Danny shuddered. How could something so simple be so hideous, so utterly grotesque? It was suspended in space, malevolent, powerful. It was so dark as to be almost beautiful, poetically evil perhaps. The light appeared to fall into it and simply disappear. It was as though it were made from the absence of light.

On closer inspection, its body appeared to be a single cloud of black, congealing phlegm. It was a thick substance that constantly shifted erratically. The cloud reminded Danny of a pool of tar that had been picked up and pulled into rough shapes. Globules and stalactites of black substance hung within the otherwise empty body. Deformed arms trailed here and there.

The whole thing moved like a crab. Yet its deformed tentacles darted with the speed and mechanics of an insect. It was vast, the size of the moon.

Inky jets of blackness spewed at great speed from its body, seemingly at random. The jets looked like the flickering of a serpent’s tongue. The creature tasted its victim. It moved closer, edging toward the Earth awkwardly in fits and starts.

The Earth’s magnetic fields changed and suddenly, a hail of meteorites rained down upon the creature. A force field around the entity became apparent. As each meteorite struck it disappeared harmlessly into a cloud of dust. Danny thought he could see the aura of the Earth intensify, reaching out toward the creature.

The Earth was acting as a single organism, trying desperately to attack this thing. She put out great bolts of lightning toward it, frying the thin atmosphere of space. The black cloud jolted violently as the hundreds of millions of volts hit one after the other. Further meteorites stormed down but it remained undisturbed, strengthened even.

At the centre of the creature’s cloud-body could be seen a black rotating globe with a wispy red aura. Dark continents moved upon oily seas. As it approached the creature cast a shadow over the whole planet.

Danny was terrified but hypnotised also. If he looked within the eyes of the creature would he ever escape their pull? The eyes were randomly placed within the black congealing cloud that was the creature’s body. They looked apathetic but hid an infinite hardness, a deep, glacial anger. He did not know if it was actually there, or just in his mind, but from somewhere his senses were activated. He was aware of a stench of rotting, cancerous flesh. He felt contaminated by the creature's presence and its deadly smell. He was also deeply afraid.

The thing continued to approach the planet. The attacks from the Earth grew less frequent then stopped altogether. For some time after the fight the creature just lurked, waiting for the kill.

An area of the creature stretched and pulsed as though insects were bubbling under the skin. Then a great pod-like arm burst forth from within the inky blackness of its body. The pod fell

across a huge swathe of land around the Earth's equator. The creature seemed to engorge with light. It began to pulse more regularly. The blackness dispelled and became blue, then yellow, then once again to black. But not the dull blackness it had been before. It was now a brilliant illuminated blackness. It seemed to pull every ounce of light back into itself.

The dark cloud that was its body became flattened. It extended hugely in size, becoming an oval disc. The countless eyes elongated then disappeared altogether. The tongue-like jets of blackness stopped flickering outwards. The arm that had extended from the dark creature was still aimed toward the equator. The arm-like pod pulsed as blue and yellow globules raced from the Earth to the ethereal disc that the creature had now become.

Danny noticed that the aura of the whole planet was weakening. He felt tears well in his eyes and a gnawing coldness spread across his heart. The planet itself seemed to be crying. Within the black disc he could see skulls and broken bones imaged in its surface. People were wandering dazed in the deserts, children dying of thirst. Withered mothers carried their shrunken babies who clung desperately to the breast. Dying cattle lay emaciated upon the ground. Salty tears of the herders fell namelessly to the dust.

The disc grew until its surface was as wide as the Earth itself. The pod withdrew itself back into the disc. The disc shone bright white for a moment and then shifted. It was still there but it had become translucent. The creature was now invisible. By adjusting his eyesight, making it lazy, almost blurred, Danny could still see the outline of the creature. It was growing. It was no longer a disc. It was becoming a sphere encompassing the whole Earth within itself. It had, in effect, consumed the entire planet.

Still clearly apparent and circling like a satellite within the invisible sphere was the remains of the black creature, a dark globe. It was the heart, and brain, of the creature. A new atmosphere now quietly cloaked the planet. Killing it, slowly, softly, surely.

With tears still burning in his eyes Danny turned his head back to the right. Thinking Stone's spirit self was still there. It seemed to Danny that Thinking Stone nodded. They left the 'dream' of Earth's past and headed back to their energy-bodies. Danny found himself still sat within the little nook of branches some nine feet off the ground. He stretched a little and adjusted his eyes to the daylight.

Thinking Stone's deep and sonorous voice rang cleanly through Danny's mind, 'What you saw actually happened - but over millennia. And still it is not over. The creature is called the Elif and even now it lives here. Its mind is one of the most powerful forces on your planet. It is a creature that can seriously weaken an entire planet. Indeed, that is what an Elif eats - planets.

'For aeons it hid, incubating, biding its evil time. It would assimilate a mind here, a mind there, much as a dog pack will scavenge for easy pickings. For millennia we protected the Earth. We kept the Elif weak. Then a great and dangerous force disturbed the whole solar system. The creature knew its time had come. It had to strike before the Earth and the solar system made it through to the space and time of Aquaria. Aeons of frustration, millennia of hatred would find an outlet. After so long hiding in the shadows it showed itself and attacked once again.

'After the Earth had failed to drive it off, the Elif engulfed her. It cut her off from the cosmic forces - and the nourishment she so desperately needed. The Earth spirit, Sofia, is brave indeed. The cradle of life, of mankind itself, grew steadily drier. Nothing would grow. The desert sands sprang up as if from nowhere. A dusty murk veiled the sky. The wells gurgled then choked with dust. The air grew grey and stale. The birds kept low. The ancient cities began to crumble. The great civilisations that had grown again since the ancient floods sank slowly into the new deserts.

Every leaf drooped, every tree dying. The sparkle of life all but vanished. All the time the Elif drank of the Earth's life like a vampire. Millions upon millions starved.

‘Those that survived were changed. The rule of evil became the law of their land. The time of Eden, the eternal dance of energy, was nought but a long forgotten memory - a fairy-tale. Generation after generation fell prey to war. Evil became second nature. Hatred dwelt in almost every heart, lived in almost every home. And today hundreds of millions have killed and died without even knowing what possessed their minds or perverted their hearts.

‘The Elif lives in many realms at once, swapping at will should danger threaten. Its body feeds on life-force, its mind on pure thought energy. Greedily, it sucks up the power of plants and animals. It is always hungry, never satiated, always looking to dominate. It can possess a mind before it is aware of even the slightest change. Boundaries of time and of space have little meaning for it. But still we kept it at bay.

‘It had its sights on the Earth for tens of thousands of years. When the two-leggeds first built their great ancient cities, their pyramids and temples, its jealousy knew no bounds. It couldn't abide the thought that they might in the future master themselves. Whilst the Earth-humans were but tribes scattered here and there it waited, letting its prey grow fat. But soon it had to attack, whilst it still could. Some on your planet called it “The Fall”. It is recorded in all the old texts. Some on other worlds have called it "The Affliction" or "The Spirit-Plague". But few know of the Elif, only its effects. It keeps itself well hidden. Not all life-planets have been so attacked, but again, not all have survived.’

For a long time Danny sat in silence, simply watching the birds and the swaying of the trees. As if the environment sensed his mood, a light rain began to fall.

‘I am sorry to intrude upon your thoughts my friend,’ Thinking Stone intoned eventually. ‘But I have more to tell you. We have found a way to end the Elif.’

‘You mean to kill it?’ said Danny who wished immediately that his words had not sounded so defensive.

‘That is not the term I would choose.’

Danny felt an anxiety move from his belly upwards.

‘We have found its Achilles’ heel. There is a frequency, a nemesis frequency. At sufficient power it would neutralise the Elif. It must be delivered to the heart of the creature. The ruro globe in your chest will amplify your powers and your mind. It will enable you to deliver the frequency. But, it knows. It knows all about you. It has many powerful people in its employ. Besides, there are others who crave the ruro for their own ends. You must enter the Elif's mind, and deliver the frequency, before it is too late. Prepare yourself Danny.’

A powerful sound jarred his brain. It was strange and painful, frighteningly, raw. It was as if his cerebellum itself was vibrating, creating a strange loud frequency from within. The sound felt like it was created by his brain rattling in his skull. Danny's breath burst out in anxious gasps. Taking control he made himself calm down by slowing his breathing.

‘That Danny is the Nemesis code. It is the secret work of aeons. Its existence is something we hid even from you. And now it is stored in your mind.’

‘Thanks for telling me!’ Danny cut in.

‘There is not time to explain everything son. You must go now. We will be with you in any way we can,’ and with that Thinking Stone fell silent.

Danny had gone white with shock. What could he possibly say in return? Who could he turn to? He felt alone and insignificant, he thought he might have known such feelings in the past but they were nothing compared to this.

With one swift intention Danny left Thinking Stone, and the Sapient Realm, far behind.

## **Chapter Thirty Two - A Message for Jodie**

He was instantly back, half-asleep, slumped forward in his wheelchair. The wheels squeaked upon the wooden flooring of his bedroom. He stayed for a moment or two, gathering his thoughts. After what seemed like an eternity, he made his decision.

He left a mind-message for Ben. Then, harnessing the power of the ruro material in his chest he beamed Orb across to Jodie. He planted the sleeping mind-entity in a dark recess at the back of Jodie's mind. Neither of them would notice for a while. He then swiftly departed the ordinary realm.

Danny entered the Thought Realm of the Earth itself. His body slumped forward once again.

'Danny, Danny, wake up, wake up,' pleaded Ben. His voice was hoarse with effort. 'C'mon, don't leave me like this. Wake up!' Ben had felt sure something was seriously wrong.

He had struggled getting to the room quickly. He had found Danny half-comatose in his wheelchair. At first he had thought Danny had merely gone to the Sapient Realm, but this felt different. Something about Danny just wasn't right.

'My mind messages!' Why didn't I think of that before,' Ben whispered to himself. His eyes went white and then closed as he nipped into the Thought Realm and across to their secret mind arena. Sure enough there on the tiny island was a letter symbol, 'M,' hanging in mid-air above a small palm on the beach. In his imagination Ben reached out to the letter and touched it. It unfolded outwards to reveal a message written in gold ink on blue paper.

*'I have been to see Thinking Stone. A terrible time has come. There is a creature called the Elif. It is a dark being that causes this whole planet untold trouble. The special substance from the Akashi library, the ruro, gives me the power to enter its sanctuary. I must go alone to the Elif. We may need you here. You should gate-crash Jodie's mind and tell her all that you can. We are all in grave danger, Danny.'*

Ben wasn't sure what to do. Should he disobey his friend and follow Danny to the Elif or should he find Jodie first? Would Thinking Stone know what to do? He should take control himself but which path to take? One thing was certain - Jodie was going to get a surprise.

Jodie was quietly putting the books in their rightful places. She enjoyed her work and it was good to be back now that life was slowly returning to normal.

She had wanted to be a librarian ever since she could remember. Her father had discouraged her once, many years previous. She still remembered the conversation, 'Go make dinner now would you love? There's a good girl. And don't be filling you head with daft ideas,' he'd said in a kindly tone, from the lounge. Jodie had waited for the inevitable rasp of the can-pull. He wasn't known for his sparkling wit. After a gulp or two, he continued, 'You're not clever enough to be a librarian. Everyone knows you're a practical lass.'

Her mum hadn't been in her life since she was a toddler. There was no other adult in the household. No-one to tell her she could, if she tried, be who *she* wanted to be. But finally, with a little help from her friends, she had gathered the courage to apply for an access course. She had to work harder than the other students but she got the grades eventually.

Despite it all, she'd always felt responsible for her dad, like she had always been the adult in this relationship. He had a knack for twisting things. He'd even made her feel guilty about going back to work, like she should be at home looking after him.

The untoward events at the library had certainly got around. Quiet little Jodie was getting a reputation. She just couldn't help getting involved in weird situations so it was said. Perhaps she attracted them. Perhaps it was her fault.

Whilst Jodie was returning books to the shelves she felt her whole world go jet-black in a mere moment. Her legs became a mass of jelly as she slid gracelessly to the floor. All she could hear now was a loud, low-pitched buzzing sound. It seemed to rise and fall in a set pattern. She lost control of her eyes and then her head followed, then her whole body. The noise just ceased. It was as if she had been dipped, in an instant, into a pond of cool clear celestial water. In the water were messages and pictures waiting just for her.

Susan, the head-librarian, happened to be passing when Jodie took her funny turn. Susan stood rooted to the spot swaying like a tree, at that moment, completely unable to respond.

Jodie's mind was being fed data. It was something about an entity, the Elif. Danny had gone to the Thought Realm of the Earth, to attack it. She, Ben and Danny were all in grave danger apparently. She just wanted her quiet life back but they needed her. She couldn't see any other choice than to be involved. But then she saw other things, things from the future. An ambulance, a kidnapping, men in black with automatic weapons, a strange headquarters full of things she had never seen before - alien things.

But the worst thing of all was the black satellite orbiting the Earth. This, she knew instinctively, was where Danny was going. It looked evil. It seemed to emanate a black light, if there could be such a thing. On its surface dark continents moved. Tar-like seas swept its face with glacial hatred. She could see myriad eyes just beneath the surface of the globe. They looked at her with contempt. She felt that if she looked directly into those eyes they would eat her soul. The eyes were hungry and cold. They radiated anger.

Then the black globe was gone. She could see Ben. He smiled and said,

'Sorry to gate-crash your mind like this. Danny sent me. I went to see Thinking Stone too. He has felt some of the patterns of the future in order to help us. We need you Jodie. Thinking Stone also sends you this - it is some sort of sonic key or code.' Thinking Stone had entrusted him with a mind recording. Ben played it to Jodie.

Jodie felt a beam of blue light hit her powerfully in the chest. She was overwhelmed with the most fantastic feeling of peace and of courage. The feelings were encoded sonically. The sounds echoed within every atom of her body, a most beautiful symphony. It was like being in touch with the most fantastic part of her own self. It was like something that had always been there but she had never quite known before. Not like this, so tangible, so real. The doubts and guilt of her childhood evaporated like dew in the sun. Nothing seemed to matter anymore. She smiled to herself. Then a doubt crept across her mind - how long could she hold on to this feeling, she wondered.

Suddenly she was awake - back in the library. Susan was on the phone, asking for an ambulance. Jodie jumped up in a single leap and snatched the phone from her.

'False alarm. No need for an ambulance, just gone a little faint. I'm diabetic you see, and I'm not as careful as I should be,' Jodie lied. 'Yes, I am sure, sorry to waste your time.' Jodie put the phone down slowly. Angela was staring at her with a mixture of horror and rage.

'Give me your car keys,' Jodie demanded in a low growl with her hand out-turned.

‘Erm, I don’t think that’s a good idea,’ said Susan, whose voice had suddenly gone weak. Jodie's own car was in the garage being prepared for its MOT.

‘Yes of course it’s a good idea. Now just give me the damn keys,’ Jodie menaced through gritted teeth. Susan just stood there, unable to move a finger. When mild-mannered Jodie snapped only the foolish would get in the way. She remembered where Angela kept the keys. Reaching into the fake designer handbag that was stowed beneath the library counter, Jodie’s fingers encircled a small key-fob. In Jodie's light grasp the keys for Susan’s small metallic-green Japanese SUV sat temptingly. Jodie knew exactly where it would be parked - in the space near the CCTV cameras.

Susan regained some of her composure, ‘Come back here young woman! Put those keys down immediately.’

Jodie marched off.

## **Chapter Thirty Three - Hanger Forty Two**

Hangar Forty Two was on an old air force base in the middle of Suffolk. Far enough away from London to be inconspicuous, near enough to be well placed for visiting VIPs. The air-base itself melted into the endless greenery and well-tended countryside - it made a discrete add-on to the local town. It was nothing too secretive as that only attracts more attention. It was just another part-used, slightly run-down military base and airfield as far as the locals were concerned.

A few people on the actual base knew that a restricted entry zone existed and that it contained Hanger Forty Two. They knew that it was more than merely out-of-bounds. They knew it was quite possibly to do with the so-called 'Black Ops'. These were military operations that didn't officially exist and weren't funded via the normal streams.

There was an RAF information officer whose task it was to put out the odd cover story. His latest wheeze was that Hanger Forty Two was a testing lab for experimental microwave weapons. They had loved that down at the Stag in the local town of Bentwaters. Every six months or so he would put some new gossip out onto the grapevine. That seemed to work fairly well. Of course, the information officer didn't actually know what he was covering up. He'd been misinformed.

Some vaguely secret work did go on in the main hangar but the real business was elsewhere. It was certainly nearby, but hidden so well it was blindingly obvious.

Alistair Civil, the head of the agency-with-no-name had personally driven out to the nearest large town, Woodbridge, to pick Monty up from the London train. Normally he would have sent an assistant but Monty needed some extra preparation in Alistair's view. Monty was from their Nature-technics department and had come down from the Scottish HQ especially. They were both strange men from an even stranger organisation. It was all a front, as one of the two men knew only too well.

They were driving smoothly through some new suburbs and across the long open country lanes in Alistair's slightly weatherworn Vauxhall saloon. With his slender finger tips toying with the cool steering wheel, he daydreamed happily. Whatever the custom wheel was made of was a mystery. But one thing was for certain; Alistair thought with a little glow of triumph, it would be very, very expensive. Mood-enhancing steering wheels didn't come cheap. The car had all sorts of conveniences and comforts not usually available. It was all carefully engineered not to attract attention. A brand new, modified and customised vehicle dusted down to look like an ageing family car. Thanks to the Tesla-engine one only had to put fuel in it once a year which was a considerable plus.

Monty grew tired of watching the large, spacious fields that edged the wide country roads. He was used to being hemmed in by mountains or forest up at the facility in Argyll near the Highlands. This land was just too flat and open. Too cultivated and tame. Somehow it made him even more uneasy. He shifted round to look at Alistair. He was just the same. That man never seemed to age.

'I never entirely understood what the agency's post-brain research is all about,' Monty said, trying to sound a little flippant and failing miserably. 'You know, what with me being stuck in entity research and all.' Monty knew the agency prized his cleverness but think too far outside the box and they might decide your genius wasn't worth the risk. Monty had spent his whole career balancing up his brilliant insight with contrived dumbness.



Alistair sighed quietly. 'A brain isn't the only thing you can think with Monty. Do away with your dependence on that one piece of organic hardware and the possibilities are vast.'

'Yes, I see...'

'So Monty old chap, this is it then?' Alistair noted dryly, changing tack.

'I, I guess so. I heard you managed to get the Virtual Tracker back.'

'We did indeed. I can fill you in on that if you like.'

'Yes I was wondering about that situation. Most advanced nature-tech I've ever worked..'

'..The frog mind-entity,' cut in Alistair, 'the Mind-Ware 6, did go missing but we have him right back fully under wraps - where he belongs eh? At least if we can believe Zero's reports.'

'That's the unhinged free-lancer who calls himself, "The Leader" isn't it?'

'Yes, that's him. If you want something desperate doing, give him a call. We're about to tell him to home in on Operative 4, the disabled neurode who has the ruoro material. Unless we get a change of plan from the big man upstairs,' Alistair pointed upwards with his left hand in case Monty was wondering who he was referring to.

Alistair entered the outskirts of Bentwaters town. It wasn't far now till they reached the base. For a few minutes both men were quiet. After the small well-to-do housing estate the main road was a broad but nondescript affair. Only Peter's Pets and Chan's Chinese Takeaway caught Monty's eye.

As they headed out of town Monty could not contain himself any longer, 'You know, I'd rather you talk to it if you don't mind.' Monty said.

Alistair smiled inwardly. He'd just notched up another point against his wayward colleague.

'Does our friend the Elif really get to you that much?' remarked Alistair casually, faking a little concern.

'I think it's just, like, you are more on its wavelength. You have a deeper understanding of it,' added Monty. He realised the moment the words left his mouth that an underhand insult, and an equally underhand compliment, probably wouldn't work in the same sentence. Alistair grinned, two points to none. Monty was out of practice when it came to talking to people – too much time spent in the lab experimenting.

'We'll both speak to it. At this crucial point in time the big fellow will probably want our full attention,' Alistair accented the word 'full'.

Monty was worried. This was getting to be more ominous by the minute. For a start, he didn't fully buy into all this extra-terrestrial stuff. He knew the hardware worked. The off-worlders were real enough. He just didn't agree with the extent to which they were involved. He wondered to himself if there were some other way.

'Someone, someday, is going to rumble my lack of sincerity,' thought Monty to himself. Next thing he'd know he'd find himself dead - and that was if he was lucky. If he were unlucky he'd be drug-patched and micro-chipped. End of free will, end of story, end of the real Monty. He'd just be a slave. 'Perhaps I am already,' Monty thought darkly.

And this Alistair guy, he was positively dangerous. His smiles and jokes, the friendly banter, hid something deeper, something not altogether nice. Hell, it was something not altogether human, Monty decided. It was like he could read people's minds. He was just waiting for the right time to push a man off the nearest cliff.

Even the special-ops officers afforded him a wary respect. He was certainly the closest to the Elif. This made him a very powerful man. Monty didn't want to think about all that. He made himself picture his wife's lovely floral arrangements instead. Sometimes he would join her in that hobby. Flower arranging made such a nice change from his usual male-dominated life.

‘Monty old man, I’ve just been thinking about how damn drab my office has become - all that green leather and dark wood. You wouldn’t believe how much time us poor pen-pushers have to spend cooped up in there. Not like you scientist chaps,’ Alistair remarked in a friendly tone. ‘Maybe I’ll stop at the corner shop and pick up some flowers to brighten it up eh? The men might think I’ve gone soft though.’ Alistair smiled one of his more unnerving smiles.

Monty smiled and then sank further into his seat. They passed through a check-point and swiftly entered the air-force base. Despite the fences, the cameras and the odd passing army truck, the place seemed quite empty, deserted even. The base had a sense of spaciousness as if it was insulated from the rest of time and space.

They were headed toward a large hanger on the eastern side of the base. Eventually they reached the car park near it. There was another set of security here. The further checks completed, Alistair took the single parking space marked ‘A’. They left the car and headed for a side entrance to the hanger.

‘Welcome to Hangar Forty Two David Adams Institute. Sorry, I’ll have to check your ID Sir. Thank-you Sir.’

After their plastic and paper ID had been checked both men looked up as the camera scanned their retinas. The camera looked like any old cheap internet camera. Alistair’s thumbprint on the gel scanner and they were in.

As they walked away the slightly smug expression of the army security officer clung to Monty’s mind. That man knew something - something dark and sinister, but somehow amusing at the same time. It unnerved him.

No great surprises here thought Monty. Inside they passed sleeping jets, helicopters, various gun-type devices. Everywhere there were stacks of complicated looking hardware. If it wasn’t for the fact that all this artistry was devoted to the science of killing people, it could have been backstage at a Rolling Stones gig.

Here and there stood squares of well-padded office chairs in a neutral blue. There were workstations arranged in clusters. Military officers passed them with a friendly nod or a hello. They seemed absorbed in their own worlds. Eventually Monty and Alistair reached a makeshift set of rooms that had been built against the far side of the hangar.

‘Welcome,’ Alistair said turning the various keys. ‘These are my private rooms. My own portal to another world, you could say. My actual office is just offsite in case you’re wondering. I like to have a nice view of the whole base. Now, let’s take you through old man.’

Both men entered the room. As Monty went to step through to the room he felt as though he had just been stretched in both space and time. His body and mind felt not quite his own. A green mist filled his thinking.

The room itself seemed to have been imported from another decade. An old PC stood on a cheap desk. There were various yellowing certificates and awards framed on the walls. A plug in electric clock stood on the desk next to some dusty old military photographs.

‘We need to visit a very special area. My little community within a community one could say. I like to keep a low profile there so if anybody asks we’re both military physicists. We’re part of some consciousness experiment but we don’t know the details. Right-ho, let’s be off.’

Monty continued to not say a word.

‘It’s this way.’

Alistair headed over to the fire-exit and tapped a five-digit code into the keypad next to the door. Some magnets released with a low click and Alistair pushed the door open. They entered a dark and damp stairwell, poorly lit by emergency lighting.

‘Watch your step Monty, it’s a bit damp. Only I use this entrance...And my special guests of course.’ The pause between the sentences was slightly threatening.

Monty counted forty eight large stone steps as they descended in silence. There was another fire-exit type door with a keypad like the one in Alistair’s room. This pad had a yellowed plastic weatherproof covering. He entered another code then waited for some time. There was a double click. This indicated it was time to enter the last code.

‘The locking device has to check all’s clear,’ Alistair explained as he pushed the door open.

They found themselves in a toilet. Alistair pulled the fire-exit door shut behind him and went to use one of the urinals. Monty joined him. The toilet was lit by a soft green light that seemed to have no apparent source. Monty briefly felt the same strange stretching, disembodied sensation he had felt upon entering Alistair's room in the Hanger above. This place seemed to exist in a different kind of space altogether.

After they had finished their ablutions they entered the main area. Again, it was like stepping into another world, a contrast that that would stay with Monty for some time.

‘Welcome to the “Hang-Out” as we like to call it.’ Alistair said grandly, pleased with the effect the whole experience was having on Monty. ‘These chumps haven't the slightest idea they are part of one of the greatest experiments ever conducted,’ he whispered conspiratorially.

‘Looks like no experiment I've ever seen.’

‘This, all around you Monty, is an engine room,’ explained Alistair patiently, ‘it supplies raw power to the entity. This power transmutes and strengthens the signals the entity gets from the outside world.’

‘So, it’s a bit like a condenser, an amplifier for the Elif?’

‘That’s about right, Monty. Condensing and purifying the incoming signals for our good friend upstairs,’ Alistair winked conspiratorially.

‘Well it’s one bizarre engine room,’ Monty commented, still a little awe-struck.

‘Right-ho. Act normal. I know that’s a tall order, but here come some of the inhabitants.’

Alistair initiated a conversation on physics as a group of musicians walked past. When they were safely out of earshot he dropped the conversation mid-sentence. The two men stood in silence on the polished oak flooring. They were off to one side of a huge lounge bar. Upon the wall hung a six-foot wide flat-screen. It was showing computer animations based on fractal patterns. These patterns were tuned into the background music but somehow also reflected the observer’s thoughts. The patterns became more intense when concentrated upon and faded away when looked at from an angle. The screen appeared slightly differently to each person. The colours and detail seemed impossibly intense.

Monty wondered where the windows were before he remembered they were underground. The lights were dimmed and candles burnt romantically at each table. The atmosphere was spacious and somehow wonderful. Enchanting smells of deep forest wafted in through the powerful air-conditioning, subtle hints in the background of one's mind. Intelligent looking people reclined with their hushed shoes resting on expensive leather stools. Most were sat on their own reading books. The armchairs and settees looked like they would take an act of will just to get up from. The bar itself was enormous, big enough for four or five hundred people. There were about a dozen customers sat here and there. Some were sipping at drinks in huge white cups. This was Monty's idea of heaven.

‘Everyone you see here is a psychic, a gifted musician, a talented writer, something along those lines. But very few know what this place is really about. We conduct the odd thought experiment now and then. We tell those lucky enough to be invited here that it’s all about getting

the atmosphere right. But really all we want is the thought energy. See those air con' vents.' Alistair pointed to the regularly placed circular vents dotted upon the ceiling. 'Defocus your eyes and look at one of them. What do you see?'

Just then the band started up. It was pure unadulterated magic, music of a new era. Was it jazz or classical or Indian raga? He couldn't tell. Monty followed Alistair over to a huge 3-seater brown leather sofa. Daydreaming, he defocused his eyes and watched one of the circular ceiling vents. The beautiful music continued to pour over his soul. His fears about meeting the Elif were briefly forgotten.

After some time Monty realised he could see swirls of blue and yellow energy moving in time to the enchanting music. These swirls were centred on the vents. The energy was being collected.

'Have you adjusted your vision? That's good. It'll be useful where we're going,' Alistair remarked casually.

The fear appeared from nowhere and started to rise again in Monty's guts. He sipped at the perfect tea that had been brought over and placed on an expensive oak side-table next to the sofa. After the music had finished Alistair arose and with a brief raise of his eyebrows indicated that Monty was to follow.

Alistair and Monty wandered about the 'Hang-Out' for some time. There was an indoor market place with everything from strange looking vegetables and fruits to crystal balls. Nothing however was for sale. If you wanted something you just took it. The fear continued. Monty put his paranoia down to the forthcoming meeting with the Elif.

They passed rooms where groups of people were meditating. There were other rooms where people were holding ropes connected to strange barrels filled with water and stones. Everyone seemed to belong with some group or other, or was otherwise detached but engaged. There was no great friendliness but an all-pervading calm was felt throughout.

Eventually Alistair and Monty reached what felt like the centre of the complex. In a round concrete column stood an ordinary looking elevator door, big enough to admit two at a time. Alistair pressed the down button and waited. Inside, the elevator was an ordinary metal button pad. Alistair pressed 'U1'. When the lift was moving he quickly pressed 'U1' again then another fast sequence. A spring-loaded catch gave way smoothly. An exquisitely engineered mechanism glided the whole keypad out. The lift stopped. Alistair flipped the keypad back to front and replaced it into the wall with a practised action. He then tapped a code into the numeric keypad that had now been revealed. A thin metal tube extended itself from the wall. It pointed at Alistair's forehead.

'Don't worry Monty, this is just our latest security device. Telepathic thought entry codes. We still use retina scanning and gel-prints just to be on the safe side though.'

Alistair placed his thumb on a small gel-pad to the left of the keypad. The two men looked up at the camera in the corner of the elevator. Their retinas scanned, a green LED light came on and the lift started to move downwards again. After a few seconds had passed the lift stopped. The doors opened on to the edge of an astonishing room.

'Welcome to our subterranean nerve-centre,' Alistair remarked casually with a long sweep of his arm. They both stepped out from the elevator and onto the sumptuous black carpet. They were in a large circular room. On the floor, woven into the carpet, were long, transparent light-conducting tubes. They radiated outward from the centre of the room like spokes on a wheel. Blue and yellow globules of energy continually passed along the thin tubes toward the outer wall of the building. Here they turned upwards, traversed the outer wall and returned back along the

ceiling toward the centre of the room. Apart from the tubes and the carpet the whole room appeared empty. Monty noticed that there was a subtle, golden geometric grid woven into the black carpet. It reminded him of a microchip.

Monty felt heavy. It was almost as if there was too much reality in the room. Gravity had been concentrated like soup. The air, although chilly, was still dense. Monty thought he could see subtle blue and yellow swirling mists moving here and there in the half-light.

‘Lights,’ said Alistair. A subdued blue glow filled the room.

Monty could now see that there was a raised circular platform in the centre of the round room. It was here that optical tubes converged from the ceiling’s centre. They entered the top, of what looked like a huge cylindrical fish tank.

It stood about six-foot high and was at least three-foot wide. Beside the tank were two black hydraulic office chairs, the kind with their own wheels on castors. Inside the tank was a blue liquid-gel substance - now lit from within. In fact, most of the blue light was actually coming from the tank. It was glowing.

‘Electrical lighting interferes with the device’s functioning. This is free plasma lighting. I quite like it myself. You’d better sit down Monty and prepare yourself. I’m used to all this, what to say? Journeying?’

Monty thought Alistair was being slightly too friendly now. Exactly what was at stake here? Monty could clearly see the swirls of blue and yellow energy moving around the still atmosphere of the room. There were also small dancing white bubbles that appeared here and there. If he had not been so scared he would have found the sight quite entrancing.

‘This is it Monty old man. We’ve had plenty time to get used to things I’m afraid. The big guy wants our attention so my hands are tied. Unfortunately, there are specific instructions should you prove...unhelpful,’ Alistair smiled. ‘Not that I’d want to use them of course. It’s just business. I’ll go first. See you up there Monty.’

Alistair sat in one of the office chairs next to the side of the tank. As he approached the tank the gel-like contents seemed to swirl and move. The colour changed becoming more intense. Small darts of red free-formed at random within the liquid. Monty thought it was like watching some kind of plasmatic silicon chip. However, there wasn’t an electrical plug anywhere in sight.

There were two areas of the tank that had differently textured material. These areas were oval and large enough to frame a human head. They were set at mid-height in the tank. Alistair moved his head toward one of these areas and gently pressed his forehead against it. Although the surface looked hard, once touched within the oval it stretched like cling-film. The transparent material contoured itself to Alistair’s head.

Monty thought it was almost like birth in reverse. Alistair forced his whole head through. The plastic suddenly gave way then clung to the sides of his neck without losing a drop of the tank’s precious contents. The red shots of energy increased dramatically in speed and number. They darted mechanically up and down, making sharp ninety-degree turns before disappearing.

The bursts of energy began to form patterns moving out from where Alistair had planted his head. He breathed the liquid in, taking long deep gasps. He didn’t look in any way shocked. He was merely exhilarated, as if he had dived into freezing cold waters for the sheer fun of it. Alistair turned his head to the side, smiled and then beckoned for Monty to follow his lead. Monty did so. He knew that if he did not he was as good as dead.

On the round roof of Hanger Forty Two a small dish homed in on a signal. The signal came from a black globe satellite travelling high above the Earth. Locking in on its target the dish produced a small tube that pointed at the black sphere far above. Small electrical motors whirled

with well-oiled efficiency till the tube and satellite were suitably aligned. A blue laser-like light could now vaguely be seen. Monty and Alistair entered the mind of the Elif. The laser turned red.

## **Chapter Thirty Four - Coffee with the Enemy**

There had been no other choice as far as Danny could see. There was no way of escaping this next step, however much he might like to try. There wasn't even time to contact Jodie personally. He was still worrying that Ben might not think to check his mind-messages. Still, he'd just have to trust on that one.

Danny entered the Thought Realm, a sphere of thought that surrounds every person and everything. He soared up to the Thought Realm of the Earth itself, settling down to the altitude that he imagined might house satellites. He searched for some time. He drifted past chunks of ghost-like metal and other debris till eventually he found what he was looking for.

He homed in on a black globe. An indistinct though arrow-straight red beam of light connected the black satellite to somewhere on the Earth. By defocusing his eyes Danny could also see the light grey sphere, of the Elif, that encircled the whole planet. This dirty grey sphere was the true body of the Elif. The black globe was merely the Elif's brain.

Here and there small whirlpools of energy shot up from the Earth to the grey aura. Each contained the hopeless dreams of another lost soul, a small donation for the ever-hungry Elif. In return, the many demons within the Elif would descend through the invisible grey matrix. Each demon splinter of the Elif was eager to make its nest in a new human mind.

It must have been about the size of a large van. It looked like it was made of some tar-like substance. Upon its surface oily waters and black liquid-metal continents drifted. It shone with an eerie dark light.

Danny felt a growing chill rising in his bones. Hatred arose in him, a raw animal anger. He swallowed and focused on the ball of ruo in his chest. With a final glance downward he noted that the ruo was glowing a more intense blue than it ever had before. It was a glow that could be seen clearly through his flesh. Danny's Thought Realm self took a last deep breath. He dived toward the point of no return.

'Who dares attack me?' thought the Elif indignantly. The globe was shocked. It had sensed the onslaught shortly before but its premonitions had failed completely. He had not seen this future. How can this be? Rippling waves extended out from where Danny was aiming. As he made contact the whole sphere started to pulse violently and to glow an angry red, then purple. The thing was fighting him. Doubts and fears drilled their way into his mind. Perhaps he should turn back now. After all what could he do? He didn't matter. Surely it had gone too far for him to make any difference?

Danny shouted at the unwelcome voices in his mind. Great swirls of the Elif's grey aura lifted themselves up in arms. The swirling arms gained solidity. They tried to tear Danny off as he clung to the molten globe. Concentrating on the ruo globule inside he felt his whole body tune into its frequency. He was the ruo. He must go on. There was no turning back now. He must fight. Beginning from his chest outwards he became engulfed in a dazzling blue, red tongued light of fire. He was on fire. The surface of the globe suddenly gave. The boiling black and red surface calmed and Danny entered inside.

What happened next took Danny wholly by surprise. He was expecting the gates of hell. What he got was closer to Starbucks. It must have been the dark side of Starbucks however. Danny found himself suspended in a totally black room. One by one items appeared, a lounge chair, a table, a coffee bar with espresso machine. His body was more or less the same but made of a slightly heavier substance than it was in the Thought Realm proper. Danny had no idea

where he was or even what realm he was in. A cup of coffee slowly floated itself over to him. A straw appeared in it. One of the thick flexi-straws Danny found so useful back on Earth. Danny tried a sip. It was just how he liked it.

‘I see you’ve made it then,’ said a dark bass voice that seemed to reverberate everywhere. ‘Probably expecting fire and brimstone I imagine. It may have been that way that once upon a time but I do things differently now,’ it paused, ‘despite, your lack of invite.’

More silence followed. Danny took occasional sips of his coffee. He was trembling. All he could think about was escaping.

The Elif continued, ‘Time is different here. It goes fast or slow - just as I desire. Let me explain a little - although really it is you who should be doing the explaining. Nothing is all bad - myself included. When I first came to the Earth it was already in difficulty. And what is more, your solar system was about to enter the cosmic plains of Armageddon: a difficult journey for a life-planet such as Earth. The plains of Armageddon are brutal. It is like a desert in space. It was all the sun could do to continue shining, giving out the power of the living. The solar system went out of balance. Moons were lost, bodies tilted. But worst of all the great deserts on Earth were born. The time of Eden, the Eternal Dance of Energy, came to an end and the era of “The Fall” began.

‘It looks like I attacked the Earth all those years back - but that is only part of the story. Yes I fed on the life-force and the mind energy too - refined “force” to a creature such as I. But, Earthman, everyone needs to eat in the lower realms. The Earth Spirit, Sofia, had lost a great deal of her power because of the terrible disease she had experienced. This is the disease of the Armageddon space-plains itself. Man had fallen from grace, the children starved. Mother Earth knew that if there were enough humans, one day they might reverse the drain of her life-force. Their combined consciousness would be enough to protect her from the Armageddon space plain.

‘Now, as you know, the Earth is about to leave the Armageddon plains but it is the humans who have lost their way. And the Hidden Ones will try to destroy the Earth once again. I know you must think I am some sort of devil - the source of all evil and all that. But hear me Danny. You are not alive for millennia without gathering some kind of wisdom. Why would a completely evil creature exist in God’s great universe anyway?’

‘Yes, the Sapient Ones are right, I have attached myself and fed from the Earth. But I also have something I can give in return. I can implant thoughts, weave dreams, redirect hopes, and waive fears. I can live in a million minds at once, aware of each as the centre of my attention.

‘I can help mankind change. The next few years are crucial. Would you let mankind wander through the last reaches of the desert alone?’

Danny sat quietly deep in his thoughts. The coffee was still hot. However much he drank his cup stayed full. At least the centre of hell was better than home in this respect. His coffee was often lukewarm and his plastic beaker one third full or less back there. Perhaps this is a form of self-defence, Danny reflected. Thinking about the petty things in life, pretending that I’m not really here having a relaxed conversation over a cup of coffee with the Elif. What if I am trapped inside its mind, perhaps forever? Or at least for a very long time - Danny couldn’t allow himself thoughts like that. He collected himself. Sensing his readiness the Elif continued.

‘There are too many humans for me to influence. They behave like scattered seeds of darkness blown about by an evil wind. But you carry the ruo substance in your Earth-bound body. This is the most powerful substance in the entire universe Earth-child.



‘We could change the world with it, and quickly. We could return to the days of Eden - but with billions of Adams and billions of Eves, not just a few like before. It could be wonderful, beyond both our imaginations. Think about it awhile. I would need the actual substance from your chest on the Earth-plain. Your mind would be temporarily conjoined, though still separate, to my own. Together we could change the thought-patterns of the entire human race. What do you say Danny? Will you at least consider my words?’

Danny sat silently and contemplated. He dearly wanted to believe it. He had expected fights to the death, screaming and tearing of flesh. But instead he had got words that left him feeling unsure of anything. Who was he fighting anyway? Why destroy the Elif? Is war and fighting, all there ever is? There must be more than good versus evil forever and ever, amen.

Danny prayed. He asked the universe, his higher power, to guide him in some small way, any way that he could understand. As if in a mirror his request was miraculously answered. The faintest echo of Thinking Stone's voice stirred deep within him. It was so deep that Danny knew that even the Elif would not be able to overhear, ‘Nothing really dies Danny. The Elif just does not want to change, that is all.’ With that Danny understood what he had to do.

Danny summoned up every ounce of power, every ray of thought, each drop of sunshine that had ever resided inside his mind. He was powering up like a great sports car revving for the first time. Danny shone like the rockets of the shuttle launch, except where there was fuel, here there was life. Danny grew as bright as a small sun, his mind as wide and powerful as the universe itself.

He heard a scream, a long, dark, furious scream that emanated from the very bowels of the great creature, the Elif. Swirls of blackness engulfed him trying to stop Danny's light, block it out in any way it could. Danny threw the arms off. He felt an immense anger. Tuning in to the vibration that was locked deep within him, Danny began to emit the Nemesis code. His whole body reverberated to its inharmony, its almost evil sound. Every ounce of himself ached and hurt with its power.

The Elif was still fighting. Great swirls of blackness arose all around him. It was a cloak of nothingness into which light just died. This gathering darkness surrounded him. It was getting harder to emit the vibration. It was as though the Elif was sucking the life-force straight out of him, killing the sound and light. Soon, he couldn't move, couldn't think. His mind was no longer his own. He tried to pull his mind back but the dark force was too strong.

For a moment, Danny thought about Thinking Stone and Jodie. With one last effort he pushed every ounce of his soul into making the vibration. Suddenly countless black flying rats slammed into his body. They pounded and gnawed at his flesh. The pain as their teeth shredded his living tissue was unbearable. Then suddenly, engorged on his flesh and hanging by their claws, the rats died and rotted in seconds. From the bodies of the rats came beetles. They drove themselves into every opening mercilessly hungry. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think but still he fought.

A beam of dark light, a foot across hit him square in the chest. It knocked him flying into the surrounding nothingness. He felt his whole body explode. But still Danny continued to exist, to fight. The little pieces of the explosion, a cell here, a splash of flesh there continued to support his mind. The splattered gore reformed itself into tens of thousands of minuscule Dannels. He lived in each and every one of them at once.

Danny continued to emit the vibration, but quieter now and from each of his tiny bodies instead. An enormous disembodied hand gathered up all the tiny Dannels using a magnetic force

field that it emitted. A second hand appeared and crumpled the pieces of his soul into a ball. Still Danny emitted the vibration. The hands threw him.

He hurtled through the blackness with a speed entirely beyond his control. Next thing he knew he had passed through a wall that felt like water and had hit the ground hard. The force of the fall knocked every last breath out of him.

Time passed. It was hot, dry. There was a baking sun overhead. Danny looked down at himself. His body was exhausted but in one piece, more or less normal. He was in a desert. The sun shone harshly. The Elif was gone. The nemesis vibration had stopped. Danny fell asleep, exhausted

## Chapter Thirty Five - The Elif's Punishment

'You utter, utter FOOLS,' screamed the hollow but terrifying dark voice. The venom hung in the air like freeze-framed globules of spit. Monty was trembling with fear. His insides were turning to jelly. This place was even worse than he imagined. He *was* a fool for trusting. Anything would have been better than this, even death.

Since entering the mind of the Elif he had acquired a new body. Same shape and size as before, just now he seemed to be made of a something lighter than normal flesh. He had a heartbeat and still needed to breathe. He feared he might actually be dead. But whatever it was that was happening to him, death was not the greatest of his worries.

'I hold *you* responsible Alistair. You should have had this all under control. Immediately that the boy returned from the Akashi realm with the ruo material you should have gone in and cut it out!' bellowed the Elif. 'What use is my misleading the agency if you can't get even get the simplest of jobs right? The Leader failed to bring me the Akashi gate and now YOU FAIL ME TOO!'

'It took us some time to capture and prepare the mind-entity to transport the ruo my master. I feared that some within the agency were getting suspicious - I had delayed their transport arrangements and as we know, they are desperate for the ruo. I thought we were obeying. I was very wrong. We were about to go in. Hours, minutes even,' replied Alistair calmly.

'What! Don't talk to me about minutes! I am a master of time or did you forget?'

'Yes, you are truly the great one and I am forever your servant. I am sorry. I didn't plan it, or understand you correctly. It is my fault, master.'

'Not all is lost, Alistair. The boy's thought-form did manage to enter my mind. He tried to destroy me. Sadly, I have not been able to destroy *him*, not entirely, not without the ruo globe. I had to throw his thought-form somewhere he can do little harm. I've transported him to Earth's far future. A version of it anyway. He can stay there and rot for all I care. At least until I can destroy him properly. That's a better fate than a mere quick death. I will spare your life Alistair. I need you on the physical plane.'

'Thank you master. I would gladly give my life if you so wished.'

'I know. But your friend - he will pay instead. The sound, the disembodied voice, seemed to home in on Monty. 'He has no further use. But wait! Why should I just let him die? That would be too good for the snivelling little *wretch* that he is. He can be one of my *pets*.'

'You will be in-cor-porated,' a new, mechanical voice - the Elif's thoughtputer - said with a steely chill. With horror Monty looked down. His eyes were revealing what he could already feel to be the case. His body was being sucked away in great swathes of grey. He was becoming nothing but a cloud of darkness. His thoughts became vague. The cloud reformed and hardened. His thoughts, and self, congealed. He was becoming a small black creature. He had four legs and wide oval yellow eyes. He was still suspended in the blackness. A moving sea of dark plastic energy was now forming under his feet. In the distance he could see hundreds, if not thousands more pairs of eyes just like his own. They looked hungry and vicious.

A swarm of flies descended upon his face, his nostrils filling with them. They stung and bit. He could feel the blood forming in tiny droplets upon his animal-like snout. A ball of black energy hit him hard. The insects dispersed in an angry cloud. He felt every bone in his body snap with the impact but a second later they all reformed. The pain however remained.

‘Now go! Join your new friends,’ the Elif’s voice boomed. Monty needed no further telling. He ran toward the thousands of eyes, torches upon the horizon of darkness. As he ran he could hear the Elif, and Alistair laughing. The outlines of their faces could be seen as huge portraits in the sky. The Elif’s face was not human. It had two large oval eyes, completely black with strange diamond shaped pupils. The pupils were red. It had a wide face, a mere slit for a mouth and no ears. Its forehead slanted backwards and was four times the length of a humans’. Alistair’s face looked like it should - the real ugliness beneath the thin veneer of the everyday. The sharpness of his long face and chiselled nose was accented by his grey skin - it wasn’t a face that suited laughter.

Monty ran for his life, unsure whether the pack of creatures he ran toward would be worse than that which he left behind. But somehow he wanted to reach them. He felt more like a hurt creature than the confused, hard-thinking human he used to be. Maybe the pack would welcome him.

The Elif and Alistair watched him go.

## **Chapter Thirty Six - Alistair Returns**

In the circular room below the 'Hang-out', below Hangar 42, the body of Monty lay cold and slumped upon the black carpet. He was dead. His head had just been spat out of the tank, the liquid within no longer desiring his company.

Alistair removed his own head from the tank. He kicked Monty's leg out of his way. He got his mobile phone from his breast pocket and stepped into the elevator. He noted in the mirror that his thinning hair and sharp edged nose were bone dry, if a little shinier. He combed his hair back into place.

Once out in the main plaza of the ground-floor Hanger Alistair spotted an officer with suitable security clearance. 'Officer Stewart.'

'Yes sir?'

'There's been an accident in the circle room. Could you have it cleaned up? Completely please. No paperwork.'

'Of course sir. Good day.'

Alistair smiled briefly and continued on his way. He walked across to the edge of the building - strangely, despite the cell tower being nearby the phone reception here was never good. Alistair's mobile phone had only three buttons. He pressed the one marked 'E'. On the third ring the call was answered. Whoever picked it up did not think to say, 'Hi'. After a brief pause Alistair quietly said, 'Retrieve the ruo globe then destroy Operative 4. Prime the ruo into the mind entity ready for transport to the big fellow. *Do not send* till you receive final authorisation from me *personally*. Accept instruction from no-one else, military or civil and DO NOT part with the ruo till I say. Is that clear?'

The Leader did not reply. Alistair knew he had been heard. The one who called himself The Leader ended the call and started the powerful silver van. The Leader smiled to himself.

## **Chapter Thirty Seven - The Carousel of Murder**

For some time he just lay there. At first the emptiness, the vast sense of space was almost pleasant. However, his aloneness began to dawn on him as the scorching sun parched his brittle skin. His throat felt extraordinarily dry. His stomach was empty. He seemed to have an ordinary flesh and blood body again - yet it wasn't quite as heavy as it should be. He could move his limbs. This wasn't the Earth plane at all. He must still be in a thought realm of some description.

This was nowhere he recognised. Every telepathic call he put out boomeranged unanswered. He felt a long way from home. And then he remembered: the attempts to win him round, the Nemesis code, fighting the Elif. Had he won? If he had beaten the Elif why was he here, discarded like a useless piece of rubbish?

In every direction all he could see was sand. The lower half of the sky was a dirty ruddy massless grey, the upper half a harsh metallic blue. The sun beat down mercilessly. He could feel the moisture leaving his skin in droves, drying his scalp and face. He took his ragged T-shirt off and tied it around his head and shoulders.

Being able to use his legs was a brief moment of joy. He stood up, contemplated briefly and headed off. The sun was at midday but Danny did not know in which direction he was going. For hours he walked the harsh and unchanging landscape. Occasionally dust storms would blow his way. He would crouch down and shield his eyes and then continue. After some time he thought he might very well die. So the Elif had won after all.

Had he not emitted the Nemesis code for long enough? Now he would never know. Just as he was beginning to despair an internal voice reminded him of the ruro. He looked at his chest, and glowing a faint blue, the small globe was still there pulsing quietly to itself. He sat down cross-legged and meditated upon the ruro within his chest. The pulsing and the intensity grew slowly stronger. Leaving his thought-body he scanned the surrounding environment. A few miles away a small group of people were travelling on foot. If he just entered their thoughts and adjusted their path a little they would reach him shortly.

Danny entered the personal Thought-realm of the youngest member of the group. Suddenly the boy thought he saw something in the distance, something move, an animal perhaps. The youngster remarked to the others about maybe seeing something out to their right. The leader of the group thought they should investigate and then return to their original course. One of the others checked a primitive looking compass and reluctantly agreed.

Danny was asleep with exhaustion and heat stroke. They found him shortly before his body, albeit a less material one would pass away. Danny awoke to find himself being carried upon the shoulders of one of the men. They were heading toward a large residence, an obviously ancient but seemingly ordinary, brick and wood board suburban house. It was nothing unusual except it was placed alone, at a slight angle, in a seemingly endless desert. The men took him around to the side of the building then down some steps to a cellar.

A massive dust storm was approaching. Everything needed to be battened down. Danny found himself placed on a rough mattress in a small dark room. It was blessedly cool. Sometime later a girl came in and held a leather bladder of musty water to his lips. She brought him some strange hard bread. He ate it in small bites, his appetite still shrivelled from the heat of the desert. Danny slept. Whether it was for a day or a week he did not know. He felt stronger when he eventually made his way from the dark, cool room.

‘Ah, the stranger arises! To what do we owe this honour?’ the man exclaimed in a friendly tone. His pronunciation was strange, somewhere between Chinese Cantonese and English Yorkshire. The man's voice had a rough guttural, dust-baked quality to it. ‘You're not from round here are you lad? I reckon you dropped from't sky. First Un-triber we've seen in a dozen years you is. You're a star hereabouts. Not that there's many of us. We lost another one only last week,’ he paused, lost in his own thoughts. ‘Long way from home I bet?’

‘A very long way - although I can't say for sure. I don't really know how I came to meet your tribe but thanks for saving me from the desert,’ Danny replied.

‘You're welcome. We need every last person we can get. There are less than a few thousand of us in the whole tribe of Angle. Still it's Atmos Day tomorrow, the one day of the year to have a full belly.’

The man, who Danny came to know as Torreano, went on to explain a little. For as far as had been explored by his tribe there was only desert surrounding them in their new homeland. Here and there the tribe's people could tap the salty wells. They had learnt to desalinise the water they'd found. A little food could be grown and a few animals fed from place to place.

The Angle tribe had found this building, a hundred years previously, miraculously preserved amongst the otherwise barren landscape. They called it The House of the Last-Born. It had been placed here as a sign for them, the last of the Chosen People. Their king had recognised it from a very vivid and disturbing dream he'd had. It was a sign to settle the tribe. They had travelled for nearly a generation, escaping from the endless dark floods of winter that shadowed all the northern countries. The tribe had survived despite countless bandit attacks, against all the odds.

The actual house contained treasures from a previous civilisation. Torreano had shown Danny around. He took him past the ancient electronic equipment, the kitchen with central bar and once expensively tiled flooring. The tribe's people couldn't read any of the writing in the house. Although they spoke accented English they appeared to have no written language.

The house was a dusty museum piece, a mirror of a large well-off modern home. The tribal caretaker of the house turned out to be Torreano. He afforded the pictures of the family special devotion. There was no electricity here and Torreano did not even understand the concept. The tribe guarded the house as a treasure and no one was allowed to live there.

The annual Atmos day was tomorrow. Groups from the four neighbouring tribes were making the long and tiring journey. There would be a feast, a celebration, and an offering - a human offering. Somehow both the name of the day and the talk of offerings made Danny nervous. It did not bode well. Still Torreano seemed a decent fellow. He was thin and had a straggly, pointed beard. He was not the most pleasant smelling, he had a sour aroma. But he seemed kind.

Throughout the rest of the day small groups of people arrived. All were on foot. They slept that night in tents surrounding the mysterious house. There were small fires. Sad meals of the black bread were eaten. By nightfall there were hundreds of people.

The next morning had a hazy sun-baked dirtiness to it. When Danny had awoken and wandered around to the front of the house he saw that most of the people had already risen and were gazing upwards. A black satellite had just arrived. Far above them it sat menacing and all-powerful.

For Danny the image had that larger-than-life quality like a scene he remembered from the film War of the Worlds. The emptiness and void-like hunger of the thing could almost be felt. There was a sense of a growing evil. It was like a gathering storm waiting to crack the dead motionless air. It never landed, so Danny was told. It just watched from afar.

The black continents that moved continuously about its face could clearly be seen. If it was observed for some time a slow pulsation became apparent. Defocusing his eyes Danny could see that it had many spikes of black energy sticking out viciously from its dark grey aura.

'It keeps the deserts from killing us. It doesn't ask for much - just that we celebrate its day and remember the legend of Atmos. It was Atmos who guided us here to our new homeland. Atmos who stopped the bandits from destroying us on our great journey from the Winter-lands,' Torreano explained.

Danny and Torreano took their places at one of the wooden trestle tables that had been placed all around the house. The atmosphere was heating up. An excitement was building. The mood was now like that of a busy country pub on a Sunday lunchtime. Food was being served, roast goat, mushrooms and a light bread.

Every person in the crowd had been given a small wooden tankard. It contained a bitter tasting beer called Trinitarian. It was made from herbs and appeared to glow. Torreano explained that Trinitaria, a powder from which the drink derived its name, was made from a desert rock that shines in the dark. Danny tried a sip and grimaced. It was better to be thirsty he decided. Whatever it contained it was obviously very potent. He'd had to tap into his powers to rid himself of the effects of just the single sip he had drunk. An angry looking man from the neighbouring table snatched his drink, eyeing him murderously as he did so.

'Here's to the year of our Lord, 1066. Atmos day is also the winter equinox, we are nearing the end of another year,' Torreano toasted Danny. 'You really didn't know that did you? I don't see how you could come from so far away. I really don't.'

Danny felt strangely comforted. It was like he had known Torreano forever. If he was here with him things couldn't be quite so bad.

'So what's the legend of Atmos then?' Danny asked.

'A long time ago when there were billions of humans living on the Earth, I know that's hard to believe, there came a great era of disasters. Many of the people had been led astray by the Hidden Ones and knew nothing but hatred and fear. The disasters wiped out most of mankind but the great god Atmos and his black satellite led the Chosen People. We were the ones that had thoroughly repented. Atmos took us here to a land where there is still some food. The four tribes, the Angles, Saxa's, Normasts and the Braves settled this land, the last living continent.

'Once a year the great black satellite returns. The god Atmos comes from the sky. Atmos travels in the black satellite. He is our saint, our protector. We celebrate and offer ourselves. That way Atmos gains the strength to protect us from the worst ravages of the desert.'

'I see,' said Danny swallowing down the last piece of goat on his square wooden plate.

'Watch! The festivities are about to begin,' Torreano exclaimed.

Four lean and strong looking men were pulling a large wooden tower. It was the height of a house. It was mounted on a square block and four uneven wheels lent it motion. The men heaved and sweated as they pulled it to the front of the large house along the sandy road. An expectant hush fell upon the crowd.

The top of the wooden tower had four arms. These extended horizontally in an even cross shape. The cross was fixed to the top of the wooden block in such a way as to allow it to rotate horizontally. It looked like a medieval fairground ride. Suspended from the end of each arm was a rope. At the end of each rope a leather helmet could be seen. It was a carousel of murder.

The sky turned dark as night in seconds. A red glow could now be seen around the black satellite. Four bonfires sprung into life throwing the wooden structure into a thing of mythical properties. The four men attached themselves into the helmets.



‘Any who survive are heroes. The spirits of those who snap at the neck go and live in the sky - with Atmos himself,’ explained Torreano in a whisper. A laser-like beam of blue energy turned slowly to a red fiery light as it emerged from the black satellite. When it struck the top of the wooden structure the whole thing began to rotate.

The crowd clapped, stamped and chanted. They screamed, ‘Atmos, Atmos,’ in time to the rotations. The spinning cross was getting faster and faster.

The drugged drink, the hypnotic murmuring and the evil carousel were so overwhelming that Danny almost lost himself to the madness. A dark part of himself wanted to join in. Danny stood up to leave. The man who had stolen his strange beer saw him stand up. The man leapt upon him and threw him to the ground. His breath smelt of meat and death.

‘YOU EVIL CHILD! What gives you the right to walk out on ATMOS!’ the man yelled. His eyes were bulging, deranged. ‘*Give me* the power stuff. It belongs to Atmos! GIVE IT TO ME!’

Danny looked around desperately. Where had Torreano gone? The man was too strong for him. His limbs flailed but he was pinned down by his attacker’s weight.

The crowd saw nothing. They were ecstatic, clapping and shouting, stamping their feet. A loud unmistakable crack of broken bone could be heard from the medieval carousel. Danny felt it in his stomach. The crowd immediately went wild and the noise was overpowering.

Danny’s attacker produced a large 9-inch razor sharp blade. It appeared to be made of sharpened bone. Danny struggled with all his might but the man had the phenomenal strength of madness. His insane eyes glinted with dark power. Oily sweat dripped from his sneering face. Danny could taste the stench of the bitter beer, and death.

Danny watched in horror as the blade entered below his sternum. The blood appeared in small rivulets as the knife moved shallowly upwards. The sharp pain was numbed both by the surrounding madness and his efforts to break free. Perhaps the Trinitarium beer had dulled his pain too. The ruro globe glowed brightly beneath his skin. The madman grinned - the prize was in sight.

## **Chapter Thirty Eight - In the Material World**

In the Earth realm Danny was still conscious, but only just. He was in a brightly-lit, clinical version of hell. He could hear the surgeon shout something to the anaesthetist about keeping him conscious. 'Whatever you do, don't let him go off,' he had yelled above the industrious din.

He was completely immobile. The drugs in the drip numbed the pain. A metal instrument held down his tongue and kept his airway open. A plastic mask went over his mouth and nose. Occasionally the anaesthetist, who sat by his side, would notice his blood gases dropping, he would then fiddle with valves and monitoring devices. Finger sensors were scanning, machines beeped. Danny could see the scalpel move upwards, the ruo glowing brightly beneath his skin. Damn! They were going to cut him open and take it.

He'd tried to remember how he got here. Anything was better than watching that knife. Suddenly, in chunks, it flashed back to him.

It was mid-morning, a beautiful bright autumnal day. He was in his room, alone. A van had careered up the drive, its flashing blue lights reflecting on his bedroom ceiling. There was an angry triple thump at the front door. The ambulance man had shouted for Danny. Michael had said that nobody had rung for an ambulance. 'Don't be bloody stupid!' the ambulance man roared at the top of his lungs, 'of course they'd been rung, why else would they be here?' Daniel Sola was in shock or a coma apparently. He might need urgent life-support.

The ambulance men weren't taking no for an answer. They forced their way into the house, pushing Michael aside. They had hooked Danny up to a drip and got him onto the ambulance within seconds, a minute at most. The ambulance hurriedly headed out the drive. Sarah had been dazed - this felt terribly wrong.

Michael had a horrible sense of De-Ja-Vu. What Michael could not have foreseen was that the vehicle did not head to the local general hospital. It turned left then immediately right before it dived through some gates to the nearby Territorial Army barracks. Danny had been transferred to a waiting lorry, a lorry that seemed to double as a mobile operating theatre.

Jodie kicked the car into third as she skidded round the corner into Zig Zag Drive. The images from Ben's force-fed communication, the ambulance, the men in black, the automatic weapons - all spun in her mind. She tried to chase the images away. They sneaked back into her consciousness like scavengers feeding at a corpse.

She flew past the gates of the science academy on her right. Quickly, she banked sharply left into the last bend. She was nearly at the short drive to Danny's house. But there in the middle of the road stood a black-windowed four-wheel drive vehicle, more truck than car. It was massive and parked sideways it blocked the road almost entirely.

'What the hell am I going to do now?' Jodie muttered. She knew it would be fully occupied. A man in green combat fatigues jumped out and trained an automatic weapon on her. This was it. She was dead.

Jodie slammed her foot on the brake. She pulled the handbrake up pulling the car into a sideways skid. She was careening toward the roadblock. She kept low in her seat.

'HIT the gas NOW!' screamed Orb, who appeared as a vision above the passenger seat. A cascade of bullets immediately rang out, ricocheting off metal and stone. Orb had created a protective field around Jodie but it was far from perfect.

Jodie slammed on the accelerator, let off the handbrake and shot sideways off the road. The disused metal gates to the sports field crumpled under the impact of Jodie's car. The padlock and chain were thrown high into the air. The side windows shattered under gunfire. The black 4-by-4 slammed forwards after them.

'Keep your head down!' Orb yelled. More bullets shot through the car. The front window burst outwards in a blaze of glass.

'To your right, steer to your right. Left a bit, a bit more. Keep going. Keep your head down,' Orb's instructions echoed loudly in Jodie's ears. This was no ordinary telepathy. Her inner ear and brain itself seemed to be vibrating. It occurred to Jodie that she was to master telepathy only to die from a violent death a moment later. She hardly dare lift her head to see where the car was going. Yet somehow she could see in grainy black and white. Orb was beaming pictures straight into her brain.

'We're going through a fence,' yelled Orb telepathically. The car smashed straight through a builder's barricade. The lower half of the academy's field was a building site. Buckets and planks scattered. A portable toilet went flying upwards - the blue lumpy liquid and toilet tissue streamed like a momentary flag.

Jodie's small SUV steamed ahead over the rough terrain. Every time she'd heard the firecracker sound of gunfire she had hit the gas pedal harder in terrified reaction. Now she was headed straight for an enormous mound of rubble and broken bricks.

She felt sick as the pulverised tyres caught the bottom of the mound and the car headed relentlessly up the steep angle. There was no other way. To stop meant certain death. She slammed the accelerator hard to the floor. The powerful engine gave it all it had.

Her car twisted left, then right, climbing over the rubble. Reaching the apex of the mound it shot out into thin air.

A tonne of metal danced serenely. It cleared the bottom wall of the field and travelled side-on across the road below. Gun cracker fire rang out again deafening her ears. Glass shrapnel flew everywhere, a line of blood snaked its way across her sweat-beaded forehead.

'Careful with that thing,' whispered the Leader as the surgeon reached into Danny's chest. The white-cloaked man held aloft the blood-covered, blue-glowing orb of ruo. The surgeon quickly passed it to one of the two uniformed officers who wiped the object clean.

'Okay, prime the storage device,' instructed the Leader. The blue globe was dropped into a short metal tube at the side of the lorry wall. The ruo entered the tube and fused with Golf who was being stored in the compartment below. Golf was not only capable of controlling minds and storing ruo but he was to be the unwilling transport that would deliver the ruo to the multi-dimensional Elif. The agency wasn't to know that Golf could physically transport multi-dimensional items. The Elif, and Alistair, had lied to them. The Elif, in thousands of years, had not yet met a human who could withhold knowledge from itself. Still, the Elif didn't trust Alistair entirely. He could still be working for the agency, or even someone, or something else. 'The Leader' was the Elif's back-up man.

'Okay, load the co-ordinates.'

'At last, I will deliver the ruo to the Elif,' the Leader thought. The material, safely stored within the multiple realm capabilities of the mind-entity, could now be physically transmitted to its destination. It was a process that would inevitably liquidise the mind-entity - an added bonus to the Leader's way of thinking.

Soon the Elif will have the power to control the Earth's entire multitude of minds. The Leader thought greedily of the praise, the rewards, and the sheer power that would soon be due to him.

'Sorry sir, I can't do that sir,' replied the English officer.

'What do you mean? I AM IN CHARGE HERE! Do it now or I'll BLOW YOUR BLOODY BRAINS OUT!'

'Those are the orders sir. A special forces chopper will take the ruo and its carrier. Check with your superior if you don't believe me.'

'Sod him. I don't check with no human!'

The leader pulled a flap of skin-coloured plastic from his forehead. It revealed a black oval shaped eye with a red diamond-shaped pupil within a white triangle shape. His voice morphed into a deep inhuman bellow.

'PATHETIC HUMAN. I HAVE NO SUPERIOR. I WORK FOR THE ELIF ALONE.'

The Leader's own eyes had turned completely black. He looked deeply into the eyes of the officer, who sat terrified at the keyboard. The red diamond pupil on the Leader's forehead glowed brightly as the man crumpled and screamed, his body dissolving like molten plastic. The Leader kicked his steaming body to one side and started to enter the transmission codes himself. He would soon be delivering the ruo, and its host, to the Elif.

One of the soldiers the agency had secretly placed outside the van shifted out of the sudden trance he had entered against his will. That single moment of clarity was all he needed. Realising that something had gone wrong, he opened the van's back door entered and aimed his automatic machine-gun at the Leader's head.

A blue snaking bolt of energy immediately shot out from the white triangle within the Leader's forehead. The stream of energy struck the soldier's head. The man fell screaming, clutching his head, his gun useless. His brain felt like it was boiling, which was in fact what it was doing. The other soldiers surrounding the van awoke from their trances only to fall to their knees screaming and clutching their heads. Their brains were on fire.

The Leader was about to dispose of all the soldiers when the sound of gunfire distracted him. Turning round he left the soldiers panting for their lives on the floor.

A loud whirling rumble could be heard as the energiser, for transmitting Golf and the ruo globe, powered up. The Leader turned to the computer monitor. Mounted upon the roof of the lorry an apparatus unfolded. It revealed a large white dish with a tube at its centre. Small electric motors powered in as it aligned itself with its satellite master. A blue laser-line connected the dish to the black satellite-globe far above.

There was more gunfire and a roar of engine. There followed a split-second of silence. Across the road a metallic green SUV appeared above a pile of builder's rubble. It flew sideways through the air turning its rear end toward the lorry as it spun. At the wheel, bleeding and semi-conscious, was Jodie.

He must not fail the Elif, he must not...but something was wrong. It must be another attack. He heard the ripped tyres burning the ground, the gunfire. *NO! He can't allow this to fail.* He counted the seconds, four, and three...Energiser not fully charged, two, just a moment to go now. One second till he could dispatch the ruo to the Elif...

The rear of Jodie's car slammed into the side of the truck. The energiser lost power. Metal walls splintered and fractured. The heavy vehicle crushed its way through the thin aluminium walls of the lorry. The surgeons and soldiers were buried underneath torn circuitry and

aluminium wreckage. The Leader's mind-field had wavered and now their trance was broken. Now, death had flashed them by without warning.

Cables trailed randomly. The lorry lay upon its side. It was a twisted tangled wreckage. Jodie sat in concussion still gripping the driving wheel of the SUV. The car was implanted at a 45-degree angle within the truck, its rear wheels still spinning. Danny had been thrown across the lorry by the impact of the vehicle. He lay unconscious, his chest seeping blood amongst the body-strewn wreckage.

Orb dissolved the Leader's Mindsnapper field. It would no longer control Golf. Orb and Golf entered Jodie's mind. The sudden blast of energy from the ruro globe, which Golf held, shot Jodie into super-consciousness.

Thinking Stone had told Jodie she must follow Danny into the mind of the Elif. He cannot do it without her he had said.

It was all up to her now.

## **Chapter Thirty Nine - Heart to Heart**

In the Elif's mind-realm, Danny stared aghast as the bone knife sawed through his skin. His flesh yielded like hot butter. The man reached in, the insides of Danny's body being a honey-like energy field. The man scooped up the gold-dripping ruuro globe with his dirty, long-nailed hands.

The crowds were wild, shouting, screaming. A second and third sickeningly loud crunch of bone rung out. The murderous carousel spun its vicious course. The words, 'Atmos, Atmos,' rang through Danny's blood, taunting his soul. *'This is how you are going to die,'* an inner voice seemed to be saying - the voice of Atmos. A weak grey light suffused the sky. The carousel slowed to a halt, one of the four men was still alive. The crowd were quietened, awed.

Torreano appeared behind Danny's attacker and kicked him square in the right kidney. The man gasped and dropped to his knees, still cradling the ruuro in his hands. Danny stood up. His chest gaped with a bloody flap. A young woman was pulling at his shirtsleeve. When he looked across he nearly cried. He knew those eyes. The face was different. Everything was different. She was half-starved, dressed in rags. But to him she was the most beautiful sight in the universe. She had that same warm light in her eyes that he remembered.

It was Jodie - Jodie in energy form. Danny was amazed. How had she got into this reality? She must be super-powered psychically.

Jodie took the ruuro from the praying attacker who fell into the dirt, his eyes glazed with drunken pain. She cleaned the globe with her own spit and wiped it upon her inner arm. Placing it on her chest, she felt her skin knit and move. The globe entered her flesh and shone from within.

She was stronger now than she had ever been. She held her right hand slightly above Danny's chest and poured energy in. Danny felt an incredible heat and then coolness. The skin flap was completely healed.

*'Thinking Stone told me that I am the other half of the Nemesis Code,'* she whispered.

*'Quick, this way!'* shouted Torreano grabbing them both by the arms. He pulled them toward the building. Entering the house of the Last-borne, Torreano pointed toward the cream-carpeted stairs. Danny and Jodie climbed the stairs and entered one of the rooms. They sat down, hands touching, and meditated. A blazing field of white light sprung up immediately. They were a grand lotus of fire. A fire so bright it shone through the brick walls. Their minds joined.

Torreano stood guard. He had waited for this moment for all his life.

## **Chapter Forty - The Storm**

The Elif was angry. It was attacking. The great storm it had summoned had appeared from nowhere. Waves pulled themselves up from the ocean bed. The port town of Liverpool was under siege.

Buildings across the country rocked in the aftershocks and tremors that spread out from the north west of England. The ground around the city of Liverpool shook. A strange unworldly roar seemed to tumble upwards out of the Earth. Rain pelted people to the pavements and cars and lorries were swept aside like toys.

The evil weather was searching, looking for the bodies of Danny and his friends. The Elif *must* have the ruo.

All around Danny's cottage lightning strikes hit here and there, wrenching the air with their electric screams. The once beautiful garden was in ruins. Thunder boomed overhead. The closest thing Danny had to a family trembled in fear inside the cottage.

The walls of Danny's Liverpool home stood firm despite the threatening winds.

'What's going on? The sky's gone dark. Was that gunfire before?' gasped Sarah.

'Don't worry Sarah, it'll just have been this storm. Sounds like its right overhead but Danny'll be fine at the hospital. We'll ring them as this storm settles down,' Michael reassured her. She was worried sick about Danny. Why did he have to keep leaving her like this? Nathalie was frightened too but she was too worried about Ben to be concerned for her own self. Ben wouldn't move from his room. What would happen if they had to escape?

The sky had turned to night. Great winds had arisen, tugging at the building. The radio was down, as was the TV. The lights were out. They could see trees being swept about outside. Tiles and branches flew across the lawn. The walls started to shake.

Michael, Nathalie and Sarah huddled under the tables in the dining room. Nathalie had her arm around Sarah. 'We're going to have to grab Ben and head for the basement...' she said.

## **Chapter Forty One - The Prodigal's Return**

The wall of the ship fluoresced. The blue-green Earth could be seen rolling in the cosmos. But there across its face was an ugly grey organism that looked like an amoeba. It was pulsing, stuck to the Earth's face like an enormous piece of living chewing gum.

‘Aleya, what the *hell* is *that*?’ shouted Hevel.

‘There isn't time to tell you right now. I'm not even sure I know. The trace for that mind-entity leads right to the centre of that thing. Can you see the storm in the middle of it? It just sprung up from nowhere. I think the grey field thing is generating it. I can't sense a present location for that mind-entity either. Whatever's happening down there that mind entity is key, I just know it. The storm centres over the disguised ship we found.’

‘This is seriously weird Aleya. Someone else must be after it. That's sure is no natural storm. What do we do?’

‘If we use every last bit of power we might just be able to fire up the hidden space-ship - and the Urnie even.’

‘What'll that do?’

‘I don't know. But it's worth a try. There's nothing else doing.’

‘Energise,’ said Hevel and Aleya in perfect unison.

A great beam of blue light emerged from Hevel's ship and entered the top of Danny's home.



## Chapter Forty Two - A Ship is Born

Michael, Nathalie and Sarah were terrified. The house shook every few minutes. The storm would grow in intensity then die away for a while, only to re-emerge with a vengeance. The atmosphere was ominous.

It had felt like a war, Michael thought anxiously. There had been gunfire and a sound like a car-crash, but now the only sounds were the storm itself.

Michael looked bewildered. Nathalie didn't know what to say to him. She just shook her head and went to try and comfort Ben - he still refused to leave his bedroom.

A high pitched vibrating sound suddenly flowed through the building. It seemed to be coming from above, from the chimney. A blue laser-like light lit up the ceiling. The walls of the house started to shine and fluoresce becoming transparent. Inside the walls strange shaped metal objects could be seen. They had long curved arms with a ball-like head at one end. They began to move as though possessed of some intelligence. The shapes gathered and fused. They began to shine a white-hot blue.

'You've got to get Ben!' Nathalie screamed, 'We're getting out of here now. Come with me Sarah. Mike - you grab Ben.'

Michael went to try and lift Ben forcibly from his room. Ben's strength and weight were surprising. He went hysterical when Michael tried to pick him up, spitting and clawing at his face. 'I *want* to be here. I *know* what is happening. *Leave me!*' yelled Ben in his high-pitched tormented voice.

Michael had old back injuries. He'd pulled it again last week. He didn't have the strength to lift Ben against his will. He was going to have to leave him.

Nathalie and Sarah were by the front door. She prepared herself to run outside - this building had a frightening life all of its own. The glowing, moving walls were beyond her comprehension and she could see the fear in Sarah's eyes. They would have to face the storm. She ran outside and braced herself, clinging to a lamppost against the wind, holding onto Sarah with her other arm. She scanned for shelter as they waited a moment for Michael and Ben. Michael, fearing for his own life, finally left Ben and ran for the front door too.

'He won't let me take him!' cried Michael, the tears streaming down his face in the rain. He grabbed Nathalie's hand and all three ran toward the church across the road.

A deep repetitive rumble sound started, descending from the top of the house. The sounds had a strobe-like pattern and reached a crescendo, rising finally to an impossibly high pitch.

The metal structures worked their way toward the top of the building, travelling through the walls. They melded themselves into a vaguely circular shape. Still, Ben was not frightened. The molten metal pushed itself outwards and the attic space fired into dust. The metal formed a disc shape, which merged where the roof space of Danny's cottage had been just seconds before.

The newly emerged disc rose and shone with white light despite the storm. At the centre of the translucent disc a small structure could be seen. A structure called the Urnie. The Urnie had waited patiently inside a weight-bearing wall in Danny's loft for decades. Finally it was on the move. Within the Urnie was a glowing yellow image of the Akashi space-tree. The tree's image started to spin and the solidifying disc took off. It raised itself but then hovered above the house completely motionless in the storm.

## **Chapter Forty Three – Last Gasp**

In the wreckage of the mobile operating theatre, the Leader came round. He pulled a twisted shard of aluminium from his bleeding thigh splattering pieces of his flesh as he did so. His energy powers were weak. He sensed the connection to his master growing dim. He searched for his gun but it was lost amidst the tangled wires. He felt no pain, only a hatred that obliterated all fears.

*'There they are!'* thought the Leader.

*'Together they are the Nemesis code. They must die,'* said a dark, low voice inside his head. This was his last chance to make good. He crawled on his hands and knees through the tangle of metal, plastic and dust. If he could just reach them in time he could stop the code. *He must kill them.* Danny was the nearest - he will be first.

Trailing a pool of blood the Leader pulled himself over, like a dying slug, to where Danny lay silent. Danny was losing blood fast and his chest hardly moved with each shallow intake of breath. The Leader thumped down on to Danny's chest using his head and shoulders. The horrible splintering crack of ribs could be heard. Pulling his trouser belt free he wound it twice around Danny's neck and began to pull tight. He was using every last drop of his fast-draining strength.

## **Chapter Forty Four - A Carriage Awaits**

In the house, Ben was alone but calm, sitting cross-legged upon his bed in his room, dust littered the carpet. The roof had not exploded - it had simply disintegrated. Ben was oblivious to the dark winds and stormy skies swirling above. Underneath the saucer-shaped craft hovering above him, all was calm. The storm's pelting rains and winds did not seem to affect the craft or the area underneath it.

Lightning continuously discharged itself all around. Seismic reverberations shook the ground at irregular intervals. Where there should have been ceiling, there were now only dark clouds. The air had a murky war-torn atmosphere.

The entire roof structure had been shredded after the disc-craft had reformed itself and then taken off. It now hovered just above the remains of the house. Above that disc there was now a second craft, also waiting soundlessly. Coloured lights moved in circular patterns underneath the lower of the two discs.

Ben sent out a telepathic beacon of energy encoded with patterns of himself, Danny, Jodie, Orb and Golf. He hoped to contact his friends and to summon help from the crafts above.

'This is Aleya. I am a ship mind-entity. I note your distress. Do you wish to be retrieved?'

'Yes,' replied Ben telepathically, 'do you have the other's locations?'

'Not yet, but I recognise the pattern for the entity called Golf.'

Golf had trespassed upon the ship's mind storage facilities some time earlier. Aleya had then traced Golf back to this very area, which also happened to be the central vortex of the storm. Aleya began to search for the other energy signatures Ben had sent. She found some signals nearby that matched the patterns Ben had provided. They were in severe distress.

'A transport beam is ready but the signals from the other life forms are too weak. This environment is too chaotic to distinguish them accurately. If you locate them telepathically I would have a greater chance of success,' she explained.

Ben's mind ran everywhere in the local Thought Realm. Everything was muddy with fear. Out of the blue, Ben remembered the sound that the future Mountain-Spirit had spoken. It was from when they had been in the Akashi library and had searched the future in his life-book.

The sound was still there lurking at the very bottom of his mind. It was merely waiting for the right time to appear. Ben tuned into it and amplified the signal. He beamed the sound out and it became his vision. His psychic sight cut through the chaos like a knife.

He saw a tiny pip of blue light. The ruro, which Jodie still had within her chest had become a telepathic lighthouse. Ben homed in on the light. Thank Goodness, Ben thought. Danny was very nearly dead. Nearby was Jodie, unconscious - also critically ill. Within Jodie's mind was both Golf and Orb. Ben transmitted the co-ordinates to the entity called Aleya.

The Leader tightened the cord around Danny's neck and calmly watched his face go blue. It was not raw hatred. He was just calmly, psychotically, doing his job.

Outside the wind continued to rock the truck that doubled as an operating theatre. Lightning and rain pelted the ground. Danny prepared to die.

Back within the Elif's mind, the young woman, Jodie's energy self, touched her second finger and thumb with Danny. They were both sat cross-legged facing each other. The room smelt stale. The house, or rather the museum, of the Last-borne had not been aired for some time.

Time disappeared into a world of feeling. They lost themselves in their combined mind. The sound of the recombined, true Nemesis code burst forth beautifully. It permeated the whole of the Elif's mind.

The Elif screamed. It shattered into a billion, myriad pieces.

The grey light shot back into itself. It was as if the sky was an ancient TV set that had been flicked off late at night. The seas calmed, the tornadoes dissipated and headed back out to sea harmlessly. The winds gradually abated.

The people came out of hiding from their basements and cellars and underneath their desks. Buildings stopped quaking. The sun peeked out from behind the huge black clouds; grey swirls fluttered in the sky like torn ribbons. The daylight returned. In the church across from Danny's house Sarah breathed easier.

Above Danny's house, exposed without its roof, two star-ship-shaped saucers hovered. The two discs were connected by an electric blue aura. A transport beam fell from the higher disc. It split into three and alighted upon the unconscious bodies of Danny and Jodie amidst the twisted wreckage. The third stream found Ben.

As the Leader tightened the cord to deal the final constriction, Danny and Jodie's twisted bloodied bodies turned to a shimmering heavy light. The silver light became a gossamer water which drifted upwards to form two tiny balls of light. The balls of light continued up out of the twisted wreckage of the lorry. They were drawn magnetically along the blue traction beam in which they travelled. A third tiny globe of light also made its way from the wreckage of the nearby house.

The Leader was alone. Only the shattered Elif, the unconscious soldier and the sticky drip of blood kept his vigil with despair.

## Chapter Forty Five - Stonehenge

It felt good to be alive. The scars still throbbed occasionally but otherwise it was okay. His body was in one piece. He had never known healing like it. It was like concentrated super-deep sleep. Time had been compressed - an hour contained a month of physical healing, or so it felt. The transport beam had taken Danny and Jodie to a highly charged space within the ship's energy drive. Aleya and Orb had overseen their healing.

After their psychic communication in the strange desert realm within the Elif's mind, Danny had become slightly embarrassed around Jodie. She still threw him the occasional warm glance though.

One thing was nice. He no longer had to share his mind with those mind-entities. The ship's mind storage system was hosting them. It beamed them out as realograms into the internal space of the ship. A realogram was like a hologram but you could touch it. They needed feeding as well. He wished he could tell Sarah they were safe. What if something had happened to her?

Hevel was a strange fellow but was growing on Danny. He'd never met anyone whose main relationship was with a living vehicle. Aleya and Hevel didn't talk much. And when they did it was mainly to slate each other. They were a delightful couple.

The ships had been fusing for two days. The fusing process took time. Jodie had helped the process by transferring the ruro from her chest into the Urnie device within the lower disc.

No one was quite sure what the Urnie really did, or why the hidden disc had been left there, but giving it the ruro had seemed the right thing to do.

They had spent the last two days cloaked in a cloud above Liverpool. Danny wanted to go and look for Sarah but Ben had said she had got away safely with the carers. They couldn't do too much while Aleya, and the other disc, the one that contained Urnie, began the fusing process. Hevel said they would have the most advanced ship in the entire galaxy when the process was complete. Although if the truth were known, he was a little jealous that her attention was elsewhere. She said that no ship that contained Hevel could ever be considered advanced. Danny tended to agree.

'Where shall we go then crew?' said Aleya in her beautiful, soft tones.

'I always fancied having a look at Stonehenge,' replied Danny.

'It would make a good backdrop for my video too,' added Hevel.

'Good. Then let us go!' said Aleya.

'Shouldn't we check no-one's monitoring us first?' chimed the Orb. This new environment seemed to have made her voice even sweeter.

'Yeah, you never know, the agency might still be looking for us. I vote we get straight out of Earth space,' Golf added.

'Aleya has the most advanced cloaking in the known galaxy,' Hevel stated confidently.

'Perhaps Hevel, but I think Orb is right. The new systems are not fully fused as yet so we cannot leave Earth space yet. We can visit Stonehenge in the meantime. I could use some of that energy vortex that collects there to speed up the transformation. We can be out of this system within 3 Earth days then.'

'That's decided then I guess,' said Danny.

The two connected discs flashed blue, green and yellow then back to blue. A brief glow of red passed like a spark of fire through the connected discs before they returned to the original

strobe of blue. The colour was now more intense. The accumulated energy was released. The discs accelerated. Aleya made her way soundlessly to high above Stonehenge.