

The schoolboy exploits of Steve Morris

The Church Wood Deception
Part II

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Chapter 1

DEJA-VOU!

Standing at the bus stop I smiled at the memory of that first kiss with Christine. Closing my eyes, I could almost feel her lips caressing mine as she pressed her body against me, the scent of her intoxicating perfume overpowering my senses.

Suddenly the hairs on the back of my neck stiffened as an alarm went off in my head.

“Not again?” I yelled despairingly, spinning around to confront my unseen assailant. However, three startled faces stared at me their mouths open in surprise. Clearly these were not time travelling stalkers, but passengers waiting for the last bus to Trevethin.

Slightly embarrassed, I shouted “Cramp,” and further improvised by groaning as I bent over rubbing my right calf vigorously. I hobbled slowly away from the bus stop until I was out of earshot. “Show yourself you voyeur,” I snarled quietly.

A quiet female voice inside my head spoke.

“I am an officer from the Temporal Directorate. Please walk back into the leisure area and make your way towards the trees by the river so that we can converse without interruption.”

I paused to consider my options: I could comply, and risk being deceived with more fabricated tales, or I could ignore her and hope she would go away. My previous encounters with those claiming to be Directorate personnel had left a sour taste in my mouth - they seemed more adept at spinning fairy stories than Hans Christian Anderson. The latter option, though attractive, was unlikely; and so reluctantly I acquiesced. Walking through the park gates I continued the dialogue with the cloaked time traveller.

“I’ve not had the best of evenings and I am tired.

This had better be important.”

“We have many things to talk about Steven,” said the voice in my head, “the most pressing is that your life is in danger.”

If you want to grab a person’s attention, those five words are guaranteed to succeed. “What do you mean that my life is in danger?” I snapped, irritated by the intrusion and greatly alarmed by the warning. My invisible companion refused to be drawn into conversation until we reached her stated coordinates which filled me with indignation. It is impolite to rock someone’s world and then ask them to be patient.

Lengthening my stride, I walked swiftly past the tennis courts and rugby stadium until the voice spoke again. “Turn right and walk straight ahead toward the tree line.”

Stepping off the asphalt path and onto the grass I stumbled a few of times as I crossed the playing field - the scene of our incredible victory just a week ago. The divots and uneven turf were difficult to see in the dark with barely enough moonlight to illuminate the way ahead, even the outline of the trees against the dark night sky were barely discernible. We walked cautiously into the wooded area and stopped behind a particularly large tree trunk where two people materialised - a man and a woman.

The woman pressed a button on her armband which bathed the area in a faint white light. She was Asian Chinese, around five feet three inches tall, and quite slender with long brown hair. She wore dark blue body armour with the words *Temporal Directorate* emblazoned across her chest. The man was well over six feet tall and towered above me. He was sturdy with short blonde hair and was also wearing similarly inscribed body armour.

“My name is Ty Lin,” said the petite woman, extending her hand in greeting. “My companion is called Ledarn. We are both law enforcement officers from ...”

“Yes, yes,” I interjected impatiently. “You’ve already told me you are from the 25th century. Look! You’re the third person that I’ve met claiming to represent some fabled Directorate that patrols the sacred timeline. Is deceit an art form in your century? If you are protectors of the time-line, let’s see some identification,” I demanded.

Immediately I realised the stupidity of my request. I wouldn’t be able to tell a genuine law enforcement ID from a Billy the Kid badge, but I felt that I had to register my protest at the constant manipulation by temporal sightseers.

Ty Lin reached for her right forearm and undid a small flap which revealed an array of buttons. She pressed one of the buttons and a small holographic image of a man’s face was displayed in thin air above the button array. He looked to be in his sixties and bore a striking resemblance to pa Cartwright from *Bonanza*, though his grey hair was considerably longer. On the wall behind him was a large plaque bearing the words *Temporal Directorate*. Underneath the words was a symbol that resembled a large sundial. This was ringed by a silver flash with a small figure in dark blue body armour, like Ty Lin’s, surfing along it.

“I am the Directorate Ambassador, leader of the Department for Temporal Affairs, guardians of the timeline for the United Assembly of Nations,” said the holographic figure.

His spoke quietly, his voice had a gentle quality but no obvious indication of which hemisphere he originated from. I half expected an American drawl, or BBC English, even a Russian accent would not have been a shock - however a slight inflection at the end of the sentence caused the statement to sound like a question, which pointed to Australia.

“The person in front of you is Ty Lin; she is an officer representing this department and has a distinguished career. Be guided by her.” The holographic image disappeared, and Ty Lin covered the array of buttons with the flap on her forearm. “Is that sufficient authentication?” she asked softly.

“Yes, that seems genuine enough,” I replied feebly. “Okay, you’ve whetted my interest; in what way is my life in danger?”

Ledarn spoke for the first time, his deep voice resonating within the close confine of the surrounding trees. “I believe you may have information that will help us to identify and apprehend the members of a deadly organisation,” he said soberly. “Moreover, we believe they are aware of your interference with their genetic research, which consequently has placed your life in grave danger.”

Though I was slightly alarmed by Ledarn’s words I felt his assessment was overly dramatic and I proceeded to tell him so. “They are overreacting a bit, aren’t they?” I scoffed, “I only replaced a disk. I mean, how much effort could it possibly take to create a new one?”

Ledarn remained impassive; he dismissed my protestations with a steely look, causing me to feel slightly uneasy. He had an impressively large physique which the body armour did little to hide; this man had obviously spent many hours lifting weights. His dead pan expression, and brooding demeanour, indicated that he took his duties seriously having little time for frivolous humour.

“Your meddling might seem innocuous,” Ledarn replied accusingly, “but you have interfered in affairs that could have far reaching effects. And you are mistaken in your belief that there could be no consequences as a result of your actions. We are here to prevent your execution.”

I gasped, shaken by his use of the word *execution*, it was a cold legal term, without feeling, and bore a note of finality. Unlike *throttling* or *drowning*, those were descriptive terms, personal, - and more to the point - could be visualised. I hadn’t dreamed that my life could be threatened for the simple act of switching disks.

However, I was further alarmed when he added; “Because of this, we must move you to a safe environment, somewhere that is truly impenetrable.”

“Move me, move me to where? Is this like some witness relocation programme? What about my Mother and school? The police will be alerted, and a search will be organised. And then when I surface ... I will resurface, won't I?” As the panic increased, I took a gulp of air and continued to babble.

“I will be interrogated and undergo medical tests and probably be committed to the alien visitors' ward in St Cadoc when I mention time travel. I will forever be known as a Mad Steve,” I yelled, my heart pounding heavily gripped with fear.

Ty Lin squeezed my arm reassuringly. “Do not be alarmed. We have created a convincing scenario to account for your absence. The official explanation will simply say that you have been incapacitated due to a hazardous chemical spillage in which you were overcome with fumes. Your lung reaction and immune system must be monitored for a week in a sterile sealed unit that specialises in respiratory problems – no visitors allowed. However, your mother will be allowed to speak to you after a couple of days.”

I was conscious that I was breathing heavily and that my brow was soaked in sweat. Only once had mum and I been separated – a three-day camping holiday with my father when I was ten.

“My mother will be frantic,” I said angrily. “She relies on me; I am the man of the house.” This was probably stretching the truth a little, mum is extremely self-reliant. But she would undoubtedly be concerned and a little confused by the disruption to normal day life.

Ledarn, plainly aware of my deep concerns, attempted to calm me further. “The police will be advised that your mother is very protective and could become agitated, so they will stress that your treatment is purely precautionary. While they will assure her that you are in no danger, she will be informed that that your incapacitation will last seven days.”

“Now please follow us,” said Ty Lin, gesturing towards the river. “A cloaked transportation vehicle is hidden under the bridge. Ledarn will activate and guide it to our position at the water's edge.”

Ledarn walked to the top of the bank that led down to the river and manipulated buttons on his armband, evidently a more sophisticated model than the armband I had grown accustomed to wearing. After a few seconds, I detected a quiet hum above the sound of the river rushing past. The shape of a small craft emerged as it de-cloaked. It moved towards us and ascended the river bank.

The craft was about fourteen feet long and possibly eight feet wide, about the size of a small minibus. However, it had no wheels and appeared to be hovering some six inches or so above the ground. With a quiet swishing sound, a door opened out, and then slid quietly to the right revealing the cabin.

“Be careful not to hit your head as you step in,” Ledarn warned. “It is not uncommon for passengers to misjudge the door height and suffer mild concussion as a result.”

Unsure whether Ledarn was serious, I stooped carefully as I entered the cabin exaggerating my movements; I had no intention of imitating Mitchell. The memory of his prostrate body writhing on the ground caused me to stifle a laugh. Some have suggested that he suffered permanent brain damage, I think he was born in that condition.

A strip of lights on both sides of the ceiling activated as I entered bathing the interior in a swathe of soft blue lighting. Moving carefully to the rear I sat down in one of four chairs attached to the cabin structure, two on each side. Ledarn and Ty Lin followed and sat in two seats at the front of the craft where a control panel lit up as they began what was evidently a pre-flight check.

“Steven, would you please attach your safety device,” Ty Lin requested, as the craft began to move imperceptibly. I felt around my seat trying to find a seat belt of some description, I ran my finger around the edge of the seat and then behind me and under me with no success.

“Where is the seat belt?” I asked perplexed.

“What is a seat belt? Oh, press the button under the arm of the seat,” replied Ty Lin, comprehending my dilemma. I felt under both armrests and found a button located near the front of the right arm. I pressed it as Ty Lin had instructed, two padded arms emerged from behind me and arched around my chest until they made contact with each other, and then the padded restraint was slowly retracted until it made firm contact with my body.

“Neat idea,” I murmured, “but it will never catch on.”

The quiet hum increased in volume and I felt a slight increase in gravitational pressure and movement that I imagine is associated with an aircraft taking off. A heads-up display activated on the cabin window in front of Ledarn and Ty Lin, however, I didn’t recognise the dark green symbols that were generated.

For the next thirty seconds, we were buffeted about which I thought to be the result of unusually strong winds. I realised my mistake when Ledarn pressed a button that opened a metallic shield. It had been protecting the front viewing screen because as it opened it revealed that we were beyond the earth’s gravity, we were in space travelling away from the earth. I could see the moon projected in the top right part of the front screen.

My mouth dropped open in astonishment; I had been under the impression that we were moving to a different county or possibly another country. Never in my wildest nightmares had I envisaged a journey into the unknown, like Space Family Robinson. Instantly I was panic stricken, I have a pathological fear of enclosed spaces and suddenly I felt the walls of the small craft start to close in on me. Frantically I tried to fill my lungs with air, and though I was sucking hard I felt no benefit. The palms of my hands started to sweat, and I began hyperventilating. “Wh ... wh ... where are we going?” I gasped feverishly. My heart was pounding and felt like it could explode any second.

In a mounting frenzy, I fumbled with the button that had activated the padded arms holding me against my seat in the hope that it would also release me. I was increasingly gripped with hysteria.

Ty Lin recognised the signs of my extreme reaction and pressed a button on the craft’s console. Instantly the pain gripping my chest began to lessen and I could feel my body starting to relax. Quite unexpectedly my normal breathing pattern resumed within seconds.

“What did you just do?” I panted in relief.

“I released a strong muscle relaxant into your area of the cabin,” she replied. “You should start to feel more comfortable momentarily.” Indeed, she was right. I could feel its effects immediately as the tension evaporated, and I was no longer concerned about the size of the cabin.

“Why are we in space?” I asked, totally bewildered. “This tin can is hardly the Enterprise is it, and my name isn’t James T Kirk?”

After a couple of seconds silence Ledarn spoke. “That is correct; your name is Steven Morris.”

I tried hard to stifle a laugh at his lack of humour. “I suppose you don’t watch television in the future, the brave new world in which Captain Kirk and the Enterprise were supposed to exist. Though,” I added with a wide grin, “he was fictional.”

I began to giggle, and then laugh almost uncontrollably for no reason. “I feel completely relaxed now Spock. Boy, that stuff is good! Can I have a bottle of it?” From afar I realised that I was slurring my words and felt mildly intoxicated. Even though I

struggled to move, there was no response. My body and arms were as limp as James Kirk in a tumble dryer.

“My name is Ledarn, not Spock,” he replied seriously.

“Maybe, but you must be a close relative,” I replied drowsily, the words trailing off as I fell into a light sleep.

Chapter 2

Ergwartha 1 – The Discovery of Time Travel

I awoke as the craft began to shudder. The metallic shield was closed, and I detected the unmistakable signs of panic stirring once again, I had a morbid fear of being trapped and entombed. “Are we landing?” I asked through gritted teeth, attempting to suppress the feelings of dread.

I tried to visualise the large, open fields, at the top of Trevethin where I spent most days during the summer holidays, grass swaying in the wind, sun shining brightly. But I couldn't maintain the image for more than a few moments.

Turning to answer my question, Ty Lin recognised my extreme distress and again released the airborne muscle relaxant into the rear of the cabin. On this occasion, she must have regulated the amount as my body felt the immediate effect, but not the level of intoxication I had experienced earlier.

“No, we are merely re-entering the earth's atmosphere,” she replied with a smile. “We are still some distance from the mountainous region, our intended destination.”

“Which mountains are we talking about?” I asked curiously. “The Alps, Himalayas, Kilimanjaro?” I would have named more but three was my limit. I didn't think to include Ben Nevis or the Sugar Loaf near Abergavenny. Somehow, I couldn't imagine them being described as mountainous regions.

“You will see for yourself in a few minutes. We are about to descend through the earth's atmospheric barrier.”

The slight tremor I had detected as we were speaking began to develop into strong turbulence, throwing the craft around uncomfortably; Ledarn spoke a few words that I didn't catch, and Ty Lin turned back to the console. She began to call out readings to which Ledarn responded, directing her to activate certain systems. The heads-up display burst into life and Ledarn now scrutinised the readings projected onto the cabin window, like a rambler reading an ordinance survey map. Both were now engrossed in what was obviously a pre-check landing sequence.

As our small craft was buffeted and shaken violently, I wondered if the astronauts on Apollo 11 – the most famous rocket of my time – endured a similarly bumpy ride in their command module on re-entry. Who could ever forget the grainy black and white pictures transmitted nearly two hundred and fifty thousand miles to the earth as Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong became the first two men to walk on the surface of the moon. Like hundreds of millions of viewers from around the planet, I too was glued to the transmission in 1969 as the lunar craft touched down and Neil Armstrong took ‘one giant leap for mankind...’ Of course, there had been further manned Apollo missions since then, some completed their mission, and others terminated early due to mechanical problems, but try as I may, I couldn't recall their names. Buzz and Neil were the two most famous moonwalkers on the earth.

Over the next sixty seconds, the turbulence died away and I became less certain that we were about to die.

“As much as that was enjoyable,” I commented, breaking the silence of the last few minutes, “I am sure that the Enterprise's shuttle craft had a dampening system that absorbed the heat and energy encountered when entering a planet's atmosphere, you should look at the specifications.”

Ty Lin turned to answer me, “I am not aware of any such system,” she said seriously. “Unfortunately, re-entry can be volatile; however, Ledarn is a most capable pilot.”

“I am pleased to hear that,” I responded. “But why did we leave in the first place? I thought at one point we were heading for the moon.”

Evidently Ledarn was amused at my confusion as he laughed out loud. “It is considerably more dangerous to navigate around the earth’s skies in this period than to use a sub-orbital route to the continent you have designated Asia. The history of flight in this period is notorious for the tens of thousands that died in air battles, collisions, explosions and carelessness navigation.”

I couldn’t argue with statistics, but I was curious to know if we were able to avoid detection from the many early warning systems pointing skyward: NATO, the Eastern Block, China and others. I didn’t relish being blasted from the sky at my tender young age.

“Can I at least assume that this tin can has radar jamming equipment? If not, you might find a pair of Phantom F4’s on your tail,” I laughed.

“Are you referring to the crude method of transmitting electronic pulses and measuring the speed of their return?” asked Ledarn, scoffing at the mere suggestion that such a primitive system could still exist. “We are cloaked both visually and electronically. Furthermore, the weapons from this time period would have no detrimental effect on the performance of this technologically advanced craft. Even the force of a nuclear explosion would cause only minimal damage,” he sneered condescendingly.

“How stupid of me,” I replied sarcastically. *And God save your superior technology, fat head,* I thought to myself, irritated by Ledarn’s patronizing attitude.

A frosty silence followed and might have continued until we landed, except Ty Lin sensing the tension and perhaps wishing to distract me opened the metallic shield which revealed a breath taking, magnificent landscape below us. We were travelling just above a carpet of thick snowy white cloud which stretched out before us. Though it shrouded much that lay beneath it, numerous mountain peaks had broken through the dense white barrier.

“Wow,” I exclaimed, “what a stunning picture.” This answered my earlier question. Without doubt I was looking down on the Himalayas. “Which one is Everest?” I asked excitedly. Ty Lin looked at me with a blank expression. “Everest,” I smiled. “The highest mountain in the world - twenty-nine thousand feet. Does it ring a bell?”

“Ah,” she responded, “you mean Saga Martha, the name given to it by the indigenous population; I believe we have passed over it. However, we are about to descend and will be landing shortly. You can view it from the observatory on Ergwartha, your high-altitude retreat for the next seven days.”

Ty Lin swivelled in her chair to re-join Ledarn as the craft suddenly nosed forward and eerily became enveloped by thick cloud. For a few scary moments, we were flying blind, though I had no doubt that the systems on this cutting-edge cigar box remained completely in control.

We shot out, as quickly as we had been immersed, into a murky grey sky under a ceiling of dense cloud. However, as far as the eye could see we were surrounded by a chain of mountains of varying shapes and sizes. Some – like Jack and the Beanstalk – soared to the heavens and disappeared into the cloud. Others, though picturesque and capped with snow like a winter wonderland post card, had ravines and sheer drops of terrifying proportions. Any climber foolish enough to tackle these frozen vertical rock faces would surely plummet to their doom.

Even though the temperature in our craft was comfortably warm, as we flew past a grey pillar jutting out of an icy cliff face, a shiver ran down my spine at the thought of someone clinging to it in these sub-zero conditions, fighting to stay alive. At this high altitude the wind was fierce and unrelenting throwing the craft around like a ping pong

ball. Ledarn was frequently forced to adjust and re-adjust our course to compensate, his face a mask of intense concentration.

“Seems a bit breezy outside,” I said jovially, though secretly more than a little concerned. Continuing to descend, we were surrounded by some pretty impressively large mountains, any of which would rip this craft open like a can opener piercing a sardine tin if we were blown onto them.

“Don’t you have stabilisers or something similar as ships do?” I asked, concern rising, as we seemed to be caught in a storm-force side wind that pushed us very near to an overhanging ledge of a monster-sized mountain to our left. Visibility was now down to a couple of yards as the wind whipped the snow off the upper slopes so that we were confronted by blizzard conditions.

“The jet-stream winds are a challenge at this time of year,” Ledarn replied tersely. “The automated navigation system could make minute adjustments every microsecond and you would not be aware of the extreme conditions outside, but I enjoy the struggle – the test of my ability to confront the elements.”

Oh great, I moaned inwardly. We have a testosterone pumped-up lunatic in control of the helm. I swear I could hear a voice with a strong Scottish lilt shouting: *We’re all doomed Captain Mainwaring*, somewhere inside my head. And to add to my disquiet Ledarn banked steeply to the right accelerating the craft until he had lined us up for a spectacular head-on collision with the solid rock-face we had just passed. Taking a deep breath, I gripped both arm rests tightly. “Ledarn,” I yelled in fright, “you’re going to kill us you mad man.” My heart was racing, and my mouth was as dry as the desert floor. And yet still we were hurtling towards the solid wall of rock directly ahead of us.

“Have no fear,” said Ty Lin turning to face me. She looked completely unperturbed. Her face certainly didn’t bear the look of a woman about to meet her maker. “Ledarn has performed this manoeuvre many times,” she added, with a beaming smile. “I have complete faith in his abilities.”

“Maybe,” I replied hesitantly, “but I’ve seen the films in which the spaceship crashes and only the hero survives.”

Ledarn seemed puzzled by my remark as he likewise turned to face me. “I am unaware of any such incident since this facility was built. We have an excellent safety record.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “Science fiction films, you know... make-believe, a story created by the imagination. And believe me, I would feel so much safer if you would turn around, put your hands back on your steering wheel thingy, and avoid smashing into that bloody big rock face in front of us.”

The corner of Ledarn’s mouth turned up as a wry grin appeared. “The automated systems have assumed control of our approach. Calm yourself; things are not always as they appear. I am confident that our energy shield would protect us in the event of a collision.” Ledarn didn’t elaborate on his cryptic reply and the grin turned into a chuckle as he turned away. It was left to Ty Lin to explain the sudden outbreak of humour in the face of what looked like a suicide run.

“Ledarn is teasing you, Steven,” she said softly. “Much of the rock face in front of us is actually a holographic image which we will penetrate in a few moments. Behind it lies a solid slab of granite which retracted as we flew past the summit a moment ago. That is why Ledarn flew perilously close, he insists on a visual inspection even though the mechanism has a number of fail-safes.” Ty Lin rolled her eyes toward the ceiling of the craft in mock exasperation and tutted. “Though I do not believe it is possible to distinguish between a holographic image and the natural material, Ledarn assures me that he can. Personally, I would regard the composite generated image as defective if it were possible to do so.”

Ledarn was clearly piqued by Ty Lin's slur on his powers of perceptions. "The trained eye can easily discern the subtle differences between the genuine and the synthetic," he interjected pompously.

Thankfully an audible alarm interrupted the minor disagreement. No explanation was needed, as a quick glance out of the cockpit window confirmed that we had passed through the electronic camouflage. The computer had indeed controlled our descent and with a slight shudder had brought us to a dead stop inside a huge cavern.

As the propulsion unit began to shut down Ty Lin pressed a sequence of buttons. Noting my interest, she smiled. "It is standard procedure to perform an environmental check for oxygen and heat before leaving the safety of the cabin." I nodded appreciatively as a beep emanated from the console and the cabin door popped open.

Ledarn climbed to his feet and moved past me to step out of the craft and into the large chamber, closely followed by Ty Lin. I fumbled with the underside of the arm rest and wriggled out of the restraining arm as it retracted eager to follow my would-be captors. As I stepped out into the large dimly lit cave I was struck by its immense size, roughly the same dimensions as our school gymnasium with the capacity to easily store twenty of the small-sized craft that had delivered us to this lump of Himalayan rock.

Given the thin atmosphere and rugged terrain, the cave was comfortably warm, and oxygen was plentiful, evidence that the cave had been re-sealed shortly after we landed. It must have been a snug fit as there was no tell-tale sign of light seeping in through small cracks. If pressed, I would calculate that we were perched around 20,000 feet, and though I was aware of the hurricane-force winds battering these peaks, there was total silence and I could hear nothing.

The cave walls, though unremarkable, had a smooth almost marble-like sheen as though glazed by a million years of water erosion, testimony to the power of the humble water droplet. In contrast, the floor showed obvious signs of human intervention having been levelled and fitted out with some form of non-slip material. There was a door on one wall which Ledarn opened allowing Ty Lin to enter as he beckoned me through.

Thanking him, I followed Ty Lin into a large white room in the middle of which sat four black leather easy chairs symmetrically arranged around a rectangular-shaped glass table. The lighting was subdued, and there was the occasional potted plant dotted around. The faint smell of garden flowers filled the pleasantly heated room, and other than a barely discernible hum of machinery, there was a peaceful silence.

"Welcome to Ergwartha! Please take a seat Steven," Ty Lin instructed politely. "I will explain why it was necessary to temporarily relocate you to the safety of the Himalayas." I walked over to one of the easy chairs and sat down; squirming in my seat trying to find a comfortable position as I scanned the room.

"Your 25th-century decor has a classical look and feel; I expected something more futuristic ... like UFO." An image of tubular steel, lots of glass and tight leather outfits flashed into my mind.

"In fact, you could do a passable impression of *Colonel Straker*," I said, nodding at Ledarn. In my head I could clearly picture him strutting around the secret SHADO underground headquarter complex, I was struck by the similarities. "And we did orbit the earth on our journey here in an *Interceptor*," I added. "No ... that's too much of a stretch. That flying bucket could never pass for a sleek, highly manoeuvrable *Interceptor*," I scoffed. Switching my attention to Ty Lin, I continued with the fantasy. "You, however, would need to don a purple wig to pass for one of the *Moon-base* babes."

Ty Lin stared blankly at me and then looked over at Ledarn who shrugged his shoulders and shook his head in bewilderment.

“We are deep inside a mountain on Ergwartha, the timeframe is still 1971, and I believe that the style of furniture is consistent with the design enjoyed in this period,” Ty Lin said humourlessly.

Ledarn slipped quietly into an adjoining room to provide refreshments while Ty Lin commenced the de-briefing. “I am sure that you have many questions which, for the most part, I have been authorised to answer. However, please do not ask me questions about specific events that have not yet taken place. I cannot impart knowledge that might alter your future actions.”

This was obviously a well-rehearsed monologue as there was no variation in the tone of Ty Lin’s voice; it was delivered in the manner of an air hostess reminding passengers to fasten their seat belts. “However,” she added, leaning forward, “I am most anxious to learn of your contact with others from my period and your involvement in what are extraordinary events, unparalleled in the history of the Directorate.”

I nodded politely at my attractive interrogator, but I wanted answers. Her superiors might well have set rigid boundaries to most questions time-related, but, she isn’t the person that has been whisked halfway around the world because a bounty has been placed upon her head.

“Well you can start with an explanation of how time travel is even possible,” I began. “Mr Jordon, our Physics and Chemistry teacher, said it would need the brute strength of a black hole to generate the necessary power. This must hold one serious battery,” I said, tapping the multi-functional band gripping my left arm.

Ty Lin looked pensive. At first, I thought it due to the restrictions she had mentioned but after she launched into *The Idiots Guide to Time Travel*, I realised that she was merely attempting to simplify the explanation of a scientific discovery of mind-blowing complexity.

“The theory of time travel through wormholes has been researched for many centuries. Even in this era you have created many tales based on this concept. However, it was only in the 23rd century that a renowned temporal scientist made a breakthrough, and over the next thirty years enormous resources were poured into the technology necessary to harness and control the power of wormholes. Eventually, we were able to move objects through time, but the results were random and quite unreliable. Several more decades passed before our scientists and physicists pioneered a remarkable solution which led to exciting forays into history. A small, highly trained group of historians and scientists travelled to the scenes of great battles, researched great mysteries and observed the birth and death of monarchs. Unfortunately, even though they took great care not to interact with the people of those time periods, almost imperceptible changes to recorded events occurred. Because of this, a statute outlining the rules governing temporal activities was approved.”

I nodded looking suitably impressed. It seemed reasonable to frame the use of time travel with rules and processes.

Ty Lyn continued. “Your recent flirtation with time travel is a prime example why such a directive is necessary. You travelled back in time and used your knowledge of racing events to accumulate one hundred and forty-eight pounds, did you not?”

I began to blush with embarrassment; I didn’t think anyone would be able to detect my ill-gotten gains. “Err ... yes” I coughed.

“That may have seemed harmless enough to you, no visible consequences, but consider this possible scenario. The owner of the gambling facility had endured many months of meagre profit and on that day should have experienced a slight rise in proceeds. This, in turn, signalled a slow recovery in trade. The surge of revenue would have encouraged him to continue in that industry as business improved, carrying on for

many years in that establishment. He married and raised a family, and in the middle of the twenty-first century, one of his descendants was to make a significant medical discovery in the field of portable body scanners. Fifteen years later this was incorporated into handheld technology capable of detecting tumours in their earliest stage of development thereby saving millions of lives.

However, as a result of your time travel and unplanned wager, the manager of the gambling facility once again made a paltry profit. His continued disillusionment caused him to pursue a different career shortly thereafter. Leaving the area, he joined the military and was killed in a future conflict. Because he had no family there was no future descendent to make a breakthrough in body scanners. And though a breakthrough was finally made by an individual twenty-three years further on, in those twenty-three years many thousands died needlessly. Do you now see why, in this hypothetical scenario, even a miniscule change in the past can have enormous consequences in the future?"

The logic of Ty Lin's argument shook me. I hadn't realised that the timeline could be that fragile. I was aware of the Grandfather paradox and could understand why time travel must be carefully controlled, but this revelation was more than a little disturbing.

Ty Lin paused while looking into my eyes, obviously searching for a reaction. She nodded sombrely in confirmation when noting the look of surprise on my face.

"However, we carry currency used in every time period. Ledarn corrected the imbalance you caused by making many fruitless transactions that afternoon which produced the necessary profit margin." Ty Lin smiled as she noted my visible relief.

Whether the scenario was real or fictitious, I would probably never know. Regardless, I was mightily relieved that the story had a happy ending. At that moment, Ledarn appeared from an adjoining room carrying a tray of soft drinks and sandwiches, as he handed them to me, I thanked him. "It's nice to see that some things have endured. You haven't replaced the humble sarnie then?"

Ledarn sat down opposite me without replying. I estimated him to be around thirty years old and probably unmarried, if indeed that institution has survived the ravages of time. He appeared to be a quiet man speaking only when he had something to say.

While I tucked into the food Ty Lin continued the walk-through history. "Analysts modelled scenarios that indicated unthinkable consequences of doomsday proportions would result with the unintended death of only a handful of our ancestors. They calculated that as the effects of their deaths, deliberate, or accidental, cascaded down through the centuries, whole dynasties would vanish, and no one would be aware of the change or have any memory of the original timeline. They determined the critical need for a fail-safe - a definitive system that would alert us to any change in the original timeline."

Shifting slightly in her seat Ty Lin crossed her legs; drawing my attention to her appealing figure accentuated by the tight leather uniform. I redirected my focus and purposefully stared at her face; this was serious stuff and needed my full attention.

"It was decided that the system must be isolated, remote and tamperproof, which is why this location was chosen. For a long time, our greatest minds gave thought to devise a way to secure a system which would provide an effective alert and also detail the minute changes to the timeline with all its possible consequences.

After deciding where to locate this all-important system, it was necessary to select a specific period in which to begin recording timeline data to provide the necessary comparison. A period fifteen millennia ago was chosen, a time before mankind began to form into small groups and communities. Countless numbers of cloaked data recording devices were positioned around the earth. They have a power cycle life of one hundred thousand years and have been gathering data since they were positioned. They monitor communications updating details of births, deaths, marriages, accidents and a thousand

other pieces of information. They also form an effective detection grid around the earth. Without boring you with the technical data, the system is an advanced combination of bio-neurogenic circuitry capable of recording hundreds of billions of bits of data each second. It is constantly comparing data and information, and each hour as the recording, matching, and manipulation is complete – it becomes irreversibly time locked. The system capacity is sufficient to record ten million years of history and the speed of the memory and operating systems are so fast that TIM - a name that we have affectionately given it - can compare ten thousand years' worth of data in a fraction of a second. When TIM detects unauthorised time travel, or the ripple of any change in timeline data, it alerts the Department of the Temporal Directorate and then officers such as Ledarn and me are dispatched to investigate the anomaly.”

Gobbling down the last of the sandwiches - all salad, I concluded that 25th-century folk must be vegetarians. I was buzzing with questions.

“You appear to be aware of the finer details of my time travelling adventure,” I said sheepishly. “I guess, therefore, that this detection grid pinpoints every illegal journey so you can prevent whatever dastardly plot scum bags from your time period have planned?” I said, very much impressed by such an awesome detection system.

“There are many issues to consider,” replied Ledarn, taking up the narrative. “TIM issues an alert for each breach where unauthorised or unplanned time travel occurs. However, to illustrate the size and complexity of temporal detection, last month TIM identified over eighty violations. Many were administration and system errors, some were equipment malfunctions, a few were false trails, but a handful proved to be genuine unauthorised incursions into the timeline. Unfortunately, even though the department has almost limitless resources and equipment in abundance, recruiting and training the right calibre of temporal law enforcement officer is a lengthy process. Consequently, there is a shortage of experienced, skilled, trained teams to investigate such incursions.”

“There are other complications too,” exclaimed Ty Lin, continuing the narrative. “Often the exact date of someone’s disappearance or death is unknown, particularly in remote areas. Consequently, we travel back incrementally, typically a month at a time until we locate them prior to the event. At an opportune moment they are apprehended, sedated, and brought aboard a cloaked craft like the one we travelled in today. Nano-technology is then medically introduced into their system and they are returned to their original location within twenty-four hours. This achieves two things: it irretrievably marks them so that throughout the remaining years of their life we have the means to monitor them. But more importantly, it instantly alerts TIM to further attempts on their life identifying the precise time and location. Armed with the temporal and geographical co-ordinates, a surveillance team positions themselves in the area hours before the assault to apprehend the assassin as he arrives to complete his assignment.

Intrigued at the thought of *snatch and tag* teams patrolling the earth, I turned to Ledarn. “Is the victim aware of his surroundings while being tagged?”

“Sometimes,” he replied. “In fact, it is probably the basis in your century for the many claims of alien abduction. Our method of sedation is not infallible and occasionally they may remember or recall parts of the procedure.”

For the last few minutes we had discussed detection systems and the use of nano tagging, a procedure designed in part to protect the person and to aid the capture of clandestine assassins. Unable to quell my disquiet, I interrupted impatiently.

“Ty Lin, if the procedure is accomplished within twenty-four hours, why do I have to be imprisoned here for seven days? Sorry if that sounds harsh after the trouble you have taken to bring me here, but I would much rather be at home.”

Ty Lin acknowledged my outburst with a sympathetic nod as she reached for her drink. She took a couple of gulps and carefully placed the glass back on the table between us.

“Twenty-four hours is often sufficient when the case involves the simple disappearance or murder of an individual who has led an unremarkable life, please forgive me for being blunt. The genealogy of such ones is of the lowest priority as their descendants are among millions which, in a historical context, are of little consequence. In contrast, however, there are individuals who make a significant contribution that has stamped their mark. I refer to the high-profile group: male and female composers, scientists, military leaders and statesmen. But additionally, there are others that are less well known. There is the man that rescued Ann, an English mathematician who nearly drowned in a boating lake. Without his interventions, she would have died and never given birth to Ava who created the first sequence of instructions for a computer calculation.

An unknown carriage driver that inadvertently ended the Whitehall murders of 1888 when he ran the butcher down on a road shrouded in fog, thus sparing the life of his next intended victim. It was her second child that was instrumental in the move into sound motion pictures ... the list is endless.”

This was fascinating stuff, but she stunned me with her concluding words; “You belong in the latter group which we have named *the fabled chain*.”

Ty Lin wouldn't be drawn into revealing the contribution that the house of Morris would make, but she clarified the reason for my prolonged stay. “In such cases the sponsor sometimes uses an assassin from a legendary group whose highly trained members have a military background, they are called the *Phantom Elite*. These superbly trained assassins have access to the latest technology, are unsurpassed in physical combat, and are experts with explosive devices. They are extremely cunning, and so relentless in the pursuit of their target that they would detain us for weeks, or even months, in that one time period.

That aside, the primary reason that we wish to prolong your stay to around seven days, is that your situation is unique. We have never encountered a pre-25th-century individual that has access to our technology and who is aware of the many temporal skirmishes that are being fought across the pages of history. Additionally, you have seen the faces of at least two individuals from our era, both of whom we are extremely anxious to apprehend and interrogate. It will also allow you a period of adjustment. From your perspective this must be a terrifying ordeal; the threat of assassination is psychologically crippling and can seem overpowering. It also provides the opportunity to reassure you that your protection is our overriding priority. Both Ledarn and I are highly trained officers with many years' experience in this type of situation.”

She paused momentarily and then continued. “Additionally, from a medical perspective, Directorate policy prevents us from staying in a time period for more than several weeks. Apart from the very real possibility of inadvertently altering the timeline, there are potential health problems inherent in the constant use of cloaked technology for prolonged periods.”

The mention of health implications sounded an alarm in my head. “Whoa ... I used the cloaking device occasionally, what are the symptoms? Bits of me aren't about to stop working or drop off, are they?”

Ledarn sniggered quietly to himself before allaying my fears. “Short periods of use present no discernible health problems Steven. However, it is not unusual for a team to be cloaked for many days, or even weeks, on some missions. The medical specialists of our time are concerned that this is having a detrimental effect on our immune systems. Yet

they cannot agree whether the symptoms are temporary or permanent,” he concluded, still chuckling away to himself.

I breathed a sigh of relief, all parts still working. Yet I was still puzzled. “If what you say about these elite soldiers is true, surely a week here is like a drop of water in the ocean. To date, I haven’t achieved anything I am aware of. This contribution to history, that you are so vague about, must occur sometime in my future, and if this is the reason for the attack, won’t the assassin persist until I am just a forgotten memory? And if my achievement or actions are enshrined in the history books, surely that means that he is doomed to fail?” I added, confusing myself with paradoxical logic.

Ledarn grunted and unwittingly twisted his mouth as one does when trying to hide feelings of disagreement. Obviously, my logic was flawed in some way.

“Yes and no,” he answered, diplomatically.

“In his mission to kill you he will be relentless. Nevertheless, as Ty Lin informed you there are many other reasons to move you here for this seven-day de-briefing. It allows specialised temporal investigation teams the time to trace the lines of descent that lead to your birth. They will trace each of your ancestors over many generations - or even millennia - and perform the marking procedure on each of them - a considerable exercise.”

I was quite taken aback and made a low murmuring noise in appreciation of the enormous task they had undertaken on my behalf. “Even my mother and father?” I asked after a momentary pause.

“Especially your mother and father,” Ledarn replied emphatically.

“It must take a colossal amount of manpower and time to locate and mark hundreds of my ancestors.” *Some of which I am sure were rogues and vagabonds if a couple of my more recent relatives are anything to go on,* I thought to myself.

“Let’s see,” I said, performing a swift mental calculation. “Tagging my ancestors over four or five hundred years would amount to around ... phew, a couple of thousand people,” I exclaimed in astonishment.

“Possibly,” said Ty Lin. “And then we repeat the exercise incrementally century by century if the initial exercise proves insufficient. As you have accurately assessed, it takes many teams of temporal agents, and a large fleet of craft capable of time travel and fitted with cloaking technology to achieve this, but the effort is considered inconsequential when protecting ancestors from the *fabled chain*.”

No one spoke for a few moments as we each assimilated the reactions of the other. My head was buzzing with images of tagging teams snatching my ancestors, surreptitiously removing them from their daily grind. Would they disable them with a Vulcan neck pinch, inject a fast-acting tranquiliser or just a sock to the jaw?

The silence was broken by a deep groaning noise as the room shuddered slightly.

“Do not be alarmed Steven,” Ledarn responded to my look of surprise. “That is only an automated maintenance function. The location of this debriefing facility is known only to a few senior staff officers in the Directorate, the Security Section and the teams that use it. However, it was recognised early in the planning stage that this location would not remain secret forever. Accordingly, this facility is imbedded inside twenty meters of solid granite, is heavily shielded against attack, and has the latest detection systems. There are also counter-measures in place to combat infiltration by saboteurs. A highly sensitive and extremely responsive detection system has also been fitted. If it detects a weapons discharge, toxic gas, explosions, decompression, abnormal noise levels, or a multitude of other suspicious situations, the building complex is sealed corridor by corridor, with blast doors that remain locked down until Incident Response Security teams arrive. We undergo regular psychological examinations and our movements are continually

monitored and recorded to minimise the threat or impact of infiltration.” Ledarn’s closing remarks put me at ease as he concluded the session. “So, you can sleep soundly in the knowledge that this facility is safer than any other location on earth.”

“It is late, and I am sure you must be extremely tired,” said Ty Lin rising to her feet. “I will show you to the restroom and then tomorrow you can relate to us the highly unusual circumstances that led to the acquisition of a ZX mark II armband, and the extraordinary meetings with others from our time.”

Stifling a yawn, I nodded in agreement, I too had many questions that warranted an answer. Rising, I followed her down the corridor to what would be my bedroom.

Upon entering the bedroom my attention was immediately drawn to a large window directly opposite the door which permitted the setting sun to bathe the room with calming shafts of orange light. I walked over to the window and gazed out at a well-kept lawn with bushes placed around the edges every twenty feet or so. I could even see a small coppice some distance away, and clearly hear the sound of birds singing.

I turned to Ty Lin in astonishment and exclaimed, “We are deep inside a mountain in the Himalayas, aren’t we?”

She laughed. “Yes, what you see is a computer-generated image designed to make an abnormal situation feel slightly less unpleasant, and there are a variety of images to choose from. The computer can display panoramic seashore views, chaotic large city scenes - complete with car horns sounded day and night, a remote mountain cabin with six feet of snow, and many more. Computer,” she said loudly, “change the time in the meadow scene to zero one-fifteen hours.” Instantly the fading sunlight was replaced with a dim moonlit night.

“Enjoy your night’s rest,” she said, pointing to a large double bed to the left of the room equipped with large puffed up pillows and a white duvet bed cover. A small bedside cabinet sat near the headboard, on it stood a small bedside lamp. “The washroom is off to your right, and I will wake you in seven hours,” said Ty Lin as she left the room. “Sleep well.”

“Yes, good night,” I responded drowsily, as she closed the bedroom door.

I undressed slowly, hanging my jacket over the back of a chair near the door. I withdrew the pocket watch given to me by my mother just before I set off to the grand Autumn Ball. Sadness quickly swept over me as I recalled the tender kiss on my cheek. I recalled the feelings of impatience that I felt as I endured mum’s last-minute checklist, I was so anxious to depart for the Ball. I pressed the catch and the lid sprang open, it read 01:16 A.M.

Truly, had only six hours passed since those poignant moments? Had I known the strange events and emotional roller coaster that would unfold over the evening, I would have returned the watch to my mother immediately and ascended the stairs to bed.

I placed the watch in the drawer of the bedside cabinet and continued to undress, throwing the remainder of my clothes onto the seat of the chair in an untidy pile before climbing into bed and falling into a fitful sleep almost instantly.

CHAPTER 3

PHELR'S

I awoke with a start; a buzzing noise had interrupted my sleep. As I sat up and looked around the room, I realised that bright shafts of sunlight were streaming in through the partly drawn curtains. "Morning already," I yawned, trying to focus my eyes. "My head feels like there are two men inside it trying to hammer their way out, and my mouth tastes like the inside of a parrots cage," I groaned.

"We have a remedy for that," said Ledarn brightly, as he strode into my bedroom. "Go and cleanse yourself and then put on these clothes while those you wore yesterday are laundered. When you are ready make your way to the kitchen," he instructed, dropping a pile of clothes onto the chair near the door. I was about to ask him for directions when he added, as if reading my mind, "follow the smell."

I showered quickly and was pleasantly surprised that the clothes he had given me fitted well. The shirt was a normal 20th century light blue cotton garment and the slightly faded denim jeans were also unremarkable. I wandered out of the bedroom and let my nose direct my steps. The smell of bacon and coffee grew stronger as I approached the end of the corridor making my stomach churn with pangs of hunger.

"Did you sleep well?" asked Ty Lin, turning and smiling as I entered the kitchen area.

"I think so," I replied groggily. "However, I have a head that feels as though a football team is practicing in it," I said, rubbing the back of my neck tenderly.

"Do you often get a pain in the back of your neck?" she asked, her face etched with concern.

"Increasingly," I replied, taking a seat at the table as a mental image of O'Hare instantly sprang to mind. I had barely sat down as Ty Lin placed a cooked breakfast of bacon, eggs, sausages, tomatoes, and a mug of coffee in front of me.

"I am at a loss to understand how your generation ever lived long enough to procreate on a diet of fatty animal parts," she said, with a look of revulsion.

"Maybe, but they taste wonderful," I murmured, my mouth full of food.

It was only after I had consumed the food ravenously, swilled down two cups of coffee, that my head started to clear. I let out a satisfied moan as I swallowed the last mouthful. "You may not eat fatty animal parts," I teased Ty Lin, "but you certainly know how to cook them."

Graciously, she accepted my compliment with a faint smile and then turned to business. "If you now feel strong enough to continue our discussion of last night," said Ty Lin softly, "your recent encounters with men fraudulently claiming to be Directorate personnel would be more appropriately discussed in the meeting room. It provides a more comfortable setting and has recording devices to capture your verbal expressions more accurately than would notation."

Though I had found this leather clad female arousing last night, she was just as alluring today wearing a calf length white dress with her long hair held back by a blue ribbon. As was the case last night, Ty Lin's extremely shapely posterior hypnotised me as we moved to the meeting room. However, I think I was busted when Ty Lin turned to speak to me. I quickly averted my gaze, but not before she noted the part of her anatomy that had been the object of my attention. She gave a broad grin.

"Would you like to be seated Steven and please explain to us how you came into possession of 25th-century armband technology?"

I sat down and shifted around until I was comfortable. I crossed my left leg over my right leg and grabbed my ankle to maintain the position. Ledarn joined us and I waited for both Directorate officers to give the signal for me to commence.

When Ty Lin nodded, I nervously took a couple of deep breaths and launched into my tale of woe.

“I was walking to school a little over a month ago...”

I related how I had stumbled upon the grizzly scene where Officer Number Sixteen, possibly named Edvan, and the dead body of the other time traveller lay. I explained how the deceased time traveller was located through a signal emitted by the tracer, and how he was miraculously transported back to the future. I poured over the details of my conversation with Edvan, the transfer of armband technology, and how I had stripped and partially buried him.

Both perked up noticeably, listening intently, and digesting every detail when I revealed how I had discovered his true purpose through the data contained on the disk that Edvan had asked me to protect.

“Obviously he wasn’t a law enforcement officer who was ambushed by a desperate time thief, so what am I missing? What was Edvan’s real mission?”

Ty Lin stiffened slightly. “As you rightly suspected, Edvan was undoubtedly a data gatherer.” For a moment she was quiet and then her eyes moistened. “We have lost colleagues, good friends, defending the timeline. We tried so hard to contain the knowledge – the very existence of time travel, but such incredible events could not remain secret forever. Occasionally small details leaked out, rumours began to flourish and speculation increased day by day. The Inner Cabinet considered a full disclosure to the Union of Nations, but analysts feared the outbreak of mass hysteria possibly leading to civil unrest as fearsome scenarios abounded. This prompted the Supreme Legislator to fervently deny the speculation, and though reports continued to flare up sporadically, the tension dissipated slowly over time.

Unfortunately, certain corporate entities were unconvinced and had begun to dig deeper, their tentacles spread into the furthest corners of government. We believe, through an unidentified source in the very highest echelon of our Administration, that at least two clandestine organisations gained access to this knowledge surreptitiously, obtaining the specifications of large amounts of top-secret equipment. It appears that they will stop at nothing to acquire the designs and hardware, and they have the wealth and resources to build and develop much of the technology essential for time travel. Consequently, our resources are stretched to the limit trying to prevent them from travelling through history reaping havoc, or attempting to repair the damage they have caused to the time-line, as I have already related to you,” said Ty Lin. Her face filled with a look of sadness.

Ledarn had slouched back in his seat, hands laced behind his head as he stared up at the ceiling listening attentively to Ty Lin as she described the deadly power struggle for the control and domination of time travel. Occasionally he nodded in agreement and grunted when he felt stronger affirmation was required. As though carefully rehearsed Ty Lin concluded her summation of the Directorate’s considered objectives of the dark, lawless organisations, and looked over at Ledarn.

He sat bolt upright in his seat, took a deep breath, and took up the reigns as he began to explain their *Modus Operandi* in greater depth. “Edvan spoke truthfully about ancient relics being stolen and then hidden by what you could call *time thieves*. A mechanism has long been integrated into each armband that prevents the user from transporting objects that belongs to a different time, which is why they hide the artefacts in a location that will

still exist hundreds or even thousands of years later, such as an isolated plain, a river or burial place. Data transfer is similarly affected.

Though the disks Edvan possessed were manufactured in the 25th century, they contained data and DNA samples that had been gathered in your time and beyond. In the early days' we quickly discovered that wormhole travel can have unexpected results, data storage devices are susceptible to data corruption and data loss. Consequently, placing data disks in proven hiding places is a common way of moving data between centuries without loss or corruption, it is simply a matter of retrieval many centuries later."

I understood the logic of his argument: hide and retrieve, usually after the hue and cry has died down. It is a tactic thieves have used throughout the ages. The Mona Lisa, stolen in 1911, returned two years later. The Jules Rimet trophy stolen in 1966, found one week later by dog named Pickles.

"What about the dead traveller? How does he fit into this tale?" I asked, struggling to fully comprehend the part each person played in this temporal jigsaw. "Why would a person risk his life over a simple data disk?" I added incredulously. For a few moments, Ledarn stared at me without responding as though contemplating his reply. I took his silence as a sign of reluctance to reveal more than I needed know. However, after a few moments, he spoke.

"I think he was most likely a *PhElr*, a member of the Phantom Elite. As Ty Lin explained, they are highly trained with access to the most advanced weaponry and equipment and are used on covert missions, usually working in pairs. He was probably stalking Edvan. It takes a considerable amount of time and effort to document an entire family history covering many centuries, especially if genetic samples are gathered simultaneously for absolute accuracy. This highly specialised type of research is often undertaken with the sole aim of manipulating the timeline by removing a specific individual, a patriarch – a founder of a whole dynasty. Naturally, when the Directorate became aware of such an operation, they apprehend the perpetrators and take the necessary corrective action."

So, I had been right in my assessment, it did involve patriarchal genocide. I smiled smugly as a feeling of deep satisfaction swept over me – not bad for a 20th-century teenager.

Ledarn hesitated momentarily; my change of expression evidently confused him. "Have you understood what I just said," he asked quietly.

"Yes, I am paying attention," I replied nodding my head. "Carry on."

Quickly gathering his thoughts, he continued. "Unfortunately, the Directorate are not always the first to stumble upon a covert data gathering team. Occasionally a rival group uncover details of a data gathering exercise and seize the opportunity to steal the extremely valuable research. This is not a new tactic; it was common just over one hundred years ago in North America when prospectors mining gold were often ambushed on their way to sell the gold mined after many months hard work."

I nodded in confirmation; I had read of the Californian gold rush and was familiar with many of the details. The San Francisco 49ers, one of the most famous football teams in the United States, was named after that period.

"What would the opportunist thieves do with their spoil?" I asked Ledarn curiously. "I assume that it would be difficult to identify the intended target from partially accumulated data. And I imagine that even if the target is known, the new owners of the data may not follow the same agenda."

Ledarn grunted in acknowledgement, eager to elaborate. "Sometimes they ransom the data under threat of informing the Directorate. Often, they feed the data into their

database of historical research, and occasionally they destroy the data and material to thwart their rivals.”

“Ah,” I muttered quietly. A piece of the puzzle had fallen into place. Edvan’s claim of ambush might well have been true, but probably not the cock and bull story that followed. However, the reason for sending the dead thief hurtling back to the 25th century still eluded me. “If they were competitors, why did Edvan have me place a tracer on the time thief’s body, isn’t that an invitation to send reinforcements?”

“The purpose of the tracer is to transport the target to a location using the pre-set coordinates contained within. The most likely explanation is that Edvan had taken the tracer from the dead thief’s body before you stumbled upon the gruesome scene. Sending the dead body to his colleagues would have sent a clear signal that their trap had been unsuccessful, and their quarry was a formidable warrior. He was also issuing a challenge, *face me if you dare*. Essentially thought, you are correct. The tracer would have contained the departure location and time coordinates. Edvan was brave but foolish.” Ledarn paused as he digested the implication of his words. “Has anyone approached you since that incident?” he questioned.

“Yes, someone calling himself Jedzeel contacted me a few days ago,” I replied. “He also claimed to be a member of the Temporal Directorate and urged me to give him the disk.”

“Did you?” they both asked in unison. Ledarn sat forward in his seat in anticipation of my reply. This development had evidently aroused their interest as Ty Lin too had her eyes fixed intently on my face as she awaited my answer.

“I did give him a disk,” I said, pausing to build the tension. “However, the disk I gave him was a fake, it was a disk I created with fictitious names and dates. They will be searching for a long time before they find the graves of Sherlock Holmes, and Peter Pan,” I chuckled loudly.

Ledarn and Ty Lin stared at me in disbelief. “You created non-existent data and gave it to a person calling himself Jedzeel?” gasped Ty Lin.

“Yes,” I giggled. “And I watched him hide it in the base of a headstone in the cemetery next to the Church of St Cadoc.” I gave them both a triumphant smile as they began to chatter excitedly among themselves.

“He will have to return for the real disk or start the research from the beginning again,” Ledarn said, looking at Ty Lin who nodded in agreement. “Now that he has made contact with Steven, and knows his identity, he will realise that he is still in possession of the original disk and will be determined to retrieve it.”

“Oh great,” I groaned. “One more person to worry about and I suppose he will want to kill me as well?” I muttered dejectedly, but not really wanting to hear the answer.

Ty Lin leaned over and touched my arm consolingly. “Not necessarily Steven, even a *PhElr* knows that the briefest interaction can have unforeseen consequences. Murder, accidental or otherwise, that hasn’t been analysed and fed through a consequential modelling array, is unthinkable.”

“Unless they have been specifically hired to kill me,” I countered sarcastically. The outcome arrived at after being fed through one of your damned machines.” I loosened my collar as I pictured the hangman’s noose tightening around my neck. Ty Lin smiled weakly and lowered her eyes slowly looking aimlessly at the ground.

Recognising the despair in my voice, Ledarn quickly responded. “In addition to the reasons outlined by Ty Lin, we have relocated you to this isolated place to receive instruction on simple evasion techniques, to discuss your normal daily routine and to incorporate into it a rigid safety plan. At all times after returning to your normal environment you will be accompanied by a team of four directorate personnel on a

rotating basis, these are specialists in personal security. Ty Lin and I will be two of those officers. We have many years' experience in security operations, we have never lost a potential target and you will not become the first," he said seriously.

Ledarn's assurance offered a tiny glimmer of hope among a sea of gloom and uncertainty. As I stared at the tranquil computer-generated meadow scene through the large meeting room window, I digested Ledarn's words. Perhaps I could survive an assassination attempt on my life, and perhaps I could evade the Special Forces gun slingers from the 25th century protected by a team of bodyguards. Ledarn had a reassuring quality to his voice that gave hope. Aided by an extremely confident manner, he displayed a strength that reinforced that expectation. He gave the impression that he was supremely confident in his ability to defend and protect - a field agent who was practiced in the art of defence. However, I was still troubled by the thought of annihilation from the lethal weaponry facing me.

"But what defence is there against the particle weapon that I saw obliterate a sturdy tree and kill two men?" I asked, convinced that nothing could survive a blast from this futuristic ray gun.

Ty Lin, ever the scientist, spoke. "Particle weapons are in their infancy and are unreliable, not easily controlled, and the most current version is the size of the craft that brought you to Ergwartha." Pausing for thought, she continued. "What you saw is almost certainly a modification to a laser weapon, a side-attached frequency modulator that is thought to enhance the output by a factor of ten. Fortunately, there is little evidence of its effectiveness as it frequently kills the perpetrator more often than their intended victim. However, on the few occasions, it has been successful, the damage is significant. Even body armour and energy shields offer little protection."

A moment of reflection followed while Ledarn and Ty Lin quietly digested the comments of the last few minutes. However, it didn't last long as I was bristling with questions. Unable to contain my impatience I broke the silence, articulating a question that had formed in the back of my mind.

"I suppose I could keep the energy shield fully enabled during my waking hours that would at least improve my chances of surviving most forms of attack. There are no issues in prolonged use are there?"

Ledarn glanced briefly at Ty Lin. "I believe that this is your area of expertise, but please be brief." Ty Lin smiled broadly and gave an almost inaudible chuckle, it seemed Ty Lin also found Ledarn's pompous attitude amusing. I had an ally.

"Research into the development of a protective shield began in your era using sound waves, with limited success. In the late 21st century energy shield research focussed on enhanced magnetic pulses also with limited success. The breakthrough happened toward the end of the 22nd century when a physicist exploring the properties of electromagnetism and charged point particles created an early working model of the energy shield presently employed throughout the Directorate. Other refinements were added over time such as the frequency modulator and the nano technology that forms a telepathic link with the armband. However, to answer your question..."

"*Finally,*" Ledarn uttered under his breath.

"As I was saying," Ty Lin said brusquely, throwing Ledarn a withering look, "long term use of the energy barrier can cause health problems by interfering with the strength and frequency of the electrical signals relayed to the heart, rather like the problems people of your time experienced when fitted with heart regulators. Extensive research has produced conflicting evidence. Currently, our best medical advice is to allow periods of rest following prolonged use."

Slowly I exhaled through my nose and rubbed my temples in frustration.

“Right, there are potential health problems if I overuse the energy shield, and cloaking device, but used sparingly they offer partial protection. What about the proximity detector? Will that always provide an alert when someone possessing advanced technology is close by?” Anguish had again crept into my now wavering voice. “I suspect that Jedzeel tried to fool me with technical mumbo jumbo about low-grade power output. Please tell me it’s reliable?”

Ty Lin stood up and began to pace slowly around the room. The late morning sun streaming into the meeting room accentuated her finely sculptured cheekbones and her dark brown eyes sparkled as she spoke, alternating her attention between me and Ledarn intermittently. “The proximity detector does indeed detect low and medium grade power units. Unfortunately, the more advanced high-power units deceive the detection signal by utilising a sophisticated dampening field, but there have been encouraging results with the material composition of the armband. The armband is constructed with an extremely rare combination of materials which the detection net can recognise through the unique material signature and the detection wave’s peculiar and distinctive speed of decay.”

“I’ll have a dozen of those,” I said enthusiastically, buoyed by some encouraging news.

Ledarn scoffed loudly. “We do not issue top-secret technology to those in our time much less issue it to our ancestors, I dread to think of the consequences if scientists of this era took possession of our superior technology.” Shaking his head in anguish he added, “Can you imagine what would happen to the timeline? Wars have been fought over less.”

It was evident that Ledarn specialised in security and covert ops, as he immediately recognised the strategic implications of my light-hearted suggestion and seemed to take the lead when these issues surfaced in the conversation. But he was also stuffy, and on occasions a little arrogant and controlling. I could see that things were done his way or not at all.

“So, I will have little choice other than to place my life in your hands when I return home?” I said, with an air of resignation. It seemed pointless to argue. I felt totally helpless with little or no control over events.

This interminable situation took me back to last May when I overheard someone talking about a swimming lesson planned for the following afternoon. As I enjoyed swimming, I sought out Mr Cropper and asked to be included. When we arrived at the pool the next afternoon I discovered that we would be wearing clothes over the top of our trunks as this exercise was designed to demonstrate a strong level of swimming proficiency and was one of the elements necessary to gain The Duke of Edinburgh Bronze level certificate. I duly changed and put on the old clothes that had been provided, and then climbed into the swimming pool where I attempted to tread water for ten minutes. Each time I kicked my legs or made circular movements with my arms the clothes impeded the action and I found myself repeatedly dragged under the water. After a few minutes, I had to be hauled out coughing and spluttering. Needless to say, I was awarded an unspectacular fail. My present situation felt very similar, I just hoped that Ledarn had his lifesaving certificate.

I was left to my own devices for the remainder of the day. Ty Lin and Ledarn disappeared into a room that they called the Communication Centre. They said they were relaying the details of our conversation to their superiors via a temporal communications satellite.

However, I found several distractions to keep me occupied, twenty-four-hour television boasting over eighty channels, mostly American and European - the signal being greatly enhanced by 25th-century decoders. However, my favourite was the simulator which was a duplicate of the cockpit and cabin that I had travelled in yesterday.

There was no instruction manual, but the online computer gave me a summary of the functions.

Initially, I selected standard circuits, taking off and landing using a deserted runway in Colorado. This proved to be greatly entertaining, but deceptively difficult, more than I would have imagined. I crashed and burned four times out of five, I concluded I needed the dexterity of *top dog*. As I became more adept, I chose the scenarios involving cloaked urban manoeuvres, flying between buildings and bridges in downtown Manhattan. Eventually, I attempted the more adventurous - but potentially suicidal - manoeuvre of flying at treetop level while trying to avoid electricity pylons and cables and bridges; again, I crashed spectacularly. By late evening my skill level had increased, and I had mastered the main techniques to the point of landing more often than I crashed, and I was able to manoeuvre between buildings without clipping the odd skyscraper.

CHAPTER 4

ARMBANDS IN VARIOUS LOCATIONS

My second full day on Ergwartha began with a full cooked breakfast during which Ty Lin talked about the perils of time travel and the dangers of being stranded in a particular time frame.

“If your armband was destroyed or badly damaged on one of your forays into the past,” I posed, munching a mouthful of toast and marmalade, “I imagine you would be stranded for weeks before you were rescued?”

“Not really,” Ty Lin replied casually, with a shake of her head. “You are thinking in relative terms, Steven. We carry a tracer like the one that the man called Edvan used. Even if the signal took decades to reach the Temporal Directorate Headquarters and it took weeks to determine the year and location. And if, exceptionally, the response took a further ten years to co-ordinate, it would be timed to arrive only seconds after the tracer was activated which was so ably demonstrated before your very eyes only a number of weeks ago.”

I nodded in acknowledgement as I attempted to grasp the vagaries of temporal operations. It seemed incredible that a signal spanning five hundred years could receive an immediate response. Brown’s buses could learn a thing or two about such swift reaction times.

Ty Lin reminded me of a parent patiently instructing a child explaining concepts that the child could barely understand. And I suppose that was a pretty accurate reflection of the situation, as I struggled to assimilate mind-boggling theories, technical specifications and complex operational exercises. As so often had been the case in this entire episode, an answer raised fresh questions.

“Has anyone ever been stranded without a tracer or any form of communication?” I could picture the horror and feelings of desolation.

“A few were temporarily lost in the early days of time travel.” She started to giggle at the memory of their voyage and uncertain fate that obviously contained an element of humour. I was increasingly drawn to Ty Lin’s manner and personality. She had an infectious giggle and an engaging smile, and unlike Ledarn, thankfully, she was seldom serious. In stark contrast to the teachers at St Alban’s she exuded a genuine warmth and concern when talking to me, not as an adult talking down to an adolescent, but as one adult to another.

“So, what happened to the castaways?” I asked inquisitively. “Were those futuristic Robinson Crusoe’s ever located?”

She stared at me impassively before responding. “Pardon me, who?”

“Robinson Crusoe, Daniel Defoe?” I urged hoping to strike a chord and recall a forgotten memory. “Didn’t they preserve the classics?” I exclaimed in astonishment.

I proceeded to rattle off the limited list of classics I could remember, in a final desperate attempt to jog her memory. “Does Treasure Island, Gulliver’s Travels, A Christmas Carol or Jane Eyre ring a bell? You know...the classics, novels, stories read to you during childhood.”

Ty Lin paused, scrunching up her nose as she searched her memory banks. “You are describing writings that to me were popular more than five hundred years ago. There have been many similar writings that we also treasure in my time. However, I am unfamiliar with Mr Crusoe, tell me about him.”

And so, I proceeded to outline the hazy details retrieved from the deep recesses of my mind of Daniel Defoe’s desert island tale.

When I had finished Ty Lin looked thoughtful. “That is an interesting account, and I see the analogy between his situation and the pioneers from my time. However, they did not have a man called Friday as their companion,” she added, with a dainty laugh. “Like Mr Crusoe, we located them in due course, but it involved a large search and resulted in a few minor changes to the time-line as some had married and produced children.”

Pausing for a second, Ty Lin’s face suddenly wore a more serious expression. “I cannot overemphasize the danger of travelling to the past. Any form of contact is always potentially dangerous. It is for that reason we have brought you to this secure facility in your time rather than moving through time to various locations. This is essentially a time-free zone; there are no other personnel in this part of the building, and no one from your period which alleviates any possible time-line contamination.”

Given my recent awareness of time travel I couldn’t shake the intriguing scenario of possible shipwreck in some long-forgotten point in history from my mind. The endless possibilities, the dangers, and the extreme isolation captured my imagination, and so I continued to probe.

“Hypothetically, if you were hurled back in time, say by a system malfunction and lost the use of your armband. Without time frame coordinates, how would your colleagues begin the awesome task of locating you?”

Ty Lin was silent and thoughtful for a moment, which provided the opportunity to further complicate the scenario.

“I am sure you are trained to survive imaginatively, but if your rescue never took place, would you live on the fringes of society and be prepared to die in that time period?”

Ty Lin smiled at me, “Questions, questions, questions.”

“Valid questions,” I replied playfully.

“In the most extreme circumstances, where system protocols and detection procedures failed, and if, unthinkable, the detection net failed to identify the sudden appearance of the armband power signature and the extremely sophisticated nano technology, a helplessly stranded time traveller shrouded in the past would look for one of the emergency armbands that were embedded near ancient structures on each continent six thousand years ago. And before you ask, I cannot reveal their precise locations, that information was never disclosed to us,” she added, anticipating my next question.

The revelation of hidden armband technology came as a surprise, but I was slightly baffled by the hidden aspect. I could understand the need for secrecy, and the implications of detection, but this sounded like blind man’s bluff with a bizarre twist.

“So, what’s the point of hiding them in various parts of mankind’s history to cater for emergency situations if the marooned person has no idea where to find them?” I asked, shaking my head slowly in disbelief. “Searching for a needle in a haystack sounds like child’s play in comparison.”

Ty Lin looked slightly hurt at my unexpected criticism. “In the training academy we were given only limited details, so remote is the possibility that directions to specific locations were not thought necessary. Additionally, our nano technology is many times more sophisticated than yours and can locate the extremely weak power signature of a deactivated armband within a radius of a few kilometres. More like searching for a stick in a haystack wouldn’t you agree?” replied Ty Lin. She raised her eyebrows playfully, accompanied by a triumphant smile.

Reluctantly I nodded in agreement. “I hope there’s one in Britain,” I sneered. “It’s a long swim if you are trapped in pre-Viking Europe.”

Ty Lin tutted at me in disapproval, “I believe you are attempting to elicit additional details from me. All I will tell you is that one is purportedly hidden close to one of the

oldest monuments in your country,” she said, with a tone of finality as she stood up and walked out of the room.

I sat back in the armchair, my head resting against the comfortable head rest deep in thought, soothed by the surreal computer-generated surroundings deep in the bowel of a frozen, ice-capped mountain. I conjured up the image of Tom’s face as I related the details of my time on Ergwartha. I’m sure that he wouldn’t believe me, and who could blame him. Life and death discussions with Directorate personnel who aren’t due to be born for another five hundred years would sound farfetched, even to me.

Hidden deep inside a Himalayan mountain possessing extraordinary powers, I could almost pass for one of The Champions. Would I play the part of Craig Sterling, or Richard Macready brother of the gorgeous Sharon Macready, played by the sophisticated Alexandra Bastedo? They too were marooned in the Himalayan Mountains following an air accident. Of course, they received their amazing powers of telepathy, enhanced hearing ability, incredible strength and agility from a mysterious race of beings that healed them. Unfortunately, my powers are courtesy of the mysterious Edvan, and are likely to be only temporary.

Later that evening Ledarn poked his head around the door and called me. “Steven,” he said softly, disturbing my television time, “we are receiving satellite communication from your mother. Remember that you are in a special monitoring unit and do not tell her anything that would arouse her suspicions,” he warned, as he handed me a headset.

“Mum,” I yelled excitedly, as I fiddled with the mouthpiece arm.

“Steve are you alright my love?” mum shouted back; her voice sounded strained with emotion. “What happened? I received a message from the police late Friday night saying that you were involved in some sort of accident as the result of a tanker spillage.” She sounded so distant and forlorn; I just wanted to hug her tightly. “They wouldn’t allow me to contact you for twenty-four hours; I’ve been out of my mind with worry. Are you okay?” I could feel tears welling up in my eyes as I pictured the look of anguish on her face.

“I’ll tell you all about it when I am released from this unit,” I replied emotionally. My throat had tightened, and I had to bite my bottom lip hard to stop myself from losing control. Mum was struggling to hold herself together and I didn’t want to distress her further. “Everything is progressing well, and I feel fine, in fact I’m bored silly.” I tried to cheer her up with a little bit of light banter. “The nurses are great, and the food is almost as good as your home cooking.”

“Oh, my word you are in trouble then,” she said, laughing lightly. I felt wretched that I couldn’t reveal the truth, though in all honesty the truth would probably frighten her to death. I was still struggling to come to terms with the enormity of it all. “My money is running out,” mum yelled, with a slight hint of desperation. “I will phone you again tomorrow.”

“I love you mum,” I shouted, trying to convey the full range of my words and feelings in that fraction of a second.

“I love you too,” she replied emotionally, and then the dialling tone cut in.

“Is everything all right,” asked Ty Lin sympathetically, seeing the tears roll down both cheeks.

“I’m fine,” I replied, choking up. “I just need to blow my nose.”

Ty Lin touched my arm tenderly, “you will soon be able to hug your mother.”

“It was good to hear her voice,” I said, smiling weakly at Ty Lin as I wiped the tears away with my hand. “How did she obtain this number? I don’t suppose directory enquiries have a listed number for Himalayan Mountain number forty-five,” I quipped.

“She was given a number that is automatically redirected to an orbiting satellite, which is then directed to Ergwartha, piggy backed on a laser guided carrier wave,” she explained.

“I thought so,” I said, pretending to understand the jargon. “I must remember to include it in my theory of sub-atomic matter for my next science project,” I said, shaking my head vigorously to unfreeze my brain.

MEMORIES

I awoke the next morning feeling distinctly homesick. I felt hurt inside at having to mislead mum, she sounded so forlorn and helpless on the telephone last night. I could hear and feel the pain in her voice as she said goodbye.

I washed and dressed automatically, not thinking about the actions I was performing. I was deep in thought. I wondered if this might be a taste of things to come. Would I have to lie to my family and friends on a regular basis?

I could accept the consequences of my unintended involvement in a battle for historical accuracy, but I had given little thought to the implications of a protracted struggle for my survival. Might the growing web of deceit place the lives of those close to me in danger as well?

Ty Lin was proving to be an excellent cook, as ably demonstrated when I entered the dining room to find that she had again laid out a full English breakfast including toast, marmalade, and coffee.

“You look a little sad this morning Steven,” she said, as I sat down. “I am sure you will feel happier when you next speak to your mother.”

I nodded in acknowledgement. “I hope so,” I replied, as I dissected a tasty looking sausage.

“Ledarn requires your presence this morning,” she added. “He wishes to create a security profile of each of the time travellers you have encountered. Enjoy your breakfast and then focus on the details of your meeting.” She ruffled my hair playfully, and then left the room.

The morning passed quickly as Ledarn questioned me in depth about the events that led to the acquisition of the armband. He was extremely interested in the initial contact with Officer Number 16, paying particular attention to the words we exchanged. He spent considerable time documenting his features, mannerisms and physical attributes.

“Can you recall anything more about Officer Number 16?” he asked inquisitively, “no matter how insignificant.”

Though I racked my brain, I was unable to recall further details. “That’s all I can remember Ledarn, nothing else comes to mind which doesn’t surprise me with this monster of a headache. I am sure someone is hammering the inside of my head,” I added wearily.

Over the last two hours, Ledarn’s questioning technique had forced me to maintain a high level of concentration as he probed each answer, urging me to visualise the situation. Before the interrogation commenced, he had attached a Visual Restoration Sequencer band onto my forehead.

“This VR Sequencer,” he explained, “will capture a moment in your head. For the most part you recall only surface memories, those buried deeper are harder to find and visualise. Every facet of the moment captured by the VR Sequencer is frozen in your brain allowing you to move about and examine each feature in detail, even those seemingly discarded by the brain as irrelevant.”

Mercifully he removed the brain manipulator as the interrogation ended, and I was in the process of gently stroking my painful temple to the side of each eye just as Ty Lin entered the room with some drinks.

“Did you warn Steven that the VRS band has side effects,” she asked forcefully?

“What side effects?” I questioned anxiously. I threw Ledarn an accusing look.

“Merely headaches and slight nausea. They will pass quickly,” he replied disparagingly, as though only wimps would complain of such trivialities. A stony silence followed as Ty Lin too looked at Ledarn, narrowing her eyes in a flash of anger.

Ledarn having been outed coughed nervously. “I am quite satisfied with this morning’s endeavour and will allow you to rest for the afternoon,” he said hastily, as he gathered his equipment in one sweep. “I have many things to consider.” One final look in Ty Lin’s direction was enough to make him dodge the imaginary daggers hurled in his direction as he scurried off down the corridor.

Later that evening mum phoned again, sounding much chirpier. We spoke for ten minutes or so as she ran through a long list of well-wishers from school mates, neighbours, and relatives - including all three aunties. My spirits had lifted considerably as I replaced the telephone after the customary exchanges of goodbye.

Looking up I noticed Ty Lin standing in the doorway, she flashed her big brown eyes at me accompanied by a knowing smile.

“Okay, you were right,” I said playfully. “But you can take your *I told you so* look into the kitchen and make some sandwiches. In fact, I will come with you,” I said rising.

“Many people care about your welfare,” Ty Lin commented, as she prepared a light supper. Tonight’s gourmet special consisted of bowls of rice, peppers and a creamy sauce, a block of cheddar cheese with biscuits, and of course...coffee.

Sheepishly Ledarn joined us as we gathered around the table to eat; no mention was made of his earlier misdemeanour. He wore a deep blue track suit and as he sat down it was obvious that he was sweating, and a little out of breath.

“Two hundred and fifty Kilos,” he said, turning to Ty Lin. She looked impressed and nodded in acknowledgement.

“That is near your best recorded lift.”

Ledarn must have noticed my puzzled look because he turned to me. “Weights...I used to be an accomplished weightlifter. It’s good for the upper body particularly the vascular system,” he added enthusiastically.

“*Spock the weightlifter*,” I thought with a chuckle. Unfortunately, Ledarn took my mirth as a slight on his manly abilities as the expression on his face hardened.

“You could do with a few sessions,” he said sternly. “You would barely manage two pull-ups with those weak arms.”

My smile quickly vanished. “I can manage at least three,” I replied indignantly. “And big muscles only indicate that you have spent too much time in the Gym. No one is impressed by them you know. They are overrated if you ask me.”

Ty Lin, swiftly intervened.

“I am sure Steven meant no disrespect,” she said quietly. Ledarn appeared to be disarmed by her radiant smile and cleared his throat as he changed the subject.

“Did I hear the communication device earlier?”

“It’s called a telephone,” I said, correcting him. “Well, actually the end that my mother used is a telephone. Anyhow, my mother rang, she sounded much happier than yesterday,” I said cheerfully.

“And many relatives that inhabit Pontypool sent their regards,” added Ty Lin, with a stifled laugh. I smiled and continued to sip my coffee, wondering if anyone within a five-mile radius of Pontypool would remember me in a few weeks.

After a few minutes silence the ever-observant Ty Lin spoke softly, “Your mood has changed again, you seem subdued Steven.”

“I was just wondering if anyone will remember me if this turns out badly,” I replied gloomily.

Ledarn leaned over the table and touched my arm. “We only contemplate positive outcomes,” and with a wry grin added ... “Directorate policy.” I was shocked by this show of affection, behaviour normally associated with gentle, caring Ty Lin, not Ledarn the warrior.

“Ledarn,” I said pensively, “I am slightly concerned that you have divulged your most closely guarded secrets to me. You have spoken openly about the Directorate and revealed a considerable amount of detail about the history and development of TIM and time travel. Are you planning to erase these events from my memory like those that have undergone nano tagging?”

Ledarn was obviously taken aback by my question as he looked a little shocked. He shook his head slowly. “Simply put Steven, the answer is no. You must have realised that your nano implant is vastly superior to the simple tagging devices used to monitor individuals at risk. When you raise a question silently in your head, the nanite library you possess returns an answer that is inaudible to anyone except you. If you are approached by another who possesses nano technology with the same sophisticated level as yourself, you detect their presence as they penetrate an invisible ten-meter detection barrier. These are things we cannot change without undertaking a considerable and dangerous surgical procedure. For better or for worse, these abilities are permanent; you must choose how you will use them.”

A little later, Ty Lin and I had been playing a card game for an hour or so as bedtime approached, and she was well in the lead.

“I think I’m being conned by a hustler, your winning streak is unnatural,” I said grumpily. “Are you able to read cards?”

I stared into her eyes suspiciously, but there was no reaction. She looked back at me with a blank expression.

“Memorising the sequence,” I said, by way of an added explanation.

“I have a photographic memory, which is aided by my nano implants, is that the same as reading cards?” She looked at me with the innocence of a young child.

I laughed heartily. “If anyone other than you uttered those words, I would think I had been set up.” However, the reference to nanites enhancing her extraordinary memory abilities had aroused my interest and I furthered the conversation. “Will the nanites increase my mental abilities as well?” I asked, laying down what proved to be yet another losing hand.

“Many of your abilities will develop further, including your mental capacity; the difference will be quite noticeable after your nano implants have settled and begin to develop,” she said. I gave quiet thought to the advantages offered by an increase in my mental abilities as we finished the final hand, Ty Lin having won handsomely.

While we tidied the table, removing a few glasses and placing the cards back into their holder, I asked Ty Lin to clarify a paradox that had been nagging at the back of my mind.

“Ty Lin, is it possible for a *PhElr* to assassinate the principle inventor of time travel? If so, how could he travel back in time to accomplish his evil deed, as time travel would not yet have been discovered?”

“A temporal paradox creates a conflict of logic,” Ty Lin answered wisely. “As you have rightly questioned, can an assassin move through time if he has eliminated its designer? Your mental perception is obviously improving even as we speak.” I felt myself begin to blush as a result of her praise.

“However,” she continued, “your concern is unwarranted. As with many great discoveries and inventions, it is rarely the result of one person’s efforts.

Earlier this week I explained to you that a noted scientist was credited with the discovery of wormholes and time travel. I should have elaborated and explained that the theory of time travel using wormholes had been generally accepted three hundred years earlier, beginning in fact in this century. During the intervening years, many other scientists and quantum physicists had laid the groundwork that eventually led to the breakthrough. However, if that scientist had been eliminated, erased from existence, someone else would have reached the same conclusions - perhaps a little later and possibly in a different research sector – but everyone adds their modest contribution to the whole.

The same can be said of the development of the materials necessary for time travel. The extremely sophisticated armband technology and nano implants are the work of a small group of highly specialised scientists who work and live-in top-secret facilities. They will never receive the accolades that their contribution so richly deserves, but it is vital that they remain nameless to preserve their family line, free of threat or manipulation.

But the point you raise has further implications. The detection systems are not infallible, we are aware that it is practically impossible to account for every individual throughout history. And there exists the potential that a seemingly minor change in the timeline could have serious consequences at a different point in time. Though the Directorate has recruited the top minds in our society, and vast resources are showered on its research, we are no nearer to developing a facility that is truly impervious to changes in the timeline, if you like, the capability to operate outside of time. Consequently, a uniquely dedicated team of historians have been placed in critical points in each century. They have an array of 25th-century technology at their disposal and live remotely on the fringes of society to minimise timeline contamination. Above all, they have been chosen for their special abilities, photographic memories and expert knowledge of the history of their assigned country and period. The teams are always husband and wife who remain childless while they live in the assigned time. These teams have been responsible for recognising small anomalies in their assigned era that TIM had failed to detect. Many of which were incidents with temporal artefact thieves, but occasionally they have recognised more subtle attempts to manipulate history. They provide the most reliable fail-safe system available currently.

As I lay in bed that night, Ledarn’s cryptic response to my fear of memory manipulation echoed inside my head. I was stuck with the mental library – a good thing. I was also stuck with the proximity alert – another good thing. However, unless I’ve lost my onions, Ledarn would surely confiscate the armband – a bad thing. It seems that I am stuck with these abilities, but no apparent way to use them. I was more confused than ever.

CHAPTER 5

TIME-LINE PROTECTORS

By the beginning of the fourth day I was growing restless. The questioning sessions had stopped. Ledarn and Ty Lin seemed satisfied with my recollection of events and while one of them was always nearby - ever vigilant, we engaged in polite conversation as we waited. It was perhaps no surprise that with the passage of time I had grown increasingly homesick, which is strange and quite unexpected. I had never thought that I would miss the simple mundane things like raiding the fridge or playing my out of tune upright piano. Last year on an impulse I applied a coat of white gloss. I also modified it by placing drawing pins on the hammer heads to reproduce the honky-tonk Country and Western sound. I missed watching British TV: Dr Who on a Saturday, Benny Hill on a Wednesday, Monty Python, and Pans People on a Friday. Though I would vigorously deny it with my dying breath, I was even beginning to miss squabbling with David. But what I didn't relish was the thought of going home and waiting for someone to take a shot at me, continually on the alert. Mostly though; it was the thought of being defenceless without the armband that sent a shiver down my spine.

Shortly after breakfast, I reminded Ty Lin of her promise to show me the observatory. I was curious to view the surrounding area in all its beauty, and to be honest I needed something to occupy my time.

It wasn't until mid-morning that she called by to accompany me to the observatory. At the time I was engaged in a mental challenge with a mobile television visor. I had been introduced to the ocular lens the previous evening when I caught Ledarn wearing a peculiar looking black visor in the lounge, but this was no ordinary eyepiece. Approximately four inches in height it followed the curve of his face. The visor had a small bridge that rested on his nose and a small arm protruding from both ends of the visor that fitted around each ear. What was truly remarkable with this ingenious piece of technology wasn't the sound system built into each arm; rather it was the way the visor reacted to sudden head movement. The reason it was termed a *mobile visor* was the ability of the material to turn opaque when it sensed motion, indicating that the wearer was about to move. This safety feature allowed the visor to restore the dark surface colour after the wearer remained motionless for a few seconds or after a mental command to resume transmission was issued. While Ledarn's nanite enhanced mental abilities allowed full control of the mobile visor, my fledgeling abilities were not as reliable. After deliberately moving my head to disable the transmission, I had to concentrate fully for the mental instruction to be processed, which was hit and miss. I also stretched the boundaries of my mental capabilities by commanding the visor to transmit in a different language each time with some strange results. I was watching a Chinese programme spoken in Italian when Ty Lyn arrived to escort me to the observatory.

"If you enjoyed the use of the mobile visor," she commented, as she led me down a corridor to a staircase that appeared to ascend to the heavens, "you will find the observatory most exhilarating."

A lung-bursting five minutes later we entered a large round room decked from floor to ceiling with glass windows reminiscent of an airport control tower. Light flooded into the room from all angles causing me to shield my eyes momentarily. It was as if we were stood on the peak of Ergwartha with a three hundred sixty-degree panoramic view of the surrounding mountains.

Noting my discomfort, Ty Lin came to my aid. "Computer, reduce the ambient light by thirty per cent." Immediately the room darkened allowing my eyes to relax as the glare

died away. The view was extraordinary, and the clarity of the images was crystal clear. I could almost reach out and touch the mountains in front of me; it was as if I was floating on thermal air currents like a Nepalese Gorak.

“Ty Lin, this is magnificent,” I said in awe. “I swear I can see the tiniest detail on the mountain peak in front of me as though I am hovering six inches above it.”

Ty Lin smiled at my enthusiastic observation. “The functionality of Eagle Eye 7 is truly remarkable. The optical magnification can pierce down to the sub-atomic level if necessary. It is highly manoeuvrable and is great fun to fly, particularly in this terrain. It has stealth capability, is always cloaked, and can hover silently year upon year.”

“Okay, you’ve convinced me,” I said eagerly. “How do I control it?”

Ty Lin moved to a console in the centre of the room and pressed a couple of areas on a touch screen. She picked up a small portable unit about the size of a large matchbox and handed it to me.

“All Eagle Eye units can be controlled by using these devices, it will respond to your hand movement. Move your hand to the right, and EE7 will bank to the right. Raise your hand, and EE7 will ascend. Move the slider control on the side of the unit forward with your thumb, and EE7 will accelerate. Move the slider down, and EE7 will slow. Please take care not to damage it and avoid hitting any climbers,” she said, matter-of-fact, as though avoiding a fatal collision on a Himalayan peak with mountaineers was normal.

“They insist on placing themselves in perilous situations and have many external conditions to contend with, we wouldn’t want to add to their woes with a wayward EE unit. If you are ready, I will disable automatic navigation and turn manual control of the unit over to you?”

As I nodded Ty Lin turned back to the console and pressed another area of the screen, instantly EE7 started to flutter with the slightest variation of my hand. At that same moment, I could hear the fierce wind growling and could feel the effects of the unit trying to resist the strong winds as the vibrations fed back through the unit.

“The sound effects are so realistic, but the controls are hypersensitive,” I said, hardly daring to move my arm.

“Use the slider to accelerate. EE7 is much easier to control when it is in flight,” advised Ty Lin.

I pressed the slider forward gently and was delighted to feel the unit starting to accelerate forward, making control much easier. Banks of green numbers were suddenly displayed near the bottom of the viewing screens; they changed wildly as the unit darted to the left and then to the right as I swung my arm back and forth.

“The numbers that you see are tracking coordinates: altitude, speed and distance between the unit and this base,” Ty Lin explained, noting the puzzled look on my face. “Other numbers are unit performance indicators, power levels, magnification settings, shield statistics and assorted readout data.”

A low-level audible alarm sounded, and a small bank of numbers changed colour. “EE7 has detected the heat signatures of two climbers, indicated by the red numbers; the data places them three kilometres away on the ridge of the third mountain to our left. When your arm informs you that it is time to rest, press the button at the top of the hand device. The computer will resume control of EE7, and it will return it to Ergwartha.”

At some point, Ty Lin must have left the room, though I remained unaware due to the intense concentration and utter delight of navigating EE7 around rock faces at break-neck speed. I plunged into crevices like a supersonic jet and back out again, banking to the left and then to the right. I pressed the slider to the limit with my thumb and watched the numbers quickly increase. Finally, they settled at three hundred - which I took to mean

miles per hour - as we swooped down over the face of a glacier, and then with the raising of my arm, accelerated skyward.

I hovered near the coordinates of the climbers, watching them from a distance for many minutes. "Computer, increase the magnification by a factor of ten," I instructed commandingly. Instantly the unit focussed on the back of a climber, I could make out the letters on the thin orange harness strap around his waist. "Computer, increase magnification by a factor of five," I instructed. Again, the effect was instantaneous, though I was puzzled by the image presented before me. I was staring at a mat of thick intertwined ropes; the only clue was the rich orange colour of each thick strand. "Plothead," I muttered out loud, as I realised I was looking at his harness. The magnification on this unit was truly stunning, I could have been examining the harness under a microscope – such was the clarity of each strand. At length I tired of zooming into the world of sub-particle examination; I reset the unit and continued clowning around the peaks of the surrounding mountains.

Eventually, I decided to call it a day. Recalling Ty Lin's instructions, I pressed the button at the top of the hand device causing the console to emit two short beeps. At that point, I lost all control over EE7 and watched it rather sedately navigate its way back towards Ergwartha.

As I retraced my steps through the corridors, I wondered how many times an EE unit had observed my movements back home. At that moment all thoughts of privacy or concealment evaporated. George Orwell was wrong; Big Brother had been with us for thousands of years.

That afternoon I found myself dwelling on the problems I would experience without the armband, no medium-range detector and no energy shield - which could be a major headache if O'Hare decided to continue his mindless conflict. I shuddered at the thought of the absence of the cloaking device, it had certainly provided a great deal of amusement, but in moments of danger it could create confusion and provide a means of escape. However, the combined functions of the armbands major features paled in comparison to time travel. I had used it just the once to buy the suit and accessories for the autumn dance. My protectors no doubt would say that I had abused that function, I guess it's a matter of perspective. But regardless, used or abused, it was an awesome feature that I would prefer made available in my fight for survival. I felt that in some respects I had earned the right to benefit from the protective powers of the armband. I had reacted discreetly in burying Edvan, and I had kept the existence of the armband and its functions secret. I had applied a considerable amount of initiative in discovering the true purpose of the disk. And hadn't I shown commendable ingenuity in creating the duplicate that I handed to Jedzeel?

As I lounged in a comfy reclining chair staring out at countryside scene that belonged in Wiltshire - not the thin atmospheric, icebound landscape of Ergwartha - I turned the positive and negative arguments over in my mind slowly. Evidently, research had concluded that continuous time travel could prove to be a health hazard, and the possibility of changing past events was terrifying. But time travel was a crucial part of maintaining the time-line, to correct and re-set events altered by a lawless minority. Slowly, the embryo of a solution was beginning to form in my mind.

Many of the problems inherent with time travel could be minimised or even eliminated by using local time-line protectors – me, and possibly others like me, operating in our own lifetime. Unlike my 25th-century counterparts, I would not be burdened with the knowledge that the smallest action could erase whole future generations, because I am not displaced in time, tip-toeing through a page in history. I am living through current events, where I belong. Presumably, the actions that I might take in response to a given situation

are the actions that I would have taken with or without the knowledge of a simmering time war being fought throughout the history of mankind. Only if security teams from the future failed to uphold their most sacred directive, that of revealing the outcome of current operations, would this plan be jeopardised.

A surge of excitement swept over me as I considered the part I could play on the historical stage. Edison may have invented electricity, Newton and Einstein gravity and relativity, but their combined contributions could be dwarfed by the inception of local time-line protectors, formed as the result of Steve Morris's creative processes.

Later that evening, I summoned Ledarn and Ty Lin to the lounge area where I waited for them to settle before clearing my throat and launching nervously into my proposal for local time-line protectors. Ten minutes later as I wound up my closing argument, I studied their faces, anxious for a sign of acknowledgement, a nod or a smile, even a raised eyebrow. There was a period of silence, both deep in thought as they considered my plan.

Ledarn was the first to speak. "To clarify, your suggestion is that you are trained to investigate and correct temporal anomalies within this time frame?" I nodded in agreement.

"Do you think the Directorate will agree if you recommend it?" I asked, eager for approval.

Ledarn paused, his face impassive. "I cannot make that decision, only the Directorate Council can approve or reject all temporal matters. However, I would be astonished if they accepted your proposal. It is unthinkable that a forefather be allowed to remain in possession of such a powerful range of functions," Ledarn said solemnly, shaking his head.

My heart sank in disappointment, and I struggled to gather my thoughts, hurt that my proposal was dismissed so lightly.

"Ledarn," I said soberly, "the last few weeks have clearly shown me that there are far greater matters involved here than my personal wishes and satisfaction. Unknowingly I have put my head above the parapet and interfered with a powerful organisation that is determined to manipulate time and destroy countless lives and dynasties for their personal gain. I am not a heroic figure, nor am I chasing an immortal place in the annals of history, but neither will I cower nor hide. Though I hope that the rest of my life is uneventful, I am tired of being bullied; whether by O'Hare or a fanatical mercenary. If I am going to die, I want my death to have some meaning."

I felt greatly let down by Ledarn's response, it wasn't by choice that I was on death row. But it appeared that I was a minor irritation in their cosmic time war. It seemed a case of *well-done Steve...good work, return the armband and fade into history.*

That evening Ledarn approached me in the dining room. "Steven, the Directorate Council has considered your suggestion and has endorsed my earlier assessment. We all understand and admire your very noble desire to help in the struggle to maintain the time-line, but to allow you the continued use our technology is as illogical as it would be for you to permit a person in Tudor times the possession of an automatic weapon." Reluctantly I submitted to the logic of his argument, but I still felt deeply disappointed that my offer of help had been rebuffed.

"What of the armband?"

"You will be permitted to wear the armband for the duration of the surveillance; however, you will be required to return it to the security detachment when they consider the threat to your life diminished. Ty Lin has been instructed to disable the time travel function, but the others will still be available to you as a precautionary measure."

Upon my arrival on Ergwartha, Ty Lin had confiscated my armband for examination. However, during our discussions on the second day of my confinement, she became

excited when I explained how Edvan had deactivated the dead time travellers cloaking device with the touch of a button on the device now in her possession.

During the remainder of the week, she stripped the armband, meticulously documenting the available functions before despatching the results to Directorate Head Quarters. At various intervals she would discuss her findings with Ledarn, bubbling with enthusiasm and excitement as she uncovered differences between standard Directorate equipment, and what was clearly a replicated model. Some of the differences were quite noticeable; and it was one of these refinements that had caught her attention.

Just before bedtime on my fourth day on Ergwartha Ty Lin cornered me and Ledarn in the rest area where she began to describe in scientific detail how the energy shield worked.

“It is completely different to the standard Kleinmann model as it continually ionises the body with positive ions. These, in turn, attract the negative particles produced by the Maglok particle emitter and follow the contour of the body more closely than the linked particle Takishi model.”

Ledarn’s eyes had a slightly glazed look as he muttered, “Good, well done.” It was apparent that Ty Lin was the science technician, and Ledarn - the security expert - appeared to have little appetite for the depth of scientific knowledge that so obviously excited his colleague. “Relay your findings to the Directorate,” he added, with a distinct lack of interest, moving restlessly around the sofa like a trapped rabbit.

Ledarn took the opportunity to escape when a quiet alarm was triggered in the communications room. He appeared after a few seconds. “It is your mother,” he said quietly.

As he handed me the headset, he issued a reminder, “Do not forget the details of the imaginary accident, and you can tell her that your release is imminent.”

“Mum,” I said loudly into the mouthpiece, “how are you?” Though my question was rhetorical mum proceeded to rattle off details of her day and that of many others before I managed to interrupt her flow.

“I think I might be out of here in a few days, I really miss you ... and David,” I added grudgingly. We carried on with our small talk for five minutes or more before Ledarn gestured for me to wind up the conversation. “I’d better let you go Mum, it must be costing you a fortune to speak to me, and I know it’s a long walk to the phone box on Beeches Road.”

Not easily fobbed off, Mum told me that the call was free, courtesy of the specialist unit, and that she enjoyed the walk as it provided her the opportunity to calm herself before speaking to me. Likewise, the walk home allowed her to gather her composure. We said goodbye to each other several times before the dialling tone interrupted us.

“You will see her in a few days,” said Ty Lin, ever the comforter. “Have a pleasant night’s rest. I will tell Ledarn that you have retired to your bedroom.” She scanned the room quickly, “how strange, he seems to have disappeared.”

CHAPTER 6

TOO TECHNICAL FOR ME

The fifth morning of my incarceration passed quietly until just before dinner. As I entered the lounge, Ty Lin was sat at a table engrossed in the dismantling of a small electronic unit.

“This was the extremely clever little component that deactivated the cloaking device of the dead time traveller, and its small companions that deactivates energy shields,” she said without looking up. “I am about to send the schematics to the Directorate.”

Finally, she lifted her head from her work and looked in my direction. “Oh, Steven,” she said in surprise, “I thought I was talking to Ledarn.” Her face broke into a large beaming smile.

Focussing on the part as I walked over to the table I replied. “You look pleased with yourself and it sounds interesting, but can you copy it?” I picked up the electronic unit and examined it, the largest part of the unit was made of a blue shimmering crystal-like substance and had a couple of small cube shaped attachments. “I expected to see circuitry and wires,” I commented, surprised at its mysterious yet elegant composition.

“This unit creates and amplifies a strong signal, which is transmitted over a short distance to deactivate a cloaking device,” Ty Lin replied excitedly. “It is also modulates through a range of frequencies so that it is effective with most models. However, the power output also creates tremendous heat which the technology of your time period would be unable to withstand,” she added.

Alert... alert... screamed a voice in my head. *Physics lesson in progress.* I nodded in agreement, my eyes glazing over as had Ledarn’s the previous night.

She carried on without let-up. “It works by fooling the target cloaking device into thinking it is overloading, which then automatically deactivates. This is a safety feature built into all such technology,” she continued.

Falling asleep now, I thought as she droned on.

“Excellent,” I shouted suddenly, interrupting her in mid-stream. I walked to the door quickly. “Not hungry anymore,” I mumbled, as I left the room. *No wonder Ledarn is so serious; I thought to myself, she bores him to death with an avalanche of technical information.*

I almost knocked Ledarn over who was stood in the corridor near the doorway; he had evidently monitored the conversation. “It is a mistake to ask Ty Lin a technical question,” he said, with a chuckle. “Just nod and give a general affirmation. No one’s brain is big enough to begin to understand her explanations,” he shouted after me as I walked along the corridor and into my bedroom.

That evening I again practiced in the simulator where I gave a respectable account of my newly gained flying abilities. I had progressed to aerial acrobatics, chasing and being chased. Firing and being fired upon. During a particularly tricky manoeuvre I became aware that Ledarn was stood behind me assessing my strategy and aerial abilities.

“If you had risen into the fierce air current and inverted your turn, you would have positioned yourself behind him and used the element of surprise,” he counselled. “However, your progress is impressive.”

Just before I retired for the night Ty Lin and Ledarn joined me in the meeting room to outline the surveillance operation for the next four weeks. “Enjoy a good night’s rest,” Ty Lin advised me ten minutes later as the meeting ended. “Tomorrow we will discuss surveillance and evasion techniques in depth.”

SURVIVAL TEST

A man was being pursued by a posse of glamorous scantily dressed women. He zig-zagged to the left, and then zig-zagged to the right, to escape their amorous desires. A familiar zany saxophone melody accompanied his hilarious antics which had now increased to ridiculous speed, but not fast enough to evade the growing number of scantily-clad female participants.

Suddenly, the music was replaced with a piercing high pitch shrieking, and the image melted into a pulsating blob of goeey mud as my dream evaporated.

Immobilised by the intense shrieking, I fell out of bed. Overcome with panic I groped frantically in the dark for a light switch, my heart was trying to burst out of my chest and my brain was throbbing in unison with the alternating blast of what was obviously some type of alarm. "Computer," I screamed at the top of my voice, "lights..., lights..., turn the damn lights on." I couldn't understand why I was still shrouded in darkness. The computer-generated environment normally maintained a soft glow throughout the night and had provided an instant response to voice commands on each occasion I had requested a different backdrop before falling asleep.

With both hands clasped tightly to my ears I was able to filter out the more debilitating part of the alarm while trying to clear my thoughts. If the alarm was indeed genuine, perhaps the power needed to control the sleeping environment was badly needed elsewhere – like maintaining life control systems, critical when located at twenty thousand.

Now fully alert, my breathing had become easier and my heart rate had dropped as I controlled the initial panic, but I had to do something about the noise which was still preventing me from thinking clearly. Sitting with my back to the wall, hands still clasped tightly to my ears, it became obvious that the speaker broadcasting the alarm was located somewhere above me, to the left of the bedroom door. My knee was resting against the small bedside cabinet next to my bed. Previously, on the two occasions, I had opened the top drawer and a small faint light had activated to illuminate the contents. I surmised that it was a battery-operated light due to the fluctuation while the draw was open; I prayed that my assumption was accurate as I groped in the dark to open it.

Upon yanking the drawer open, a faint light bathed the immediate area around the bed, including a tubular chair to my right. Standing up I scanned the wall before me looking for the sound system so that I could kill it and restore my sanity. The extremely faint beam of light was beginning to expire when I caught sight of a small panel set into the wall behind which the speaker surely resided. I had seconds before being plunged into darkness once more, which would leave me at the mercy of the deafening alarm that threatened to fry my brain.

Frantically I clawed at the panel with my fingernails, but to no avail, there was no obvious release catch and I covered my ears again to limit the shrieking alarm that was so effectively paralysing my higher brain function. As a last resort, I picked up the tubular chair and smashed it against the panel twice, with little visible effect. The third blow, however, splintered the panel and I caught sight of wires leading to what might be a speaker. As I thrust my hand into the cavity and grasped the wires with both hands, the light failed, and I could see nothing in the black gloom. *Here goes nothing*, I thought, as I yanked with all my strength.

Once or twice a month, Tom Maxwell, Dan Platt, Dave Ryder and I, although underage, bestow our patronage on The Kensington, a nightclub off Corporation Road in Newport. I might be stretching the definition of the word nightclub when I apply it to The Kensington. It's actually a couple of large Edwardian houses at the end of Kensington Place, but it does attract some excellent live bands.

However, the mix of a large crowd in a confined space, subjected to the raw electric power of amps turned to maximum, and speakers blasting in excess of one hundred and twenty decibels, anaesthetizes the brain. Particularly as the electric lead guitar, and throbbing bass, both compete with miked-up drum kits. On many occasions, we have shared a taxi home often in near silence, still in acoustic shock. Yet despite the near deafness, my brain could still hear a continuous high-pitch sound even hours later as I attempted to sleep. This was how I felt minutes after I had ripped the power leads from the speaker, the silence in my room was truly deafening as I stood motionless in the dark unable to see my hand in front of my eyes.

Somewhere in another part of the building I could faintly hear the alarm still sounding. "Hello," I shouted hoarsely, my croaking voice breaking up due to the intensity of my scream for lights moments earlier. "Ty Lin, Ledarn, can you hear me?" There was no response; just an eerie silence filled the room. The lack of response came as no surprise; no one could have slept through the shrieking alarm, and whatever the emergency, I was sure that my protectors were fully occupied right now. Feeling along the wall I eventually found the door and opened it hoping to see a light source in the corridor or one of the adjoining rooms. To my horror, I was met with a dense cloud of hot choking smoke.

At the beginning of the new school year in August, Tom and I had volunteered to enrol in the Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Level Award class. This was in part because some of the elements, such as fire awareness, provided the opportunity to attend four Wednesday afternoon sessions at the fire station in New Inn. On a personal note, it was also due to my poor showing in the swimming pool three months earlier.

Annoyingly, twelve of my classmates were also attracted to the thought of Wednesday afternoon liberation, and though the sessions partially resembled a school class lesson, two principle differences made it worthwhile.

First, Fire Officer Evans, the poor soul given the unenviable task of educating us, treated the fourteen of us like adults. He used our first names, he allowed us to smoke, and he held our attention.

Second, we got to try out a real fire hose, ride in a big shiny red fire engine, and slide down the pole in the Fire Station tower.

Undoubtedly, the most useful topic covered during the month we visited the fire station was the fight for survival in smoke-filled rooms. "Smoke rises because it is less dense than air; this, in turn, forces the oxygen in a room downwards. That is why you should always crawl rather than try to walk through a smoke-filled room," Fire Officer Evans had drummed into us during the second Wednesday session.

Gratefully remembering his words, I fell to my knees and crawled along the corridor in the direction of the kitchen. Even at floor level, the air was hot and thin causing me to cough after each second or third lungful. As I groped along the wall, I finally reached the end of the corridor which opened out into the kitchen area. Miraculously I could see a row of small red lights near ground level on the wall to my left causing a swell of excitement to grow in me. Acting as a beacon, the red lights drew me towards them as they emitted the only light in this mountain that I was aware of. Upon reaching them I counted four red lights and one inactive light, five in all. Below each light was a small button. The layout looked familiarly, like one of the control panels at the fire station, each button performing a reset function. *Can it be that simple?* I thought euphorically to myself. I felt an overwhelming desire to press a button, any button that might restore lights and silence the distant alarm system.

I pushed the first button and tensed as I awaited the consequences.

Hallelujah! The light turned to green, and then I felt a strong rush of cool air as the smoke was vented out of the kitchen and surrounding area, being replaced with breathable

oxygen. Air had never smelled and tasted so good. I closed my eyes and rolled onto my back where I lay for a few moments breathing deeply until my head began to clear, it was only then that I began to realise how foggy my perception had become.

Remembering the other buttons, I rolled onto my stomach and pressed the second one. It also turned green, and instantly the kitchen was bathed in light. I cannot describe the joy and relief that swept over me as I looked around the kitchen and out into the corridor seeing things almost for the first time. I hadn't realised, for instance, that a small junction box was located just outside the kitchen entrance, and I was also struck by the clarity of the emerald green tiles that covered the kitchen floor.

Turning again to the reset panel, I pressed the third button. Again, the light above it turned green. Mercifully the alarm that was still faintly active somewhere in the hangar or adjoining building suddenly stopped.

"Thank God," I gasped.

Without warning, the figures of Ty Lin and Ledarn materialised before me as they deactivated their cloaking devices. So startled was I at their sudden appearance that Ty Lin reliably informed later in the day I visibly recoiled at least three inches off the ground before staggering to my feet.

"Aggh...where the hell have you two been? You just frightened the pants off me," I shouted at them in surprise, as I tried to regain my composure. "And why are you both wearing face masks?" I asked curiously. Both wore a grin as they removed what looked like oxygen masks.

"You performed admirably Steven," Ledarn said, slapping me on the back. "Even though you damaged your bedroom wall," he added, as he bent down to press the button located beneath the remaining red light. The red light changed to green, as had the three lights I activated previously. Suddenly green lights began appearing around the kitchen as machinery burst into life.

"And I would have pressed that button too if you two hadn't given me a coronary," I said angrily. "Anyhow, what was the emergency? I was trapped in my room with no light and had to smash a wall panel..." I stopped in mid-sentence. "What do you mean that I performed well? And how did you know about the wall panel?" I asked suspiciously. Ledarn picked up what looked like a small plastic device with a glass screen from the table; it was approximately six inches square, and it lit up as he started to press various parts of the screen with a small pointer stick.

"The exercise that you terminated by restoring lights and power was designed to test your reaction to extreme circumstances. Ty Lin and I monitored your response, and I am now entering the data into this recording device. I was particularly impressed with your decision making and perception."

I was staggered by this revelation, and my jaw duly dropped in amazement. It had all been a test; I had nearly choked to death and may yet develop hearing problems after being subjected to an alarm that must have been twice as loud as Concorde on take-off.

"Are you aware that I was frightened senseless and almost asphyxiated in the corridor?" I said furiously. "Not to mention the alarm from hell," I added angrily as an afterthought. "Whose side are you on anyway?"

Ledarn looked slightly surprised at my outburst. "Insulting me will accomplish nothing Steven, how else could we assess your capabilities under pressure?"

"Well, maybe advance notice that you were planning a drill would have been appropriate," I snarled, "I nearly died in there."

Ty Lin gave an audible snigger, obviously amused by my exaggerated claims.

"At no time was your life in danger Steven," she said softly. "In fact, we were close by throughout the exercise, at any given moment we could have aborted the assessment. This

entire wing was built as a simulator; it is constructed with fire retardant panels and equipped with strong extraction units. We can simulate percussion blasts, the burning of combustible materials, decompression emergencies, toxic gas attacks and other types of incidents.”

“I think you could have prepared me without compromising the simulation,” I said, still irritated by the whole episode. “So, what’s next, and what time is it anyway?”

Ledarn entered the last mark of the exercise and began to outline the day’s itinerary. “I wanted to begin this evaluation shortly after you retired for the night, but Ty Lin persuaded me to wait until daybreak.”

“Daybreak,” I echoed. “I haven’t seen the real sun rise or set for almost a week. It could be morning, noon or night, I wouldn’t have a clue.”

Ledarn nodded in agreement.

“Essentially, Steven, you are correct, it is true that this subterranean dwelling offers little evidence of day or night, but we have tried to mirror your normal rhythmical body cycle during your time on Ergwartha. Your rest period here has coincided with your standard rest period at home. Currently, it is early morning, around five o’clock. I would suggest that we all shower and dress and meet in the kitchen at six o’clock for breakfast,” Ledarn suggested, as he wrapped up the de-briefing.

At length, I showered and dried myself, shaved and brushed my teeth and then began to dress. As I stood in front of the mirror buttoning my shirt, I surveyed the damage that I had inflicted to the wall panel when gripped with panic earlier. The wall panel was badly splintered with eighteen inches of dangling wire torn from the speaker that was now plainly visible in the computer-aided daylight streaming into the room.

Briskly I walked down the corridor and into the kitchen. It might have been only six o’clock, but I was starving following my early morning wake up call. Once again, I was greeted by the heavenly smell of bacon, eggs and coffee. Was there no end to Ty Lin’s talents?

After eating, we moved into the lounge where Ledarn spent a large part of the morning talking about security procedures, assessment and decision making, and evasion tactics. Any notion that nanotechnology and advanced equipment would form the backbone of advanced warning measures was quickly dispelled.

“If you remove the technology, the contest between hunter and prey has not changed over millennia,” Ledarn began, as we made ourselves comfortable. “The techniques employed by the hunter and his objectives have always remained constant: isolate, ensnare, immobilise and execute.

The prey has only one goal – survival. Therefore, I intend to focus on proven techniques that will increase your survival rate, beginning with planning and observation. As ensnaring the prey is one of the objectives I mentioned, planning possible escape routes must become instinctive.

When you enter a shopping area, a building or a room, your life may depend on your observational skills. Such as noticing a concealed exit, a side entrance or even the location of windows that might offer an escape route.”

Ledarn continued in this vane until late morning and was summarising the final topic as Ty Lin called for a break.

“If cornered, take advantage of any opportunity that presents itself. If people are present, scream *fire* at the top of your voice and make your escape by becoming part of the crowd. Take your coat or hat off, change your appearance.”

“Hah,” I retorted, “that’s easy enough for you as you are a field agent, I’m not. It’s probably second nature to you.”

Ledarn nodded in agreement. “What you say is true. However, these techniques fall under the heading of general evasion, many leaders in our time undergo this training annually.”

Murmuring in tacit acknowledgement, I interjected before he could continue. “Well, surely the nanites and other forms of technology can be used in conjunction with these processes?” I saw little point in possessing cutting edge equipment if it couldn’t provide an advantage, however slim.

Ty Lin, who had been listening patiently, spoke.

“Technology is my area of expertise Steven, and you are correct, your nanites will alert you to the presence of others from our era if they are careless enough to stray within the perimeter it creates. However, when your opponent has technology like yours it effectively cancels the advantage that you hoped for and reduces your options. We will finish this session for lunch, but when we resume, I will focus on the science and most effective use of the nanites you possess.”

My head felt woolly after listening to Ledarn for almost four hours, and I appreciated the well-needed rest.

Following lunch, Ty Lin began her preamble. “The science behind time travel and many of the armband functions is truly impressive, and though I will touch on some background information, my main focus will be on the most effective use of your nanite technology.” At the mention of science, both Ledarn and I looked at each other. He tried to conceal a smirk as he excused himself from the session and left the room leaving me to the mercies of the science nut.

Ty Lin kicked off the session by describing the characteristics and function of the nanites lodged in my cortex. “You are aware of the invisible perimeter that the nanites create which acts as a warning system. You are also aware that they form a link with the functions on the armband, none of which would work in the absence of nanites at the base of your brain. They are necessary to interpret sounds and images and are a vital part of the security feature that permits the user to access armband functions.

There are now four different groups that have nanite implants, any one of them could trigger your perimeter warning.

Initially in our society, only a select few travelled to other periods to watch and document important historical events, maintaining an invisible presence. They possess nanites that had been surgically implanted with the same level of sophistication as yours.

Later, when the science was acquired and replicated by a clandestine organisation, artefacts began disappearing and then changes in the time-line began to occur. The lawless individuals engaged in this activity are the second group to possess the same sophisticated nanites.

This led to the Directorate placing historians in particular time periods to identify minor changes; these form the third group.

The fourth, and by far the deadliest group, are the *PhElr*. These, too, possess intelligent nanite technology.”

At the risk of being swamped with a stack of scientific data I interrupted Ty Lin’s flow. “How different are the nanites that you have termed *sophisticated*, from those used in the nano tagging?” I gritted my teeth in apprehension, waiting for the avalanche of technical detail I was sure would follow.

“We spoke earlier in the week about the less sophisticated form of nanites, those used in tagging. They are simply a refined type of tracking device whose co-ordinates are constantly monitored by the detection grid; they serve no other function. If a tagged individual stood beside you, the perimeter field your nanites generate would not be alerted.”

Ninety minutes later, Ty Lin eventually wound up the afternoon session on nanite technology, and we broke for afternoon tea.

Later in the evening Ty Lin and I gathered in the lounge for a final round of cards. Ledarn was busy making last-minute checks. "He has many matters to attend to before we depart in the morning," offered Ty Lin apologetically. "This is your final evening here on Ergwartha Steven, you must be eager to return home to your mother and brother."

"You can say that again," I said cheerfully. "I have really missed my mum and I can't wait to get back to school." Threat, or no threat, I was extremely homesick.

After ten hands of cards we called a halt and started to clear away. "You really have the luck of the Irish, Ty Lin, I won't miss our games you know, I'm tired of losing," I said, with a laugh. Bidding her goodnight, I walked down the corridor to my bedroom eager to spend my last night.

"I'm going home tomorrow," I shouted excitedly.

GOING HOME

There was an air of excitement the next morning as we prepared to leave Ergwartha. I was keen to get home and I detected that both Ledarn and Ty Lin would welcome the change of scenery. We boarded the same craft in which we had arrived, and I sat in the same seat feeling under the right arm for the button that activated the two restraining arms. The arms emerged from behind me, as before, and arched around my body slowly extending until they made firm contact with my chest. As Ledarn and Ty Lin ran through a pre-flight check, through the craft's front window I could see the cave's large circular granite block retract. We began to vibrate gently as the propulsion system kicked in, and then seconds later - like a cork out of a well shaken bottle - we shot out from the cave into the outside world.

As we sped skyward towards the earth's outer atmosphere, I realised that the crippling feelings of claustrophobia had failed to materialise. I assumed that Ty Lin had taken the precaution of releasing muscle relaxant into the rear of the craft. But I also wondered if the euphoria of returning home had overwhelmed me. Either way I hummed quietly until Ledarn announced our arrival in the parish of Trevethin.

"I have identified a secluded place to land our craft, one of the grazing fields at the top of your residential area appears suitable," said Ty Lin. "There you will be met by two colleagues, Sajna and Mark. They will stay with you for the next seven days; at which time we will replace them. We will alternate at weekly intervals."

A few minutes later we circled the field that Ty Lin had identified and then landed, finally coming to rest a couple of hundred yards from the nearest row of houses.

"Our vessel is cloaked," Ledarn reminded me, now in full security mode. "Please ensure your cloaking device is activated as you exit," he instructed a little pompously.

"Farewell Steven Morris. I will see you in seven days." I shook hands with Ledarn, and turned to do the same with Ty Lin, however, she moved forward and hugged me tightly.

"I too will see you in seven days," Ty Lin said softly in my right ear. "However, I have two devices to give you before you leave," she added. Much to my disappointment she released me. "Your nano enhanced cognitive abilities have not yet matured to the point that you can discern the faint outline generated by a cloaking device; this puts you at a considerable disadvantage. To that end I have a pair of optical detectors for your use. They are similar in construction to the optical frames worn in your era. These will allow you to see the almost imperceptible movements of a cloaked *PhElr* as he approaches. Guard them well. You will also be pleased to know that I have reassembled the armband

and all but the time travel functions are once again available,” she added, handing me the armband.

The door opened as the armband snapped into place around my forearm, and after placing the glasses into my pocket I activated the cloaking device before stepping out into the field. The stiff breeze and the unmistakable smell of crisp mountain air hit me. I stood rooted to the spot with my eyes closed, sucking in a large lungful of mountain air for all of ten seconds before the noise of boys shouting and laughing filtered through.

In an adjoining field, a dozen or so teenagers playing soccer could be heard, yelling at each other for the ball, shouting instructions and hurling expletives. I caught a glimpse of them as I walked alongside the dry-stone wall that paralleled the field in which they were battling for victory. I recognised a few of them, several lived near me in Elm Close, and one attended St Alban’s. Shifting my attention, I quickened my pace as I walked towards the road that runs near the edge of the fields with a renewed purpose – my journey home.

I approached the stone wall that bordered the road ahead when I heard a voice in my head. “Hello Steven, or do you prefer Steve?”

“Steve will do fine,” I replied quietly.

“We are just ahead of you and will do our best to remain inconspicuous during the surveillance period,” said a deep male voice.

“I am sure you will,” I replied dryly, “I bet I won’t even see you.” I chuckled to myself.

“That is our objective,” the voice replied humourlessly.

Another Spock, I thought to myself. *The 25th century has been overrun by Vulcan’s*. I crouched down behind the wall and disabled the cloaking device while looking around the field for signs of life. Rising, I climbed over the stone wall and crossed the road. I strode past Norman’s general grocery shop on my left, and started the long trek down Glen View Road, a link road that loops around the top of Trevethin. Underfoot the smooth pavement surface gave way occasionally to rough and uneven asphalt patches that the council had recently started to use as a substitute to replace broken slabs.

As the gradient increased so did the pace of my journey.

Mark continued to talk to me as we walked; at least I assumed it was Mark as the voice conversing with me had a deep resonance. However, someone once told me that you should never make assumptions. For all I know it may be normal for some females in the 25th century to have the vocal range of a baritone. We maintained a steady pace as we turned left onto Newman Road.

“Our vessel is located in the same field in which you landed,” crackled the voice inside my head. “It is situated at the outer edge of the field near the large group of trees and is, of course, cloaked. That is where we will spend some of our time and where we will sleep.”

Those words hardly filled me with confidence. “I thought you were here to protect me?” I said quietly, as we approached the bus stop just ahead where five people stood waiting. “At that distance, the only action you will be able to take is to confirm that I am dead,” I spat, in a low irritated tone.

“Steve, please be assured that the invisible detection grid will alert us instantly if anyone from our century appears in this sector, and we will be at your side very quickly, long before an intruder can locate you,” answered Sanja, speaking for the first time. “Perhaps Mark confused you when he said we would spend some of our time in the vessel. He was referring only to one of us; the other will always be very close. We rotate four-hourly to maintain vigilance, to minimise the time spent cloaked, and to alleviate boredom.”

I felt a little happier after Sajna had explained how their surveillance operation worked. I was also struck at how both Sajna and Ty Lin adopted the role of comforter when they recognised I was scared or agitated, and that Mark and Ledarn assumed the role of security adviser, taking control when the situation demanded it. There appeared to be a good balance and many facets to a Directorate team.

We reached the steps leading down to my home on Elm Close. “We are here,” I announced excitedly to my invisible companions as I bounded down the steps. I had barely inserted my key into the lock when the door was flung open and my mother launched herself at me, crushing me in a bear hug and kissing me profusely on each cheek, my head and nose.

“You’re home darling,” she declared breathlessly. “I missed you so much! Come on in and tell me all about it. Everyone has asked about you even Aunty Dot.” Drawing a quick breath, she proceeded to tell me about her week and how both she and David missed me. She also revealed that for seven days the cat wouldn’t move from my bed, a sign that I was in danger. Mum believes in signs and portents.

“Steve, we are stationed outside your front door and back door, we have performed an initial security check,” said the voice in my head, while mum, of course, continued to talk nineteen to the dozen.

“Sorry mum,” I interrupted, “I was daydreaming, David did what...?” She rattled on, asking questions without waiting for the answers until finally, she paused. Unexpectedly, she fired a question that temporarily caused me to freeze.

“So, tell me, where did that tanker full of toxic liquid dump its contents all over the road? Nobody seems to know where it happened; it wasn’t in the papers or the local radio.”

I took a deep breath before replying. “Well...,” however a female voice in my head interrupted.

“The tanker spilt a small quantity of liquid near the Clarence at the precise time you were walking past to catch your bus home after the dance,” prompted the voice helpfully. I repeated the explanation word for word as narrated by Sajna, adding...”I started to feel sick and my head was spinning as I breathed in the fumes. I walked away from the area as fast as I could, but I must have blacked out because the next thing I remember was waking up in the ambulance. I was taken to a special unit where I spent seven very boring days. Boy, I am so glad to be back home.”

Mum squeezed my hand affectionately. “I still don’t understand how it wasn’t in the South Wales Argus newspaper or on the television,” she said, shaking her head in puzzlement.

“I think it was a military vehicle mum, and you know how secretive they can be,” I said, thinking on my feet.

“Mmm,” mum agreed reluctantly. She had first-hand experience of the *need to know brigade*, as my father had served in the Army for many years.

“Mr Cropper called by the day before yesterday to ask how you were.

Everyone is extremely concerned,” she said touchingly.

Everyone except O’Hare, I thought cynically.

“Oh, and a girl named Christine called yesterday, she said to give you her love. She seemed like a nice girl. Do I detect a romance in the air?” mum asked, as she crossed the kitchen floor to light a hob on our old gas cooker, a sure sign that the brewing of a pot of tea was imminent.

“Its early days yet mum, I’ll tell you when it gets serious,” I said nonchalantly.

Again, mum threw a curveball at me. “How did you get home?” she asked curiously.

“Err...the administrator of the special unit arranged a lift. I was dropped off just up the road,” I answered truthfully. “And before you ask, I feel fine and there are no restrictions. So, no mollycoddling,” I added, in a forceful tone.

“Good,” replied mum in agreement. “It’s a little chilly and I need a bucket of coal.”

“Though I recall instructions about not lifting,” I blurted out, a pitiful look on my face. Mum laughed and nodded towards the door. “On your way,” she commanded mercilessly. “Get to it, fill the bucket and take it into the living room.” I was hoisted by my own petard.

Our house was built in the early 60s, an era that neglected to install central heating in its housing stock; consequently, we have only a coal fire in the living room. Any heating upstairs is produced with friction warmers, the vigorous rubbing of hands.

We did have a paraffin heater on the landing, but often we had to turn it off because the fumes were overpowering. Some winter mornings there would be frost on the inside of the bedroom windows. On occasions such as those, I would dive out of bed, grab my clothes, and jump back into bed as fast as possible to warm up while dressing under the covers.

Reluctantly I picked up the coal bucket and walked through the kitchen to the coal bunker, a small structure on the side of the house. Noisily I filled the bucket with coal before quietly opening the door that led into the garden. “Mark, Sajna?” I called quietly.

“I am here,” Sajna replied softly.

“Just checking,” I whispered. “I am a little uneasy about this situation because I can’t see you. Also, it’s a little awkward and potentially embarrassing to shout your names out for everyone to hear. People might think I am losing my marbles.”

“What are marbles?” asked Sajna curiously.

“It’s not important,” I replied, slightly irritated by her apparent lack of comprehension.

Perhaps sensing my frustration Sajna continued. “You must trust us Steven. We are trained security officers and are skilled in the art of defence. Both Mark and I are outside your house to guard you. Our detection systems will warn us if anyone approaches this sector. When we are satisfied that it is safe for just one of us to patrol this area, I will inform you, however, take this small transmitting device for communication.”

I felt a small object being placed into the palm of my left hand; Sajna released it as I raised it towards my face where it suddenly took form. It was disc-shaped and was no larger than a matchbox.

“Press the button to activate it but use it only in emergencies. Now enjoy a good night’s rest,” she said quietly.

CHAPTER 7

FIRST WEEKEND HOME

That night I tossed and turned waking almost every hour imagining that I had heard someone in the house as floorboards creaked and windows rattled. I lay still hardly daring to breathe, frantically trying to identify shadows in the bedroom. For a good five minutes I stared at the shifting silhouette of my dressing gown hanging on the door imagining it to be an assassin lurking in the dark. Summoning the courage, I climbed out of bed and edged towards it nervously. Even at six feet the swirling shadows and erratic movement of my dressing gown had me convinced that it was an intruder. On the count of three I lunged at it poking and prodding the material fiercely to confirm that it was just a lifeless garment.

As I returned to my bed, shafts of a bright fluorescent streetlight, broken up by the large willow tree in the garden, caused me to blink. “Idiot,” I muttered under my breath. The streetlight shining through the tree branches had created the shadows, and the strong breeze blowing into the room through the open window had caused the billowing. Some field agent I would make, fooled by shadows and the wind. Sinking down into the bed I stifled a yawn as I pulled the duvet over myself and closing my eyes I sank into a fitful sleep.

“Morning sleepy head,” said mum shaking me. “It’s eleven-thirty. Are you going to lie in your pit all day long?”

I grunted and turned over onto my right side. “I’ll get up tomorrow mum,” I replied groggily. “I’m cream-crackered and didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Refusing to take no for an answer mum seized hold of my duvet and yanked it off my body. “You’ll dehydrate if you sleep any longer. While you dress, I will make you a cup of tea and some toast.”

Muttering under my breath, I staggered out of bed after she left the room still a little wobbly. I wondered how my two guardians had fared and which one had remained on sentry duty during the night. As I stepped into my trousers, I felt an overwhelming urge to take a trip into town. I had been caged up on Ergwartha, not even able to feel the sunlight on my back for a whole week, and now I wanted to cast off the shackles of uncertainty. Grabbing a shirt, I headed for the bathroom.

Pontypool is bustling with shoppers on a Saturday morning; the indoor market is especially vibrant. The large fruit and vegetable stalls groan with produce: cabbages, cauliflowers, carrots and potatoes neatly arranged. The fruit: apples, oranges, pears and bananas - often an unripe green - likewise carefully arranged. The meat counters display prime cuts of beef, New Zealand lamb, chicken and pork. The cooked meats neatly arranged in small piles present the assistants the unenviable task of trying to separate the thin slices with unwieldy tongs. At the top of the market are the fish stalls. Complete with heads and tails and lying in a whole counter of ice cubes the fish are grouped by type. The smell of smoked haddock, plaice and cod fill your nostrils as you pass by heading towards the exit.

Mum reluctantly agreed to authorise my trip into town and kissed me on the cheek as I prepared to leave. With a final check that my wallet sat snugly in my back pocket, I left the house and walked up the steps and onto Newman Road. “Where are you going?” Sajna sked abruptly. There was a slight hint of panic in her voice.

“I am off to Pontypool to buy some clothes and have a coffee,” I replied cheerfully. “Did you have a good night’s rest or were you on duty,” I asked.

“Mark and I shared the surveillance,” she answered, a brusque edge to her voice. “Exposing yourself in a public place is not the most prudent course of action so soon after returning from the protection of Ergwartha,” she continued anxiously. “We have found the first few days to be the most vulnerable period as the subject is eager to normalise their life thinking the danger is past.”

“I bow to your vast experience; however, I am not a normal target. I have the armband technology and a pair of optical detectors. I am also wearing body armour under my jeans and jumper,” I countered. “And you did tell me that the detection grid alarm bells would sound with the arrival of anyone arriving in this period.” Fifteen-love, me thinks.

After a few seconds silence during which she had undoubtedly sought Mark’s approval, Sajna reluctantly agreed. “I suppose a journey to the shopping centre is acceptable, but only if you enable the energy shield upon my command and follow my instructions precisely, if required,” she said most reluctantly.

“What will Mark do while we are enjoying ourselves?” I asked, once again skilfully switching the topic of conversation.

“He will remain in the multi-functional vehicle, ready to affect our escape should the need arise,” she replied.

“Why is it called a multi-functional vehicle?” I asked inquisitively. “It’s hardly an exciting description, and it’s also a bit of a mouthful, you know...too long.”

My observations were ignored as Sajna reeled off its attributes like a corporate salesman. “It is truly a multi-functional craft capable of time travel, space flight, deep-sea emersion and has a formidable weapons array,” she responded.

As we walked through a deserted and eerily quiet Church Wood, Sajna disengaged her cloaking device. She was strikingly pretty with long blonde - almost white - wispy hair, piercing Nordic blue eyes and stood almost six feet tall. She too wore the Directorate dark blue body armour.

“You are without doubt the prettiest bodyguard I have ever had assigned to me,” I said, with a cheeky grin.

Sajna laughed heartedly. “Thank you for the compliment Steven, however, given the difference in our ages, I do not think it appropriate for you to imagine there could ever be a romantic aspect to our relationship,” she said matter of factly.

Yet another Spock, I thought to myself, *the Directorate is bulging with Spocks*. Though she did raise a valid argument. Mum would be speechless if I introduced Sajna as my marginally older belle, by...oh some 500 years. For the next few minutes I deliberated on the correct term for a group of Spocks:

A crowd of Spocks?

A herd of Spocks?

A gaggle of Spocks?

I finally settled for a cluster of Spocks. *Should be added to the next Oxford Dictionary update*, I thought amusingly.

At length, we approached the end of the wood and emerged onto Pen-y-garn hill. Sajna activated her cloaking device and followed me down what must be a one-in-four gradient. In fact, the effects of gravity gradually increased the speed of our descent towards the hill until we were almost running. Thankfully as we neared the bottom of the hill the road levelled out and we crossed the bridge that straddles the Afon Llwyd at a more leisurely pace.

Sajna was greatly impressed with the indoor market. “We have nothing similar to this in our time, purchasing food items seems quite interactive,” said the voice in my head.

Back to thought transfer, I thought quietly to myself, *shame I cannot reciprocate – yet*. Sajna though, was less enthusiastic about Sidolli’s. “The smoke in here stings my lungs,

and it smells of greasy carbohydrates,” she said, evidently repulsed. “I will wait for you outside. Remain vigilant.”

I wandered down the aisle of tables looking for a friendly face, but it was filled with Saturday shoppers. I felt a twinge of guilt at leaving Sajna outside, though I did tell her this is a fish and chip bar as well as a café, what did she expect? And then I remembered her reaction to Pontypool’s indoor market. It occurred to me that life in the 25th century must be quite sanitary.

Two cups of coffee and a handful of jukebox selections later I emerged into the street refreshed by the caffeine and becalmed by the normally tedious and unremarkable interaction with those around me. On our way home Sajna again de-cloaked as we ambled through Church Wood. I stopped at the spot where I had encountered Edvan and briefly enacted the scene, vividly recalling his dying words. I could picture his face as I described his death and unceremonious burial. “I don’t know who he really was, but he died a long way from home,” I commented sadly, as we commenced our journey up the field towards the church.

At Sajna’s insistence, I led her into the cemetery where only two and a half weeks previously Jedzeel had mysteriously hidden the data disk. I was struck by the fleeting existence of the occupant of each grave we passed, encapsulated in the stark and dispassionate summary etched into each headstone. One drab headstone weathered by the elements merely read: Emily Webster, born 1782 – died 1809 of Consumption. Another crumbling headstone briefly stated: Matthew Moore, born 1714 – died 1750. Many graves, probably occupied by poorer members of the community, had no headstone or any indication as to the name of the person dwelling within. No one would know the accumulated joys and sorrows of the members of this little village now asleep in death, alive for just a moment in time. The words of Solomon, in the bible book of Ecclesiastes sprang to mind; after experiencing everything a man could, he described his existence as *a striving after the wind*. Recognising the headstone that Jedzeel had used as a hiding place, I stopped.

Recalling the strenuous effort required on my previous encounter, I enlisted the help of Sajna. “This is the drop point; could you please help me move the headstone so that we can peer into the small chamber?” I asked politely. Nodding, Sajna stood in front of the headstone and pushed. I positioned myself behind it and heaved. Slowly the headstone moved inch by inch making a heavy dragging sound as it opened. Gradually the hidden compartment became visible. I instructed Sajna to cease, and we both stooped to peer into the small chamber below. To my great surprise, it was empty.

“It’s been removed,” I said, bewildered. “It makes no sense. Surely the disk should remain in that chamber for five hundred years, there or thereabouts, safely stored for Jedzeel to reclaim?”

Sajna was likewise puzzled and could offer no plausible explanation. We moved the headstone back into place and quickly left the cemetery. Neither of us spoke as we resumed our journey homeward, however, I chuckled as we strode along Newman Road. I would swap a year’s collection of Marvel comics to watch his reaction as he attempted to locate Roy Rogers. Address...Home on the range.

MONDAY AND SCHOOL

The remainder of the weekend passed quickly. On Sunday afternoon I made my way to the field at the top of Trevethin and spent a couple of hours in the *fun* vehicle, the name I had assigned it after a mind numbing thirty seconds deliberation. I had toyed with MFV and other equally tedious acronyms but had settled for *fun* vehicle which was easier to remember. There was no requirement to be cloaked inside the vehicle, Sanja was resting

on a recliner near the front of the cabin wearing short-sleeved blouse and silk trousers popular with Chinese ladies in the 60's. Her hair loosely cascaded over both shoulders.

"You are looking gorgeous today Sajna," I said cheekily, as I entered the cabin.

"It is good to see you also, Steven," she said, somewhat formally. On the other side of the cabin sat Mark who was pouring over a map.

"Hello. Mark I assume," I said, offering my hand as he looked up at me.

"You are correct," he replied, but didn't offer his hand in return. "I am looking at the charted topography of this sector for possible danger points and locations that offer protection in case of an attack," he added seriously.

I estimated Mark's height to be in excess of six feet, and like Ledarn he was powerfully built. He had tightly curled black hair and a small black neatly trimmed moustache. Unlike Sajna, Mark was dressed in body armour. It occurred to me that this was standard procedure. Perhaps one of them was always required to be ready for action. Though it was also possible that Mark enjoyed dressing like a 50's greaser in leather or whatever material makes up the composition of body armour.

We made light conversation for the next few minutes. Sajna remarked at the stiff breeze during the night while Mark concerned himself with local details.

Like Ledarn and Ty Lin, Sajna and Mark shared only a few private details - how long they had served in the Directorate, their ages and so on. However, I was pretty sure that Sajna had been economical with the truth, as she looked considerably older than twenty-three, her stated age. My suspicions were confirmed when she revealed that she had served the Directorate for nine years.

"You joined when you were fourteen then Sajna?" I said, flashing her a wry smile.

She blushed and repeated the standard line. "We cannot tell you too much about ourselves, Steven."

Even Mark spluttered with laughter.

Obviously not amused at being rumbled, she sulked in the corner contributing only a nod or a brusque confirmation whenever an answer was required.

"Look guys, tomorrow I have to return to school," I said seriously, as the pleasantries were all but exhausted. "What routine are we going to follow?"

"One of us will remain in this vehicle monitoring communications and alarm systems, the other will accompany you and remain near at all times," replied Mark impassively. His head was still buried in a pile of maps and other official looking documents he was reviewing.

I had expected that line of argument. During the last few weeks, I had acquired a shadow that stuck to me like glue, never more than a few yards away.

"That's what I want to talk to you about. Have either of you tried to walk through a corridor swarming with students who are rushing and barging past anyone in their path? People are moving in all directions. It's impossible to guess which route they will take and plan for any sudden deviation. Imagine if, among all this mayhem, students suddenly start bouncing off an invisible energy shield; it would attract a lot of unnecessary attention. I don't want to tell you how to go about your business, but I would suggest that whoever is assigned to accompany me remains by the school gates. Near enough if there is trouble, but far enough away to avoid the congested corridors of St Alban's."

Mark and Sajna remained silent for a few moments and then began to discuss my proposal, offering objections and solutions before Mark finally responded.

"I would prefer no more than twenty meters where possible and a clear line of sight. However, you have presented a persuasive assessment of the obstacles this presents. I am reluctant to agree to your suggestion, but I can find no workable alternatives."

His face wore a very serious look when he added, “The one non-negotiable condition is that you wear body armour and the armband under your school clothes and react instantly to any instructions we may issue.”

“Sounds fine to me,” I said cheerfully, as I walked towards the door. “It’s time to hit my bed. See you tomorrow.”

“Why would you wish to strike your bed?” Mark asked. His face bore a look of astonishment.

“It’s an expression – it means it’s time to sleep,” I replied with a smirk.

Mark rose from his seat and walked towards the door. “Activate your cloaking device and only deactivate it when you are sure it is clear. I will accompany you as I have the next watch,” he said, clearly underwhelmed at the prospect as we both exited the vehicle cloaked.

SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT

I awoke early on Monday morning; I had difficulty sleeping as I nervously anticipated the myriad of questions that I would face at school. Though it was at my suggestion that I walk the school corridors unaccompanied, I felt troubled. Undoubtedly, I would be an easier target for an assassin in the chaotic hustle and bustle of the school corridors and classrooms.

“Remember to wear body armour under your school clothes tomorrow,” Mark had again emphasised as we parted last night. Easier said than done with extremely bulky body armour. My trousers concealed the leg pieces with little difficulty, but the breast and shoulder pieces worn under my normal school shirt made me look like Mr Universe.

“I suppose I could tell everyone I have been working out,” I said, unconvincingly to myself in the mirror. Eventually I decided to wear my baggiest jumper over my shirt which barely toned down the pumped iron look.

“You look lumpy this morning,” mum commented, as I walked into the kitchen.

“Charming,” I replied. “Actually, I feel a little cold, so I have a couple of tea shirts under my shirt and jumper,” I lied, fingers crossed behind my back.

“That might be a slightly longer reaction to the fumes,” said mum, anxiously feeling my brow.

“Mum,” I said, feigning exasperation. “I feel a little cold not hot, you dozy bird.”

“You can never be too careful,” she fussed. Evidently the penny still hadn’t dropped.

My journey to school led me through Church Wood, where Sajna, my extremely pleasant shadow for the day, de-cloaked and walked alongside me.

“You appear to be a little nervous, Steven,” she remarked, as we ambled along the path through the wood.

“Mmm, I am,” I said, apprehensively. “It’s the thought of all the questions that I will face, and also the increased danger in a place full of corridors and shadows, and rooms with very large windows.”

“Just remember that I will be at the entrance and Mark is only twenty seconds away, he is constantly monitoring the detection grid,” she added reassuringly. As we approached the school Sajna, now cloaked, issued a few last-minute instructions which I heard as a voice in my head. There were far too many children within ear shot hurrying through the school gates for her to talk loudly.

“Steve, my friend, how are you?” asked Tom, slapping me on the back, genuinely pleased to see me. “I had no one to talk to on my way to Sidolli’s,” he added, with a laugh. “What the hell happened? And are you okay?”

He placed a comforting arm around my shoulder. “Missed you mate,” he added touchingly.

I related to Tom, and a few other friends that had gathered around me, the concocted version of events that had supposedly incapacitated me. I told many times over the next few hours. However, the most traumatic moment that morning occurred when Christine cornered me just before the Maths class.

“Steve, I was so worried about you,” she said, hugging me tightly. “I kept thinking that if you hadn’t walked me to the bus you might have missed the accident and wouldn’t have been injured. I heard that you were on a life support machine in a coma,” she said emotionally, and then tears started to run down her cheek. “It was my fault,” she sobbed.

“It wasn’t your fault, and I wasn’t on a life support machine. I was only in the special unit for observation. Please don’t cry.” I don’t know how to respond to a weeping female and started to get flustered. I could feel stinging tears well up in both eyes and my throat tightened. I leaned forward and gently kissed her lips. Her tears wetting my face as we embraced. “Come on cheer up,” I said softly, “I’m fit and well as you can see.”

We joined the slow queue of classmates shuffling into the classroom and sat down together. “Don’t you dare leave my side,” she whispered. Ominously she added, “Don’t ogle Miss Stephens either or you’re a dead man. Your ogling days are over.”

The morning passed quickly. Each teacher sympathetically asking me for details of the incident and expressing their delight at my return before beginning the lesson. As the bell sounded for the end of the English lesson, Tom and I walked out of the classroom and into the corridor. A free session and then the dinner period provided ample time for a slow walk to our pinball haven. Today, we planned to experience the delights of coffee, music and a carton of soggy chips.

As we passed the toilet, Dan Platt stopped us. “Steve, I’m glad to see that you’re okay. Follow me, I have a surprise lined up for you, O’Hare is in one of the cubicles. We were all pretty annoyed when we heard about the fight after the dance. We’ve waited for your return, and now we are going to teach him a lesson.”

He opened the door quietly and we tip-toed into the toilet. Around the first cubicle stood three classmates, each held a plastic cup full of water and on a pre-arranged signal they launched their cup over the top of the cubicle. Splat...splat...splat, each cup appeared to find its target.

O’Hare cried out in surprise. “What the...who did that?” The sound of rustling clothes could be heard as he frantically fastened his trousers. “When I get out of here, I am going to stick these cups on the end of my foot and shove them so far up your arse they’ll come out of your mouth,” he fumed.

At that moment the toilet door was flung open, in the doorway stood Mr Cropper.

“What the Dickens is happening in here?” he shouted, struggling to be heard above the ranting voice of O’Hare. “Who is in this cubicle?” he demanded.

“A bloody wet Jim O’Hare,” was the reply.

“Do you kiss your mother with that foul mouth boy?” bellowed Mr Cropper. “Get yourself out here so that I can see you.”

In a lightning movement he swivelled towards the door. “Not so fast you low life,” he shouted to Dan Platt and Jonesy who were slinking out. “All of you to my office now,” he commanded.

“Morris!” he barked, turning his gaze to me. “You have been ill recently, and I am sure that you wouldn’t get caught up in such childish behaviour, would you?” His glaring eyes bore into my skull as he waited for my response.

“Err...no Sir,” I responded quickly.

“Then bugger off,” he replied. “And take Maxwell with you.”

Tom and I scarpered out of the toilet faster than two turkeys that heard they had just missed the Christmas cut.

We laughed most of the way down Park Lane on our way to Sidolli's recalling O'Hare's outburst as he ranted and raved.

"Did you hear the cups hit him on the head? Splat...splat...splat. And the look on everyone's face as Cropper burst in was priceless," I cried, tears rolling down my cheeks.

"Try to stay alert," said a voice in my head, interrupting our conversation. The hilarious vision in my mind of O'Hare's dowsing vanished and I quickly put on my serious head as we crossed the Town Bridge.

At the start of each season I eagerly look forward to starting a new collection of football cards. I have a complete set for each season from 1964 onwards. Gluing the cards into the book each year has proved a messy affair until FKS introduced 'stickers,' self-adhesive cards, last year.

Tom was busy talking as we walked up the hill past the cinema; he was still lecturing me about *the Jayne affair*, as he termed it.

"Look Tom," I said angrily, "I wouldn't give that blood sucking, egotistic, lush, the time of day after her behaviour at the dance. Anyhow, I am progressing quite nicely with Christine, thank you very much."

We stopped at the newspaper stall at the bottom entrance to the market. I picked up a packet of stickers and handed four new pence to the man behind the counter. "Do you realise that this packet of stickers cost almost one old shilling?" I said incredulously. "One shilling for football stickers," I continued, muttering to myself as we walked through the market. I almost sounded like my mother.

"Damn it!" I cried, as I thumbed through the stickers.

"What's the matter?" Tom asked, as we loitered by the fresh meat counter.

"Another Gordon Banks," I replied angrily. "That's three I've collected in as many weeks. And look, another Billy Bremner."

Tom turned and continued towards the north exit leading out onto Crane Street. "Can't you swap Banksy?" he suggested loudly. He continued walking toward the door without turning around.

"I suppose so," I grumbled, trying to catch up alongside him. "But if he's in every other packet I purchase, I won't be able to give him away. Still, there are five new ones for my collection: Paul Madley, Jimmy Rimmer, Franny Lee, Martin Chivers and Colin Bell."

We walked out into the sunshine and quickly crossed the road to Sidolli's.

"Two coffees please, Louisa," Tom said, as we passed the chip counter. "We'll be in the back room."

Louisa looked genuinely pleased to see me. "Are you feeling better now, Steve?" she shouted after me as we walked towards the juke box.

"Yes thanks, tip-top," I yelled back.

"Right Tom, I am going to beat *top dog* on *The Casino* today." I had become quite adept at *nipple flipping* - Tom's mildly coarse description of the art of keeping the ball in play using the two buttons, one on each side of the machine.

Eight games, two coffees and a plate of greasy chips later, Tom and I prepared to return to school for our afternoon lessons. As we walked towards the exit Tom stopped to talk to Louisa. Impatiently I pulled my grandfather's pocket watch out of my shirt pocket and flipped the lid open.

"We'll have to hurry Tom, we only have ten minutes to get to the Geography room," I said, trying to hurry him along.

Tom sniggered at the sight of the pocket watch in the palm of my hand. "Why don't you buy a modern watch instead of that *Sherlock Holmes* museum relic," he laughed.

“You may mock all you want,” I replied, indignantly. “This watch is a gentleman’s time piece; it has a history behind it unlike that gaudy thing on your wrist, and it was my grandfather’s wish that I use it. You’re much too uncouth to recognise a gentleman, even when he is stood before you,” I said dismissively, as I stepped out into the street.

Tom ribbed me mercilessly the entire length of Crane Street, and only stopped as we approached Park Lane, where he began to search frantically through his book bag. “Have you lost something *pin head*?” I asked him jovially.

Tom pulled out a textbook, triumphantly waving it at me. “I thought I had forgotten my Biology homework; I would have been dead meat. Mrs Bovill promised triple detention to anyone that doesn’t hand their homework in today, but I’ve found it,” he replied, breathing a sigh of relief.

“I forgot that we had double Biology with the witch,” I groaned, as we strolled through the school gates. “Perhaps she’ll go easy on me as I have been ill,” I said hopefully, with little enthusiasm.

“Doesn’t seem likely. You’ve missed the last three lessons and a pile of homework. I think you might get the pointy stick treatment,” Tom replied, unsympathetically.

Unfortunately, he was right. Mrs Bovill walked up and down the classroom collecting homework assignments. She stopped at my desk and peered down at me. “Morris, I see no sign of your homework assignment,” she spat, accusingly.

“That’s because I have been in hospital for the past week Mrs Bovill,” I countered, giving her a weak smile.

Her lifeless eyes pierced my shield of bravado, causing me to sweat.

“Yes, I am aware of the details, they were only monitoring your condition, it was hardly life or death was it? You have had all weekend to catch up. You should have borrowed the material covered in the lessons last week and copied the homework assignment. Maxwell, your shadow, will give you the homework assignment which I expect on my desk by Wednesday morning,” she barked, as she continued towards the back of the classroom collecting the remaining homework books.

“Hell! I have been well and truly gored,” I whispered quietly to Tom. “The old crone must have been hit in the face with the grumpy brick this morning. No wonder old man Bovill is so tetchy, he has to live with Brunhilda.”

Eighty torturous minutes later, the bell signalled the end of school.

“Can I borrow your homework book Tom?” I pleaded, as we walked towards the school exit.

“I suppose so,” he said, in a mock grudging tone. “But don’t eat your tea on it. Mr Morgan is right; your tech drawing work always has tea stains or bits of egg or chips encrusted on it.”

On our journey homeward, Sajna gave me a glimpse of the mundane elements of a surveillance operation as we walked through Church Wood. She also revealed a lighter side to her character when she described how she occasionally relieved the boredom.

“When the area is quiet, I kick pebbles around. Sometimes I bark at a passing dog which they find confusing. They can sense my presence but cannot see me.” She began to giggle. “When they are on a lead they snarl in my direction as their owner tugs them in the opposite direction. They get mad when I snarl back quietly. Of course, their owner scolds them because they think their animal is being silly.”

And then, as an afterthought, she added, “You won’t tell Mark, will you? He is very serious about surveillance, and quite rightly so, it is a serious matter.” I had the feeling that she was attempting to convince herself more than me.

“Is death or injury common on surveillance operations?” I asked inquisitively.

“Death is very rare, but we do sustain injuries occasionally, sometimes serious injuries. Infiltrators are very reluctant to use deadly force as the Directorate marshals a considerable amount of resources to apprehend them. It is a grave crime to kill an Officer of the Directorate,” she answered solemnly.

I had arranged to partner Christine at badminton later that evening and had informed Mark accordingly. Though it was a low-key affair with only six to eight people participating, he was still reluctant to allow me total freedom in my daily routine. Shadowing my journey to school presented no problems as it was within walking distance; the journey to the Stadium in Cwmbran was a different matter because it involved at least one bus ride each way. Mark was extremely irritated when he learnt of this complication.

“I strongly advise you to stay home this evening,” he commanded, attempting to lecture me on the dangers of travelling on public transport. “You are an easy target on a vehicle over which you have no control.”

Continuing his sermon, he added, “I cannot guarantee your safety and that troubles me.”

I interrupted him as he was about to move into full flow. “You are probably right Mark, but I am going to Cwmbran tonight with or without you or Sajna. You decide how you want me to travel, bus or *fun* vehicle.”

“Excuse me!” said Mark, tersely. *Fun* vehicle?”

“He means the multi-functional vehicle. He has shortened the title and calls it *fun* vehicle,” explained Sajna, almost apologetically.

Mark remained quiet for a few moments while he contemplated my ultimatum. “Then I propose we travel in the multi-functional vehicle,” he said pompously.

A few hours later we arrived inconspicuously, landing at the far end of a nearby field behind a cluster of trees.

“Make sure you are cloaked when you leave this vehicle,” said Mark, who was still brooding. “I will wait here for your return. Sajna will accompany you and station herself outside the complex,” he whined.

Nodding in acknowledgement I made an invisible exit from the *fun* vehicle and walked towards the road at the North end of the field, deactivating the cloaking device when I was satisfied that it was safe to do so.

Leaving Sajna at the entrance, I made my way to the changing room where I changed quickly and hurried to the badminton court to find Christine, Dan Platt and Mr Cropper already knocking the shuttle cock around.

“I guess you will be playing with Christine tonight?” Dan teased.

“Oh really!” I said, feigning surprise. “I thought I was partnering you tonight Dan.”

I tried to suppress a laugh as Christine glared in my direction, but I couldn’t maintain a straight face for more than a few seconds.

“I don’t think so, you get your cute backside over here now or the shuttle cock won’t be the only thing I will be whacking with my racket tonight,” she threatened, playfully.

“I love a domineering woman,” I jested, as I trotted up alongside her. “Let’s beat them by ten points every game this evening, Chrissy.”

I received a cold icy stare. “My name is Christine, I don’t like Chris, Chrissy or any other variation,” she said, correcting me.

“I know,” I replied wickedly. “I was just winding you up; you look cute when you purse those luscious lips in annoyance.”

I decided against using the energy shield for the first few games and consequently Christine and I lost by a considerable margin. Christine made no comment on my

apparent dip in performance, she seemed happy just to play alongside me, making physical contact occasionally. After an hour or so we stopped for a rest.

“Are you feeling all right now, Steven?” asked Mr Cropper. “Fully recovered?”

“Yes thanks,” I replied, omitting to address him as Sir. On informal events such as this, most teachers relax the chain of hierarchy, sometimes even asking to be addressed by their first name. Mr Cropper, *Tom* to his friends, isn’t quite that relaxed but he does treat us more like adults than adolescents on a Monday evening.

When we resumed play, I activated the energy shield and increased my performance gradually. The improvement in speed, co-ordination, and power, was soon noticed by the others.

“What was in your drink at half time?” asked Dan, dipping down in a vain bid to return the shuttle cock that zipped past him.

“There was nothing in the can other than coke, I just take a little while to warm up,” I replied, nonchalantly.

It was approaching nine o’clock as we walked off court towards the showers. “See you outside honey,” I said, playfully slapping Christine’s bottom with my racket.

I spent a few minutes in the shower appreciating the relaxing effect of the water cascading off my shoulders and neck; I towelled myself and dressed quickly, eager to catch Christine in the foyer before she departed for home.

As I hurried down the corridor, I caught sight of her, hair still damp, waiting for me. She smiled as our eyes made contact and put her arm around my waist as I reached her.

“Do you fancy going to the cinema on Friday evening?” she asked coyly. “The Godfather is on in the flea pit. Sounds like a good film.”

I put my arms around her waist and pulled her tightly towards me. “You’ve got yourself a deal little lady,” I replied, gently kissing her lips.

The flea pit is the affectionate name given to the cinema in Old Cwmbrian, the original village now overshadowed by the shopping centre built nearby in the 1960s. The cinema is squashed between The Rose and Crown pub and a row of terraced housing.

Consequently, the interior is a strange shape, very narrow at the front and a great deal larger at the rear, like a huge wedge. It is poorly maintained and in urgent need of refurbishment. However, it is an ideal location for courting couples, a fact not lost on Christine. An evening of lip welding me thinks.

Sajna and I walked across the field in the direction of the *fun* vehicle. “Your countenance appears brighter this evening Steven. Did you perform well at shufflecock?” she asked, as we approached the group of trees that marked the last known position of the *fun* vehicle.

“Yes, I did Sajna, and thank you for asking,” I replied, happier than I had been for many weeks. “However, the game is called Badminton. The shuttlecock is the object that is hit back and forth over a net with a racket. But I was also a big hit with Christine,” I declared jubilantly.

As we rounded the trees we stopped. What little light that had barely allowed us to navigate through the field was now extinguished, blocked out by the large trees behind us. “Can you see the *fun* vehicle?” I whispered, eyes straining in the dark shadows.

“I believe it was located here,” Sajna replied quietly. “I should be able to discern its shape, even when cloaked.”

A deep voice crackled inside my head. “Move thirty meters to your left and follow the hedgerow. I moved the vehicle when a group of adolescents took a diversionary route through this area to the boating lake. Did you enjoy the exercise, Steven?” Mark asked brightly. Evidently, he had recovered from the stropy mood he exhibited earlier.

“Oh yes, and I think my lips will have plenty of exercise on Friday too,” I replied dreamingly, as my thoughts drifted off into the night.

CHAPTER 8

CHASING SPECTRES

Maths on Tuesday proved a little awkward. Miss Stephens looked divine wearing a tight blue dress and seemed to bend over at the drop of a hat. Twice Christine poked me sharply in the side and hissed at me. “Keep your eyes on me or you’re a dead man.” I was mightily relieved to hear the bell, the occasional sneaky glance at Miss Stephens’ form was giving me sore ribs.

The last two lessons of the day had been cancelled a few weeks earlier for the entire school; they had been replaced with a police update concerning Joseph Wilson, a fourth-year pupil who had mysteriously vanished on his way to school in October last year. Joe also lived in Trevethin; he was a quiet ordinary lad, the eldest of three brothers. He was believed to have travelled alone through Church Wood on his way to school on that wet autumn morning and had not been seen since. The police mounted a door to door enquiry campaign, and notices were posted around the town. Pontypool’s local paper, the Free Press, ran a large story as did the Argus, a Newport newspaper with a much larger circulation.

The police discounted the theory put forward by some that Joe had run away to the bright lights of London, and in the absence of a body they had also ruled out foul play. Reluctantly they eventually concluded that Joe was just another unexplained missing person. However, as the anniversary of Joe’s disappearance approached, the newspapers ran follow-up stories that forced the police to reopen their line of enquiry. This also included an appeal to the entire school, planned for the briefing this afternoon.

“I reckon he was killed by zombies as he walked through the cemetery,” Tom said solemnly, as we shuffled down the corridor towards the main hall. We were near the rear of the slow-moving queue because Tom had insisted on having a quick fag between lessons.

“You said he had been used as a sacrifice in a powerful witch’s coven last week,” I laughed.

“You can laugh all you want,” he replied testily. “That church is nearly eight hundred years old and was built on a sacred druid burial site.” Tom often conjured up bizarre explanations with no basis for belief.

Seven months ago, Charles Manson was found guilty of slaughtering Sharon Tate and four others in California in 1969 and sentenced to death. Tom informed me, with a tap of his nose, that it was common knowledge that the CIA had carried out the murders and pinned it on Manson. He swore me to secrecy before revealing that a close relative worked for MI5. This *mysterious* relative had, apparently in a state of drunkenness, told him it was linked to Kennedy. Though he failed to mention which one. You had to laugh at his wacky theories.

Eventually we were all seated and a hush descended when Mr Benson called us to order, introducing Inspector Whitehead of the CID.

The Inspector was a tall, painfully thin, man of about fifty years old with grey thinning hair. He began the update by outlining the known details, the date of Joe’s disappearance, the weather, his probable route to school and other boring minutia. His words were difficult to decipher on account of him holding the microphone so close to his mouth that it sounded like he was sucking the bell-end and made more difficult by virtue of a bad stutter.

The hall lights dimmed, and an overhead projector projected an image of Joe onto a large white screen positioned in the middle of the stage. As each transparency was placed

on the glass bed, images of Joe's house and family followed – including the family car, a white Ford Cortina Mk I. “These pictures may jog someone's memory and unearth new leads,” explained Inspector Whitehead.

It became abundantly clear after half an hour, that PC plod didn't have a lead, and wouldn't recognise a clue if it was illuminated by neon lights.

“How do you think Inspector *plophead* ascended to the dizzy height of inspector?” asked Tom, as we shuffled out of the main hall.

I was likewise puzzled. “It beats me,” I replied, shaking my head. “Inspector Clouseau is a consummate professional in comparison. That man's a clown.”

The remainder of the week passed uneventfully as daily I kitted up, my shoulders and my arm muscles bulging like an American Grid Iron player. Mark or Sajna accompanied me to school and followed me and Tom on our excursions to Sidolli's like a Secret Service operative. Each offered advice and cautioned me when they perceived danger lurking around a corner. Somehow school seemed less important alongside the larger issues of historical accuracy, shadowy organisations bent on manipulation, and my possible extermination. However, a considerable amount of homework occupied my evenings, so I was particularly grateful as the end of the week approached.

“Ty Lyn and Ledarn are to replace Sajna and me this afternoon,” Mark commented, as we strolled through Church Wood on a particularly fine Friday morning. “I will say goodbye to you now,” he said, stopping on front of me.

I leant forward to shake his hand, when completely out of character, he grabbed me and gave me a strong hug.

“I know you think I take my work seriously,” he said, as we resumed our journey. “My previous partner was seriously injured on a surveillance mission because of a moment's complacency. She recovered but was moved to an administrative position because of the lingering effect of her injury.”

I nodded my head sympathetically in condolence. “I understand, thank you for sharing that with me Mark.”

We walked in silence until we reached the end of the wooded path that led out onto Pen-y-garn hill. Mark, now cloaked, gave me last minute instructions as we walked down the hill, and spoke more rapidly as we hurried up Park Lane towards the school.

As I walked through the school gates, he bade me farewell. “I have enjoyed working with you, Steven,” said the voice now only audible inside my head. “Take care during this next week and I believe you will be fine.”

Whistling a melody that I couldn't place, I walked into the school building via the side entrance and turned right into the dark narrow corridor where I nearly collided with O'Hare. He glanced briefly in my direction and walked past without comment.

Excellent, I thought, as I made my way to the English classroom. *Perhaps the confrontation on the night of the dance has finally curbed his loutish behaviour.*

Tom and I had free lessons after English, and as was our custom, decided to study in Sidolli's - that is to study the angles and trajectory of the small metal ball as we tried to beat *The Casino*. We left school via the side entrance of the top building as I hadn't completed my Biology homework assignment and I was anxious to avoid Mrs Bovill who resides in the bottom building. She's not known as *the witch* for nothing, that woman has eyes in the back of her head.

“What are you doing this weekend?” Tom asked, as we enjoyed a leisurely walk over the Town Bridge heading towards Crane Street.

“Not a lot Tom. I think mum wants me to cut the grass so I might develop a respiratory relapse tonight.”

Grass cutting is considerably more dangerous than it sounds as we don't have a lawn mower, not even a cylinder model. In the Morris household this arduous task involves using a scythe, a lethal weapon capable of decapitating a finger or badly damaging an ankle if used carelessly. Added to the danger inherent in using this medieval apparatus is the unnatural posture required to swat the grass with the crescent-shaped blade, stooped over with legs apart. I suffered back spasms for three days when I last cut the grass in July.

After a satisfying tournament with Tom on *The Casino* from which I emerged the victor, followed by a delicious plate of pie and chips washed down with two cups of coffee, we retraced our steps to school for History - the first two lessons of the afternoon. En route, Tom related the latest news concerning the *black widow*.

"Jayne was paranoid about her figure before your outburst at the dance, but now she is hysterical if anyone even looks at her backside," he laughed loudly.

"I didn't think a person could ever be that insecure," I remarked, indifferently. "It's weird Tom, in the past whenever you and I stumbled upon her she ignored me, speaking only to you. I didn't have a clue about her insufferable vanity until the night of the dance," I complained, as we walked up Park Lane. Recalling Ty Lin's parting instructions; I fished the high-tech glasses out of my pocket and put them on.

"Whoa," cried Tom, recoiling dramatically. "They're a bit radical, aren't they? I didn't know you had bad eyesight."

"Just mild short sightedness. I only wear them occasionally," I lied, slightly embarrassed.

"They look more dated than Roy Orbison's thick frames," Tom laughed, loudly.

Ignoring his comments, I scanned the area around the main gates to locate Mark. I was anxious to perform a prototype field test to confirm Ty Lin's claim that they would detect the hazy outline of a cloaked figure.

As we approached the gates, I detected the slight movement of a barely discernible figure near the wall that ran alongside the school, leading into the park. There was insufficient detail to identify the person, or even their gender, but the outline provided enough detail to reveal a distinctly blurred silhouette. I gave a small wave of my hand as I passed Mark. He may have returned the gesture though I couldn't tell. The glasses were just a marvel of technology, not a miracle worker.

CHAOS ERUPTS

Though the lesson started well, within fifteen minutes the classroom became extremely warm and stuffy. A valve on the old cast iron radiator had rusted and Mr George was unable to adjust it. Even with the windows open I found it difficult to concentrate and started to feel drowsy. I found my eyes getting heavy, and my head began to droop as I started to play the head-bob game. Tom nudged me firmly a couple of times. On the last occasion he leant over to whisper in my ear, "You're snoring."

I had directed Tom to the desks at the back of the class, as instructed by Mark, when we entered the room. Mr George, who had his back to the class, was scribbling dates on the blackboard which allowed me to stretch discreetly to shake off the lethargy.

However, as I sat back down a loud booming high pitch voice cleared my head instantly. "Steven, Steven, be aware that an intruder has entered this sector and is approaching your position. Activate both your cloaking device and energy shield and stay alert, you could be in imminent danger. Also be advised that Mark has been wounded, but I am on my way to your location, I will be with you in minutes."

I shot to my feet, blurted out something about a toilet break, and dashed past an astonished Mr George, watched by my dumbfounded classmates. In the corridor I

fumbled frantically for the glasses in my shirt pocket, while activating the armband functions. I was in a state of extreme panic, my heart was thumping in my chest, my breathing was erratic, and my mind was reeling with questions. Was Mark fatally injured? How did an intruder find him without the detection net alerting him? How near was the intruder? And exactly what is the term *intruder* jargon for?

As I sprinted through the upper school corridors, I groped in my trouser pocket to find the communicator Mark had given me, *to be used only in an emergency* he had warned. Well this qualified as an emergency.

“Sajna,” I yelled breathlessly, as I depressed the button. “Where is the intruder?” I repeated the question three times, each time barely waiting for an answer before finally realising that I had not released the activation button.

“Steven, this is Ledarn,” said a familiar voice in my head. “Stop wherever you are, regain control of the situation, and find a place to conceal yourself.”

I was sweating profusely and extremely disoriented. “Okay,” I gasped into the communicator. “But for God’s sake tell me what has happened.”

Ledarn was right, I had run for my life in blind panic - aimlessly running in any direction, the intruder could be anywhere. I stopped as Ledarn had commanded - to *take control of the situation*. I took slow deep breaths - in through my nose. Exhaling slowly - out through my mouth. I could hear the blood surging through the veins in my head, pounding so loudly that I would be unable to hear the intruder even if he was stood in front of me clapping.

Gradually I regained control of my senses, vaguely recognising the dark corridor into which I had fled. I was in a disused part of Park house. The paint on the walls had flaked badly, the floor was strewn with dust and litter, and large spider’s webs filled every corner. The room smelt dank. Desperately I looked around me for somewhere to hide.

On the side wall stood a cupboard that ran from floor to ceiling. Unfortunately, it had little depth and try as I may I was unable to squeeze my body into the narrow recess to close the door. I was betrayed by the stomach I had treated so kindly all my life.

Eventually I realised that the futile attempt to squeeze my bulky frame into the cupboard was doomed to failure and slumped against the cupboard door. I was about to retrace my steps through the deserted building when I became aware of the sound of someone running through the corridors towards me.

A figure suddenly appeared in the doorway, and even though visibility was poor it was apparent that he wore body armour and had a weapon in his hand.

I froze, unable to move. My head screamed *run*, but my legs wouldn’t respond. I pressed myself into the cupboard trying to become part of it, desperately feeling above me for a space to pull myself into. My clawing fingers felt a hidden ledge above my head and six inches above that I hit a wooden ceiling. Any hope of escape had been blocked off decades ago; there was no refuge, nowhere to hide.

A combination of thoughts ran through my head. I hadn’t told mum or David that I loved them today; and I hadn’t had time to reveal the true extent of my feelings to Christine. I visualised her angelic face, I could smell her perfume. I loved waking up in the morning; I loved the warmth of the sun on my face as I walked through Church Wood on the way to school. I closed my eyes and held my breath; sixteen seemed a ridiculously young age to die. I tensed, waiting for the noise of a weapons discharge. Would I feel pain, or would I just cease to be?

The answer came when I heard the noise of masonry exploding and felt pain as bits of brick and plaster hit me. I opened my eyes and stared in astonishment – I was still alive. How was that possible? The intruder, almost certainly a *PhElr*, had fired at me and

missed. So much for the fabled warriors Ledarn had portrayed, crack shots – more like crap shots.

However, it made no sense. Even I could hit someone at five paces, but somehow, he had missed. Why had he not fired a second volley? What had prevented him from approaching, and if necessary, throttling me by hand?

I started to shake with relief, my chest and head began to pound again, and my legs felt weak, they could barely support me. I slumped to the floor and tried to hold me breathe listening for footsteps. Ledarn would at least want to know in which direction the *PhElr* had fled, but I could hear nothing above the buzzing in my ears and the thumping in my chest.

After a few minutes I staggered to my feet and lurched down the corridor in the direction of the main building, squeezing the communicator as I moved. My legs still felt wobbly, barely able to support my weight.

“Ledarn the *PhElr* ran past me into the main school building, he fired but somehow failed to hit me,” I gasped, still unable to believe my luck.

“You are indeed a most fortunate young man,” replied Ledarn. “I have never known a *PhElr* to miss his target.”

“Yes, thank you very much. I am still alive,” I shouted sarcastically into the communicator. “So, what should I do now?”

“Move to the school’s side entrance and wait there. Sajna is approaching that area now.”

Cautiously I retraced my steps through the corridor to the side entrance where I slowly scanned the courtyard before running out into the bright sunshine. I raced to the main gates where I tucked myself firmly behind the gate pillar, careful not to leave even a toe exposed. As the seconds ticked past, I grew more anxious, looking nervously in the direction of every sound, imagining that it preceded an assault from a percussion weapon.

“Where are you Sanja?” I rasped quietly into the communicator. At that precise moment she appeared at the gate.

“Quickly, follow me! The Multi-Function Vehicle is nearby.” In her hand was a weapon like the weapon that had killed Edvan, obviously some sort of blast gun.

I followed Sajna closely as she ran towards the park, keeping tightly to the left to make the most of the protection afforded by the shoulder high stone wall that held back a heavily wooded slope. This dense collection of trees climbed eighty to a hundred feet above us, eventually ending at the bottom of Pen-y-garn. At any point, a dozen assassins would be easily concealed in this impenetrable forest.

I stuck to Sajna like a second skin as she yelled instructions. “Keep low and stay alert. Somewhere up ahead an ambush could be set awaiting our arrival.”

As we entered the park, I glanced nervously around looking for anything suspicious, but how do you define suspicious in this extremely bizarre situation.

A few small children played on the roundabout watched by their mothers, and a young girl was sailing through the air on a swing. An old man, wearing a cloth cap, sat on a bench smoking a cigarette. A man walked towards us as his white Terrier ran alongside. I tensed as an approaching cyclist reached into his pocket...and pulled out chewing gum.

“The vehicle is around the corner,” panted Sajna, refocusing my attention. “Mark is inside he is badly injured.”

As we rounded the corner of the wooded hill, I spotted the *fun* vehicle up ahead lying in a hollow. We increased our pace, sprinting to the door of the vehicle and scrambled inside sealing the door quickly, as if pursued by a horde of invisible spectres. Mark lay on a couch unconscious. He had received wounds to his shoulder and it was heavily padded and bandaged showing signs of blood loss.

“Will he be okay?” I asked deeply concerned, fondly remembering the affectionate hug he had given me earlier in the day.

“I am unsure,” Sajna replied emotionally, as she busily poured over the controls and switches in the cockpit pressing buttons in some sort of sequence.

I moved over to her and tapped her shoulder to gain her attention. “Sajna, are we safe for the moment?” She turned to look at me, her face etched with worry.

“We are cloaked and heavily shielded, so we are in no imminent danger,” she replied, her voice quivering with emotion.

“Okay,” I said, my immediate concern answered. “Before we do anything else, please run through the events of the last hour. I really think it’s important that we reassess before moving. Something feels wrong, and I don’t know what it is,” I said, deeply perplexed.

She took a deep breath and launched into the events of the past sixty minutes.

“I moved the multi-functional vehicle to this position ready for the transfer of responsibility with Ledarn and Ty Lin. They arrived and Ledarn joined me to conduct the handover. After a couple of minutes, the intruder alarm in his MFV sounded and he ran back to it to find Ty Lin unconscious. After securing my vehicle I ran to provide aid and found that he too was incapacitated. I reached for my weapon just as my energy shield failed, and that’s the last I remember,” she said, with a troubled look on her face. “I don’t understand how my energy shield failed,” she cried, shaking her head.

“Oh, I think I do,” I said softly. “There was nothing you could have done to prevent the deactivation of your shield.” I touched her arm consolingly.

“What happened when you regained consciousness?”

“I remember Ledarn helping me to my feet, and I also recall holding onto the handle of the door as my head started to clear. I looked around the cabin and saw Ty Lin bending over Mark, frantically trying to stem the bleeding. He was badly injured and appeared to have been hit with a projectile weapon, like the weapons used in this time period. Again, I am at a loss to explain why his energy shield failed to protect him, especially against a primitive weapon...no offence intended Steven,” she added apologetically.

“None taken,” I responded, again placing my hand on her arm for reassurance.

As we were talking, I heard Ledarn’s voice urgently trying to contact Sajna from a receiver in the cockpit.

“Sajna, I have searched for the *PhElr* without success, I am extremely concerned at the lack of traceable technology. However, I have recently detected a strong tagging signal which might be him. He is heading out of the park on a two wheeled vehicle and I am in pursuit. Ty Lin is engaged in the investigation of a number of intermittent signals throughout the school’s main building.” Sajna moved to the console and acknowledged the message; she looked drained and was visibly tense.

I cleared my throat to prevent my emotions getting the better of me.

“I’m confused, I don’t understand how someone from your era can travel through time without an armband and be virtually undetectable in my time period. Ledarn told me that the detection grid was infallible.”

Sajna hesitated for a moment, and then blurted out even more shocking news.

“I am embarrassed to reveal that Ledarn and Ty Lin are responsible for the appearance of the *PhElr*. We believe he hid in their vehicle and was unwittingly transported to this time period,” she confessed, shaking her head in disbelief.

I was floored at this revelation, shook to the core. Ledarn had assured me that the detection net could pick up a flea on the back of a tick, immersed in a pocket of oil, five miles below the Mariana Trench. Possibly an overstatement, depending on the size of the flea.

“Is it that easy to stow away in one of these craft? I have seen the inside of these vehicles, there’s nowhere to hide. Where would the *PhElr* conceal himself and why didn’t the internal sensors reveal his presence?”

Sajna shook her head, “I do not know how he remained undetected, but I can show you where he concealed himself. You are probably unaware of the equipment hold under the floor of this vehicle,” she said, moving to the rear of the craft. Bending down she twisted a small handle in a recess on the floor and yanked, a panel on the floor lifted to reveal a hold capable of storing a considerable amount of equipment.

“I would never have guessed this existed when looking at the vehicle from the outside. It’s like a TARDIS,” I muttered, in astonishment.

As I straightened up from a stooped position my attention was drawn to a machine that resembled a moped lashed to the side bulkhead of the small cargo bay. It was silver in colour and bore the familiar shape of a motorcycle frame complete with a column and handle-bars that housed buttons and controls. However, on this revolutionary machine there were no wheels, or even wheel arches on the frame.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing to the machine. “It looks like a futuristic motor bike but there are no wheels.”

Sajna answered, firing a list of statistics in a matter-of-fact tone. “It is a Personal Transportation Vehicle, it has no wheels because it uses a propulsion system, in many ways it is like the MFV. It can exceed three hundred kilometres per hour and is highly manoeuvrable. The shielding capability is more than five times that of the personal energy shields our armbands generate, and of course it can cloak both itself and the rider. However, it does not possess time travel functionality. Ledarn is currently using one of the PTV’s from his craft in pursuit of the intruder.” Sonja replaced the panel and twisted the handle back into its original position.

“Is the PTV standard equipment?” I asked, as we moved back towards the control panel at the front of the craft.

“Yes, each craft carries two for the type of short-range pursuit Ledarn is engaged in at this moment.”

Suddenly, a feeling of dread swept over me. “Hell!” I yelled. “That’s what has been bothering me. First the attack on Mark, Ledarn being drawn away from this area, and Ty Lin chasing shadows. I think there are two intruders not one.”

Sajna’s jaw dropped, she looked truly shocked. “How can you be sure of this, Steven?” she asked nervously.

“Look at the evidence,” I replied excitedly. “Number one: three of you were rendered unconscious, Mark is seriously injured, and yet none of you were killed. Number two: I was fired upon from point blank range and lived. We are witnessing an old-fashioned chase, drawing us away from the school. It’s reminiscent of the cop films, you know...the bad guys create a diversion to draw the cops away from the place they were guarding, leaving it open to attack.”

I stared into her frightened eyes. “Listen carefully Sajna,” I said, with deadly seriousness. “There are too many coincidences to reach any other conclusion. I am convinced that two people hid themselves in the equipment hold of Ledarn’s MFV, one to act as a decoy, the other to accomplish their true objective. I am not entirely sure that I am their target,” I said chillingly.

“I cannot find another reason for my miraculous escape, and one person could not have accomplished the events of the last hour without the support of an accomplice.”

Sajna moved quickly back to the console in the cockpit and studied a couple of display panels. “The detection net is picking up only the nano tag that Ledarn is chasing,” she said anxiously.

“I may be wrong,” I said, with a hint of uncertainty in my voice as I continued with my assessment, “but I have an awful feeling that the primary target might be one of two pupils that attend St Alban’s Comprehensive school. One is my friend Tom Maxwell, and the other is Sian James, both names are on the disk that I was originally given by Edvan. I don’t know why the second person hasn’t been detected by your *infallible* grid, but I am certain that he is out there.”

I headed for the door. “I will keep in contact with you. Stay alert, I am going back to protect my friend.”

Sajna moved quickly, placing herself between me and the door. “Steven, you cannot leave, my duty is clear, I am here to protect you. How do you think you can prevent your friend from being killed?” she asked angrily.

“I don’t know how, but if the *PhElr* is armed with weapons from my time period, my energy shield will be more than adequate,” I said, as I hit the emergency door-release button. “I have to prevent it from happening, if I am wrong you will have lost nothing.” Sajna thought for a second and then moved to allow me to pass. “If I am right, it is my duty and yours to stop it,” I shouted, as I left the vehicle.

I ran through the park enabling the energy shield and putting the prototype glasses on, at the very least I could place myself between Tom and the assassin.

“Steven,” boomed Ledarn’s voice in my head. “Sajna has relayed your suspicions to me, and they may be correct. I have apprehended the person on the two wheeled vehicle, and he is no *PhElr*. I located a tracer that had been placed under his seat. Initial scans confirm him to be native to this era; this means that there is at least one assassin in your vicinity...possibly two. However, there are no indications that they possess advanced weaponry, so your energy shield should protect you. Sajna has departed with Mark to the Directorate so that he can receive medical assistance.”

Great, I thought dejectedly, so much for the promised twenty-four-hour protection. As mum often says, if you want a job doing – do it yourself.

As though reading my thoughts, Ledarn continued, “I will be with you shortly and Ty Lin is nearby. Remain vigilant.”

I ran back to the school main building, deeply concerned. On the surface there appeared to have been several strange events that would be dealt with quickly, an investigation that would reveal motives, targets, methods and lessons learnt. However, I was sure that there was method in their apparently uncontrolled madness, this bore the hallmarks of a well thought out campaign that was unfolding before us.

As I hurried through the corridor towards the History room, the bell signalling the next lesson sounded. Doors burst open and pupils poured out into the corridor. I pushed my way through the tide of adolescent first and second-year pupils that threatened to sweep me backward, like a fish swimming upstream. Among the crowd I recognised Thomas Williams, a friend of Sian James.

“Thomas have you seen Sian today?” I shouted anxiously above the din.

“Yes, but not for a while,” replied Thomas.

Damn! I thought, I can’t guard both in two different locations. I had to make a difficult decision, protect one, and leave the other defenceless.

Though Tom was my best friend, I also felt a sense of duty to defend Sian. After a moment’s deliberation, I decided that Tom would be the most logical option given our almost identical schedules, and so I continued to fight my way through the mass of pupils to the end of the corridor where a stair case led to the first floor classrooms. By the time I had fought my way up the stairs, buffeted by the swarm of pupils streaming down past me, I was exhausted.

“Little buggers,” I muttered, as I approached classroom 2b. I knocked and entered the classroom. “Where have you been Morgan?” Mr George enquired sternly.

“I had a bad stomach Sir,” I lied. “But after a spell on the toilet it’s feeling much better.” My forthright comments caused a titter and several toilet related comments from my classmates. Looking distinctly unimpressed Mr George instructed me to return to my seat. Even though my mind was in turmoil, and questions filled my head, Mr George unexpectedly captured my attention at the mention of Park House in the Nineteenth century...and a lady known as Mrs Evans. Apparently, she acted as matron in Park House for many years before mysteriously disappearing in May 1905. Squire Hanbury was devastated and offered a large bounty for any information as to her whereabouts. Colonel John Hardman, the Estate Administrator, is the next person to have met an untimely death in strange circumstances, in December 1911. This was closely followed by his beloved daughter Sarah in April 1912.

I lost interest when he started to talk about structural changes to Park House, and my focus was quickly recaptured by Ledarn’s voice crackling inside my head. “Steven, we are still effecting a search of the building, stay alert and be prepared to apply the techniques we discussed last week.”

I poked Tom with my ruler to gain his attention, “Tom a couple of sixth-formers have brought spud guns into school and I overheard them planning to ambush a number of targets. Your name was top of their list,” I lied.

Tom looked confused. “You what?” he whispered.

“Just stay behind me if there is any sort of commotion, and I will hide you.” It was the best cover story I could muster at a moment’s notice.

Tom continued to question me about the ambush throughout the lesson which I answered as the situation allowed, but not always to Tom’s satisfaction.

“What the hell does that mean?” he whispered loudly, after one exchange.

“What!” I asked in bewilderment.

“You said detection net.”

“Oh, I probably meant detention,” I whispered vaguely.

“What about detention?” His voice was raised as he snapped at me.

“I don’t know, why ask me?” I replied loudly. His questions were now irritating me. All my senses were on full alert - ready for the unexpected. I hadn’t the time or the inclination to answer endlessly mundane questions.

“Morris, do you want to share your thoughts with the class?” boomed Mr George, who had been interrupted by my outburst.

“Sorry sir, I didn’t mean to disrupt your lesson,” I responded apologetically. “It won’t happen again.”

“It had better not, or you *will* be facing detention,” he rasped, obviously having overheard parts of our conversation. He turned to continue the lesson when without warning chaos erupted.

A tremor preceded a muffled explosion which caused the classroom to vibrate. Mr George looked stunned, his mouth dropped open and his eyes bulged in surprise. Nobody spoke as a hush descended over the whole class. The shocked silence was broken by the Fire Alarm bell bursting into life.

“Everyone, leave your books and bags and file out to the playground. No running,” Mr George instructed, having regained control of his senses. “It may just be a drill,” he shouted, as everyone hurried out into the corridor.

I felt the adrenaline pumping through my body as I assessed the situation; I was primed, ready for the unexpected. I couldn’t remember the last time that an unannounced fire alarm test had been carried out, and what had caused the muffled explosion we heard?

“Steven, remain vigilant” said Ledarn commandingly in my head. “An explosion has occurred in the school’s main building, and the detection net has just identified fifteen extremely strong signals within the school grounds, they are obviously designed to stretch our resources and to lure us away from their intended targets, stay with your friend and take care.”

Tom and I were the last to leave the classroom. As we reached the door a second much louder explosion occurred, throwing us across the room as the building shook violently. Quickly, we scrambled to our feet and joined the queue of frightened pupils gathered in the corridor heading for the staircase that would lead us out of the building.

“Stay near me Tom,” I instructed, as I reached for the optical detectors. “That second explosion must have caused severe damage to the structure of the building; we need to get out as quickly as possible.”

We shuffled slowly to the top of the stairs behind our classmates. Below us swarms of pupils in blind panic pushed and jostled each other in their race for the door leading to the playground. We started our slow descent and were still some way from the reaching ground level when my attention was drawn to a shimmering hazy outline near the rear wall. My heart sunk; it was identical to the distortion caused by Mark when he was cloaked.

I reached for the communicator in my pocket. “Ledarn, get a fix on my position,” I shouted into the mouthpiece, the frenzied noise covering my transmission. “I have detected a cloaked figure nearby.”

As we reached the bottom of the stairs the heaving crowd had become a stampeding mass. Some pupils were crying, others shouting, and a few were screaming hysterically.

Exaggerated theories buzzed through the throng as we surged towards the door: “An aeroplane engine has destroyed the music room. Twenty people have been incinerated,” shouted someone from behind us.

“I heard that two cars in the car park exploded,” yelled another.

“I think a gas explosion in the Chemistry lab killed at least five people,” a third voice shouted above the din.

Tom and I had been swept helplessly towards the door by the surging mass. As we were about to be propelled out into the playground, I turned my head and caught sight of the cloaked figure pushing through the crowd behind us.

Ledarn finally responded to my warning as we reached the door. “Steven, I will be with you in thirty seconds, protect your friend. Ty Lin is investigating both explosions and the multiple signals.”

I positioned myself between Tom and what was almost certainly a cloaked *PhElr*, while activating my armband and energy shield in one movement. I ushered Tom to the right as we spilled out into the daylight like a couple of corks out of a bottle. Others were propelled out behind us pushing Tom and me ahead of them. We came to rest beside Dan Platt and a couple of other rugby team players who were sat on the grass to the right of the double door exit in disarray. Dan had a nasty head injury that was being attended to by the school nurse; the others were covered in dust and debris.

“What happened?” I was extremely conscious of the little time left before the *PhElr* made his way out of the building in pursuit.

“I don’t know,” replied Jonesy, who was sat by Dan. He looked dazed and his voice was strained and weak. “The wall just exploded. Someone said it was a gas cylinder exploding, but it looked more like a missile to me, and I am sure it killed at least three people.” He looked deep into my eyes as though searching for the correct moment to continue.

“Steve,” he groaned loudly, his voice began quivering with emotion. “I’m sorry to tell you that Christine was one of them. She was sat near the wall, alongside Sian James who was in the classroom finishing a project, when it exploded into a thousand pieces.”

I felt a wrenching pain in my stomach and closed my eyes as tears welled up, my face screwed with grief. For a few seconds the earth stood still as I pictured gentle Christine in my mind, I could smell her and feel her lips on mine. She had died due to her proximity to Sian James. If I had chosen to protect Sian, rather than Tom, then Christine might still be alive.

Many around me stood motionless, staring to my right in the direction of the main building; I turned my head slowly in that direction and was stunned by the scene before me. Where the large wooden framed windows of the ground floor Geography room should have stood there was a huge gaping hole. Glass, wood, masonry and debris littered the area, it resembled a war scene. Large cracks in the surrounding structure of the building face were clear. I strongly doubted the East Wing of Park House could be restored given the evidence before my eyes.

I became aware of groups of injured pupils that, like Dan Platt and Jonesy, were sat on the grass bank receiving first aid from teachers and other pupils. Many of them looked to be in shock, trembling and crying, a few girls were hugging each other.

I felt a sudden intense surge of anger, unlike any I had ever experienced before. “Tom,” I said turning to face him. “Do as I say without question.” I stared deep into his confused, frightened eyes, as I grabbed both shoulders. “Stay in front of me and run as fast as you can around the back of the building if you want to live.”

Tom appeared to be in a hypnotically induced trance, and who wouldn’t be given the devastation around us, but somehow the steel in my voice dragged him back to reality.

“What the hell happened?” he asked in despair, shaking uncontrollably.

“Turn and run!” I shouted, as I pushed him towards the corner of the building.

I took a last look at the carnage around us as we set off. In contrast to the destruction that had temporarily paralysed many, two teachers had lost the plot and were lining pupils into neat columns shouting at them to form a straight line. “Madness,” I uttered under my breath as we turned the corner and ran towards the back of the building.

On the other side of the wall was the school library a place of tranquil study, a haven for broadening the mind, and an environment where silence was jealously guarded. On this side of the wall however, Tom and I were running for our lives. The irony of the situation hadn’t escaped me.

This was the only course of action that made any sense; I could not allow a gun fight to take place in a crowded playground where inevitably more casualties would occur. Besides, if I had to reveal my secret to Tom, I wanted it to be somewhere out of sight as he would surely demand proof of my newfound powers.

As we ran alongside the back wall of the building, I looked behind me intermittently to see if the *PhElr* was in pursuit. Initially, it appeared that we had rounded the building undetected. However, a quick glance over my shoulder fifty feet further along dispelled my fragile optimism when I caught sight of an indistinct, fluctuating, silhouette giving chase.

A wall in front of us blocked our path; it was a rear section of the older Park house. We were trapped in a narrow gully unable to climb the twelve feet perimeter wall that bordered the rear of the school building, and positively unwilling to return the way we came as the *PhElr* was rapidly approaching our position.

Upon reaching the wall it became apparent that the surrounding shrubbery hid a very narrow gap. In desperation I pushed Tom towards it. “Turn sideways and hold your stomach in,” I barked at him, conscious that the *PhElr* was almost upon us.

I had barely begun to haul my backside through the tight space when the building wall above us exploded showering us with rubble. “We’re going to die,” screamed Tom, panic causing the pitch of his voice to rise comically.

“Just keep going,” I yelled at him. “The other side is only fifteen feet away.”

In no time at all we emerged on the other side of Park house where I spoke angrily into the communicator. “Ledarn are you still tracking our position? We are being chased by the *PhElr* and he has a blast weapon of some description. I thought you said he was using a weapon from this time period?”

I heard Ledarn’s deafening reply in my head, “I am approaching your position on a small transportation vehicle, it has a range of weaponry. Try to evade the *PhElr* for a few moments more.”

Tom was stooped over gasping for breath. “Cigarettes will kill me,” he said with a wry grin, “Who were you talking to?”

I could hear the body armour of the *PhElr* scraping along the gully between the two brick walls.

“Go Tom, I will slow his progress,” I yelled, pointing in the direction of the main gate.

Tom ignored my instructions. “What are you talking about, I can’t see anyone. Why are you trying to frighten me?” he whined.

“Tom, do as I tell you and run, a friend is heading towards us he will explain everything,” I said urgently.

Tom staggered away while looking back over his shoulder, obviously only half believing what he thought was a wild story while I flattened myself against the side wall of Park house waiting for the *PhElr* to appear.

I could hear him getting nearer and suddenly a distorted outline of an arm and shoulder appeared followed by his torso. He appeared to be facing away from me as I pressed the button that I prayed would deactivate his cloaking device and energy shield. If it worked, it should be enough to distract him temporarily which was all the time I needed. I waited with bated breath for his reaction.

Two things happened in quick succession. Firstly, he saw the fleeing shape of Tom, and then he became aware that his cloak and shield had failed which caused him to stop in confusion. At that moment I threw caution to the wind and grabbed his head smashing it against the brick wall in front of him with all the force I could muster - amplified by my energy shield.

“This is for Christine,” I snarled, as his head bounced off the wall like a ping pong ball. Emitting a high pitch scream, he was propelled backwards flying past me like a circus human cannon ball, and then he rebounded off the wall behind me finally coming to rest at my feet where he lay in a silent crumpled heap.

Had I been required to file a report it would have said that I retrieved his weapon and monitored him. Actually, I kicked him several times causing him to groan, once for each of his victims, and twice for Christine. I stopped kicking him only when I heard Ledarn approaching.

“I think he was about to regain consciousness,” I murmured.

Ledarn smiled broadly. “Excellent work Steven,” he cried, commending me. “You were right to move away from the crowded area where people could be harmed, and I am really impressed with your tactics. Tell me, how were you aware that the deactivation function on your armband would work on the model the *PhElr* was wearing?” he asked, with a look of admiration - one time-line protector to another.

“I wasn’t really sure,” I replied hesitantly. “But I had to do something to slow his progress. I figured there was a fifty-fifty chance.”

Ledarn stooped over the *PhElr* and placed a tracer onto his body, like the tracer Officer 16...Edvan, had handed to me shortly before his death. He activated the tracer and the *PhElr* suddenly disappeared.

“He will be taken to the Directorate detention centre where he will be interrogated,” explained Ledarn, anticipating my next question. “I am particularly anxious to know how he and his weapon evaded the detection net, and who helped him distract us by activating a myriad of signal devices.”

We walked to the end of the rear of the school building where Tom was waiting, Ty Lin standing guard.

“Most of the signals were crude devices hidden behind objects or in pupil’s bags,” she reported to Ledarn who nodded in acknowledgement.

“Who are these people Steve?” Tom asked, in bewilderment.

“Friends,” I answered proudly. “They will explain everything.”

CHAPTER 9

RUTHLESS KILLER

We walked quickly through the school gates and turned right into the lane heading towards the park, Ledarn taking the lead and Ty Lin guarding the rear. We used the tree line retaining wall for protection as we hurried through the lane running parallel with the rear wall of Park House, peering into the dense wooded area above us alert to the faintest movement.

Tom, who was demanding an explanation of the events of the last thirty minutes, stopped in front of Ty Lin refusing to move until he received a satisfactory answer to his questions. In a coordinated pincer movement, Ty Lin and I grabbed an arm each and marched him along, providing a limited response only to direct questions.

He scoffed in disbelief when Ty Lin spoke of shield technology and cloaking devices, much as I had only a month earlier. This was a clear indication, however, that Tom was to be tagged and his memory of these events wiped.

We were approaching the corner of the densely wooded area when Ledarn turned and visually checked that each of us had our energy shield enabled. “If your theory is correct a *PhElr* is unaccounted for and that is of the gravest concern.”

We hurried past the small duck pond and whisperers’ corner, so called because many pupils claimed to have heard spooky voices and random whispering in this small area of the park. Strangely it only occurred during the autumn period.

As we approached the clearing where the cloaked *fun* vehicle was positioned; a mild autumn breeze blew leaves in front of us and dazzling shafts of sunlight shone on the trees to our left. Ledarn activated a button on his armband and the vehicle de-cloaked.

Tom stopped abruptly. “Wow! How did that happen?” he cried, clearly astonished. He turned to speak to me, but my attention was drawn to bright, intermittent glinting sunlight bouncing off metal from inside the wood.

“Weapon!” I yelled, diving towards Tom, attempting to get my body encased in life protecting armour between him and the gunman.

Time appeared to slow to a crawl as I stretched frantically with my right arm, like a goalie straining to tip the ball past the post.

I saw the beam bursting out from the trees as I moved slowly through the air. However, out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of Ledarn also moving through the air and he was nearer to Tom than I was. It was a race against time.

The energy beam flashed above me, narrowly missing my left shoulder, but hit Ledarn in the chest propelling him backwards. A fraction of a second later I hit Tom with my right arm, knocking him off his feet, both of us hitting the floor with some force where I lay gasping for breath.

I became aware of severe pain in my left shoulder as I lay on the ground looking up at the clouds; they were the sort of fluffy clouds that form three dimensional shapes. I watched in fascination as the shape of a hand, but with only three fingers began to form. Slowly my mind began to focus on a voice shouting my name.

“Steven, are you injured? Your friend has crawled to my position; we are located to your right hidden in a small channel.” Ty Lin’s voice sounded tense, the confidence she had exhibited during our week on Ergwartha appeared to have evaporated.

“Check Ledarn. He is not moving. Try to get him to the MFV.”

I too began to feel concern over the physical condition of Ledarn as I recalled seeing his body absorb the discharge of the elusive *PhElr*’s weapon. I started to crawl through the grass towards his position, using my arms and legs to propel my body.

Why am I so sore? I wondered as I reached Ledarn's motionless body. I shook him gently. "Ledarn," I called fearfully. He didn't respond, his breathing was laboured, and he looked pale. I figured that blast had been absorbed by his body armour and that he was obviously in a state of shock, so I started to drag him to the safety of the *fun* vehicle.

Lying on my right side I wriggled forward using my feet to gain momentum while dragging Ledarn by the back of his body armour. It was exhausting work. My triceps and back ached as lactic acid built up and I stopped twice to rest.

Suddenly it struck me; my energy shield had been deactivated. A quick check confirmed my worst fears. *Ledarn's energy shield must have been deactivated also, why else would it have failed to protect him from the blast weapon?* I reasoned, as I continued my laboured journey.

I was only ten yards from the safety of the *fun* vehicle when the perimeter alarm went off inside my head and a voice directly behind me spoke,

"You can stop now Steven, release the Directorate officer and stand up. Oh, and tell the female officer in the ditch to stand up also."

I was startled that the *PhElr* knew my name and annoyed at the vulnerable position in which I now found myself. I had assumed that Ty Lin would provide some cover while I tried to reach the safety of the *fun* vehicle.

"Please tell the female Directorate officer to reveal herself," the assailant ordered forcefully. "She dropped her weapon when I discharged mine, most unprofessional. Please tell *Ty Lin* to stand up or I will no option but to eliminate her."

A shiver went down the back of my neck at his use of Ty Lin's personal name, how much more did he know? His voice was familiar, I had heard it before; but my mind was reeling and I couldn't endanger Ty Lin, so I took the only course that made any sense and stood up.

I turned to look at the *PhElr* who was stood perhaps only eight feet away and was astonished to recognise his dark features. "Jedzeel," I gasped, my mouth open in surprise.

Jedzeel smiled triumphantly. "Are you investigating a time-line anomaly Steven?" he asked sarcastically.

"Are you impersonating a time-line officer again?" I replied, with equal sarcasm.

"Touché. And though I would be delighted to engage in idle conversation I must deal with Officer Ty Lin first," he smirked, walking towards me. "Would you please persuade her to stand up?" he snarled, as he dug his blast weapon into my ribs.

"Ty Lin," I shouted, staring into Jedzeel's loathsome eyes, "It appears that I am a hostage in the hands of Jedzeel, the time traveller I encountered last month, unfortunately he wants you to stand up." I paused for a second and then blurted out, "If you are near the *fun* vehicle take Tom and go."

Jedzeel gave a tut of disapproval. "Steven, you have proved extremely valuable to my organization, please do not force me to execute you any sooner than I have to."

I took a step back with the intention of grappling with Jedzeel to effect Ty Lin's escape, but he moved with incredible speed and grabbed me by the neck, whereupon he spun me around so that I was now looking at the *fun* vehicle.

"Directorate Officer Ty Lin, stand up immediately or I will execute this young cub without hesitation," Ledarn commanded.

Slowly Ty Lin's head and shoulders appeared over the top of the small mound behind which she had sought refuge. She rose hesitantly, unsure how to react to this strange turn of events.

"Please come here and bring Steven's young friend with you," shouted Jedzeel, now totally in command.

Ty Lin looked frightened and unsure but did as she was instructed and walked slowly towards Jedzeel, Tom following nervously in her footsteps.

“That’s far enough,” Jedzeel snarled. “Remove your armband and place it at your feet.”

Ty Lin hesitated, aware that compliance would leave her defenceless. Jedzeel shook his head in disappointment. “You appear to need a demonstration of my intent.”

He raised his hand and fired the lethal energy weapon at Tom, knocking him off his feet. Tom hit the ground with a thud and lay there writhing in agony as a blue electrical discharge from Jedzeel’s energy weapon surged through his body.

I was stunned at witnessing the meaningless torture of my best friend, and attempted to break free of Jedzeel’s tight grip, but he merely laughed and threw me to the floor.

Ty Lin needed no further persuading; she pressed a button on her armband and then recited the command code that allowed it drop off her arm, a look of abject defeat on her face. Jedzeel smirked, took a step forward, and in one smooth action adjusted the setting and fired, the energy weapon hitting Ty Lin square in the chest.

Like Tom, she too was engulfed by a surge of energy, but it was considerably greater. Fatally wounded, she slumped to the ground. Jedzeel raised his left arm to reveal a second weapon which he aimed at Ty Lin’s lifeless body and fired. Instantly she disappeared.

I felt the air being expelled from my lungs as I went rigid with fear; I had never witnessed an execution and I was overcome with revulsion at the senseless slaughter of gentle Ty Lin. I felt a sense of shame that I had been partly responsible for her death; I should have crawled faster, if only I hadn’t been left so vulnerable when Ledarn was hit.

If only! If only!

Jedzeel now turned his attention to Ledarn, situated a couple of feet to my left, and again fired the energy weapon. He too was engulfed by an immense energy burst which was followed by a shot from what was evidently a tracer weapon that dispatched his body back to the 25th century.

I was overcome with grief, numb at having witnessed the execution of two people that I had grown fond of. I started to wretch violently, so sickened was I by the casual violence applied so dispassionately and with such brutal precision. Jedzeel would undoubtedly describe it as a professional execution, but there was no disguising the cold-blooded murder of two decent people.

“Steven, I think you should sit before your legs give way,” motioned Jedzeel, as he calmly replaced the tracer weapon into a holder on his waist belt. “Do not concern yourself about their bodies, the Directorate has detected the signal and retrieved them. Now what am I to do with you and your friend?” Jedzeel smirked menacingly.

I raised my head to look into his eyes, they were cold and lifeless. I could expect no mercy from this ruthless assassin. There could be only moments before Tom and I became two more notches on the butt of his energy weapon.

In a last act of desperation, I knelt before Jedzeel, hands clasped tightly together. “You don’t need to kill Tom,” I pleaded. “Kill me; I’ve been the cause of your trouble.”

A large grin broke out on Jedzeel’s face and he threw his head back in laughter. “You have been no trouble Steven; in fact, we could not have accomplished any of this without your help. And you are right, there is no requirement for me to kill your friend, as neither he nor the other pupil killed posed a threat. Their details were included on the disk to convince you and the Temporal Directorate that their lives were in danger – they were just pawns.”

Before I could respond he raised the energy weapon in his right hand and fired, killing Tom where he lay.

My mind snapped, I shrieked in rage at the murder of my best friend. “You animal,” I spat, as I stumbled to my feet. I rushed at him with the furious intention of turning his own weapon upon him and obliterating his face from my memory.

However, Jedzeel was a formidable warrior, highly trained in the art of hand to hand combat and easily sidestepped my assault, while whipping my feet from under me. I hit the ground with a sickening thud for the second time in a few minutes where I lay panting, winded by the fall.

In the movies I would have bounced back onto my feet and knocked him out with a lucky punch, but this was real life and any trace of resistance had just been beaten out of me. I felt utterly defeated and was resigned to an ignominious end.

Wearily I struggled to raise myself onto my elbows while Jedzeel sat watching me roaring with laughter. “Are you prepared to admit defeat junior Temporal Investigator, or shall I defend myself once more from your furious onslaught?” This was evidently an amusing situation as Jedzeel contained his laughter with great difficulty, lapsing into a fit of the giggles between each breath.

“You should be aware that I am skilled in administering pain in countless ways, and occasionally I have held a foe at the point of an excruciatingly painful death for many hours, purely for my enjoyment.”

A shudder ran through me, caused not by his demented threats, but the sick pleasure that emanated from his eyes as he spoke.

“What did you mean that I had been valuable to your organization?” I asked curiously, ignoring his taunts. “How have I been valuable? And to which organization do you belong?”

“If you give your word to sit quietly, I will reveal your unwitting participation in this momentous victory,” he answered cockily.

Taking my lack of response as a sign of submission, he began to recount the carefully planned strategy that had led to this moment.

“For many years the Directorate has ruthlessly controlled time travel for its own ends, they alone have decided the course that history should take, travelling into the past to make alterations.

Some of the scientists and politicians involved with the time travel programme have become concerned at their manipulation of the time-line, but when they raised their voice they were erased, wiped out of existence.

“How could you know this?” I snarled. “Surely you would have no recollection of a person that to all intents and purposes had never existed?” Jedzeel just looked right through me, shrugging off my challenge, completely ignoring my outburst.

“Details began to leak out from frightened Directorate employees that resulted in the formation of a group of extremely wealthy and powerful businessmen opposed to the unilateral control of such life and death technology. They gathered the resources necessary to contest the Directorate which included acquiring the latest technology, recruiting the best scientists, and the creation of a clandestine operational security force which they named the Phantom Elite, designed for covert hit and run operations. We are the best of the best,” he boasted proudly.

“Unfortunately, to date we have experienced only modest results as the Directorate seemingly has access to unlimited resources and technology research. This gave them an overwhelming advantage. It resulted in a high success rate in their detection and tagging techniques. However, that advantage no longer exists.” His face wore a sickening grin - from ear to ear - as he pointed to his armband.

“They were totally unaware that their energy shields and cloaking devices were vulnerable to disruption.”

Waiving his blast weapon in the air as he spoke, he continued to rant. “Their much-fabled detection systems failed to alert them to my presence – or for that matter, that I had an uncontrolled 25th-century weapon in this sector. Our scientists are altering the balance of power,” he boasted, pausing for a moment as if waiting for a look of appreciation.

I responded with a dark, icy stare.

Undeterred, however, he continued.

“My organisation wanted to make a powerful statement, something spectacular that would strike at the heart of the Directorate in one movement, and that would instil fear and uncertainty. You, my gullible friend, were instrumental in the execution of that plan.”

This was the second time that he had referred to my participation in this great cosmic plan. I was unaware of anything that might have contributed to its execution, save that of the execution of many good friends.

“The entire event was a deception,” Jedzeel goaded. “It was an enormous ruse,” he blurted, unable to stifle a series of giggles.

“You believed Edvan, and the Directorate believed you.” He roared, as he broke out into a bout of uncontrolled laughter.

I was still none the wiser, Jedzeel appeared to be talking in riddles.

“Perhaps you could explain it in simple terms, without the histrionics,” I growled, seriously fed up with his incessant boasting.

“Do you remember the events of 29th September, the day you met Edvan?”

“Yes, I remember it well. How could I forget, the man died in front of me? I buried his lifeless body in the woods.”

“No, he didn’t,” he cried, wiping tears of laughter from his face. “He was an actor.”

“What?” I stammered. “What are you saying? He died in my arms, I watched him take his last breath.”

I was stunned; my brain couldn’t accept the deceitful words flowing like a torrent from his lips. The death of Edvan had traumatised me for many days, and though not an expert, I was pretty sure that he had died before my eyes.

“I was stood ten meters away recording the drama. We simulated his injuries, and what you perceived as his death was in fact a quick acting chemical capsule that induced a near death-like state. After you dragged him deeper into the woods, stripped him and covered him with leaves you fled.

However, following your departure I administered an antidote and we both returned to our time period. He is very much alive and is playing the principle role in a very popular historical enactment in my century.”

I was rendered speechless by this startling disclosure, my jaw dropped, my mind was numb. Could that faith shaking event have been staged, the entire drama just a senseless deception?

Jedzeel sat smirking as he savoured my reaction. “Have words left you, Steven?” he taunted.

“No funny quip with which to enrage me?”

I struggled to form a sentence.

“Why? I don’t understand. There were disks..... What about the disks?” I gasped.

“Yes. You were infuriatingly slow in identifying the data on the disks, but creating a duplicate was a nice touch, it showed promise.”

I still couldn’t grasp the larger picture.

“But what about the dead time traveller?” I whispered. I was convinced that he too was dead. “Don’t tell me that he was also an actor.”

Jedzeel shook his head lazily, a big beaming smile on his face. “He was a Directorate agent who had infiltrated our organization. We executed him moments before your

arrival. In fact, you heard the explosion that killed him, a combination of a blast weapon and a concussion device used to attract your attention.”

Jedzeel looked supremely smug as he continued to unravel before me, the sequence of events, like Sherlock Holmes about to name the murderer.

“The tracer sent him back to Directorate headquarters, thus began our campaign to expose the existence of the time travel programme, and our ultimate aim – to wrestle control from the hands of the Directorate.

We really couldn’t have done this without you.” Once again, he erupted into a fit of laughter.

Slowly a morbid realization swept over me.

“I *am* to blame,” I said to myself out loud, “Ty Lin and Ledarn believed the deception as did Sajna and Mark. Two – maybe three of them are now dead.”

A flood of tears ran down my cheeks.

“Oh God, Christine, gentle Christine died because of me. My best friend Tom, and Sian the classical music lover - both died because of me.” I tried to wipe the tears away with the back of my hand and looked up at Jedzeel, who was still chuckling.

“And now I’m next. What’s the total? Seven, or is it eight, dead in one day? Is this how you fight the Directorate by killing innocent people?” I yelled angrily.

“Does it all boil down to greed and a sordid power struggle.”

Suddenly Jedzeel’s eyes blazed. “I need no lecture on morality from you or anyone else in our fight with those life suckers...parasites,” he responded, with no hint of remorse.

“Did your precious Directorate friends reveal that everyone in my time is dying from a ferociously mutating disease that they introduced?

They were so arrogant in their belief that ancient bacterial diseases and viral infections would pose no danger as historians and scientists walked amongst the dead and infected in London during the plague of 1666. They documented the flu virus that swept Europe in 1918, taking samples for their laboratory collection. They gathered samples of AIDs, Ebola, Covid, Typhus, Malaria and a thousand other microscopic parasites to further their pathetic understanding.

It is rumoured that they began to experiment, that they attempted to create the ultimate super virus, a combination of all those that had gone before it through the ages. But they failed to contain their monster.”

Jedzeel was so agitated that he was almost shouting, and his eyes had filled with tears.

“Suddenly, and without warning, people began to develop horrific symptoms, dying in unimaginable pain within hours of contracting this cocktail of ancient plagues.”

Tears ran down his cheeks as he spoke of loved ones caught up in this pandemic of bubonic proportions.

“My wife and two daughters were among the first wave in our sector to succumb to those invisible ancient killers, within days the dead numbered in their millions. I am the sole remaining member of my family and relatives, surviving only because I was at sea, employed on a marine vessel. When news broke, we were quarantined outside the port for three weeks until they were satisfied that we posed no threat – though by then most of the population had perished.”

He paused for a moment, closing his eyes as he visited painful memories. “Of course, a temporary antidote was quickly affected but this remedy only delayed the inevitable,” he whispered sadly. Again, he paused while his thoughts dwelled on tragic times.

Even though his actions were abhorrent, I couldn’t help but feel a moment’s sympathy for a man who had lost his wife, children, and close family members. No one deserves to lose their loved ones in such a way.

With a fierce grunt the anger resurfaced as he shouted, causing me to jump. “Do you now see why control of the Directorate is crucial?”

I stared at the angry man before me, I had been granted a glimpse of the emotions that drove him, but I couldn't condone his recent heartless actions.

“I feel for your loss Jedzeel, but cold-hearted murder isn't the answer.”

Jedzeel scoffed at my comments, he was obviously too far down the dark, evil slope, to listen to a rational argument.

“You are too naive; you see things in monochrome, black and white. Their blinkered philosophy of no disturbance, no change, isn't the only way. Others in my time believe that the universe is dynamic, and events will occur regardless of interference. If you cut a branch from a tree a new branch will appear close by. But enough of that, it is now time for you to join your friends.”

Though not an option I would have chosen willingly, I realised that I was no longer afraid of dying. In the last few minutes I had gathered my senses and controlled my fear, and I didn't want to give Jedzeel the pleasure of seeing me squirm and beg for my life.

While Jedzeel had been relating *war and peace*, I had moved into a sitting position, resting my back against a tree. I crossed my arms in a sign of defiance. “It won't do you any good you know. I have a batch of the good stuff in my bloodstream, superior nanites. Moments after you pull the trigger the cavalry will come charging in to arrest you.”

I paused for a second to rearrange my thoughts.

“No! Now I come to think of it, Ty Lin said that they would arrive here to apprehend you *before* you pull the trigger. Hah! They are probably hiding among the trees behind us even as we speak, ready to thwart your devilish plan.”

Jedzeel stared at me in disbelief as though I had delivered my victory speech in French.

“Have you hit your head and suffered a concussion? There is no one else in this sector, and regardless of what you may have been told, the Directorate will not despatch field agents to prevent me from killing you. If they possessed that ability do you not think that they would have prevented me from killing two of their own? You might find this hard to accept, but you are not that important.”

My spirits sank, he did have a point. Ty Lin had boasted of their infallible detection net. Strike one!

She sang the praises of their ability to pinpoint the moment in time when a murder was committed and how a Directorate team would travel beyond that moment and lie in wait. Strike two!

Well, where were they?

I gave Jedzeel a nod of resignation. “Touché. I have come to the realisation that everyone from your time period is a bigger liar than Tom Pepper. You should all run for Parliament.”

Again, Jedzeel looked nonplussed.

“I find difficulty in understanding your rambling colloquial terms Steven Morris, but regardless I must bid you farewell. Now please retrieve the armband that Ty Lin dropped before I executed her.” He pointed toward the spot where Ty Lin had been so cruelly murdered before my eyes.

Though Jedzeel's request made little sense, I took the last few steps of my short life and picked up Ty Lin's armband. Jedzeel raised the energy weapon in his right hand; the look on his face was blank, devoid of emotion, a trained executioner about to fulfil his role.

“I don't suppose I can deactivate your energy shield with my armband and kill you with a stone, like David did to Goliath?” I asked flippantly in one final act of defiance.

Jedzeel laughed and lowered the weapon, “Your belligerent attitude and unshakeable optimism are an admirable combination. Unfortunately for you my armband utilizes a very high rotating frequency, it would take many months to identify the frequency range.’

“Go on, humour me,” I replied. “I promise to take it to the grave.”

Again, Jedzeel gave a hearty laugh. “Steven, I almost regret that I have to kill you, but those are my orders. The frequency is 105.8.2, but that knowledge will die with you. Goodbye, Steven Morris. Prepare to meet your ancestors.”

I raised my arm instinctively to protect my face and felt the beam hit my armband, bouncing off in all directions. The force flung me backwards, I could see and feel high voltage surges emanating from both armbands, and then I lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 10

A DIFFERENT ERA

I was numb with cold and could feel raindrops splashing my face as I slowly opened my eyes, trying to focus but without success. A strong breeze blew leaves around my body causing me to shiver. Though it was dark, there were signs that daybreak was approaching as the edges of the black sky slowly changed colour, and the birds began their dawn chorus.

I tried unsuccessfully to raise myself up on my elbows but lacking the energy my head slumped back onto the wet grass. My mind was shrouded in a dense fog of confusion, I felt as though I was in a crazy dream as I struggled to clear my head.

Twice I drifted in and out of sleep. Each time I awoke my wet, cold body, shook uncontrollably.

On the third occasion I awoke my head had cleared, I was fully alert, and the awful memory of three people murdered in front of my eyes, came flooding back. I could see clearly the look of defeat and anguish on the face of Ty Lin as she realised that she was about to die. I remembered the anger I felt at witnessing the life being extinguished from Ledarn's helpless body, and the fury that consumed me as the same fate was metered out to my best friend Tom. I could vividly recall Jedzeel's final words as he bade me farewell, *Goodbye Steven Morris, prepare to meet your ancestors.*

Suddenly, I was overwhelmed with the desire to run, to hide. I was the only living witness to the brutal, senseless, slaughter of three good people, and I couldn't fathom out why I was still alive - which bewildered me.

I was at a loss to explain my survival, I was certainly hit long and hard by the high energy blast, and Jedzeel had displayed murderous intent to efface me from this world as he uttered those words. Panic-stricken, I began to scramble to my knees, but a sharp pain in my left wrist caused me to wince and tuck it into my chest for protection. I altered the angle of my body to enable my right hand to support me as I rose to a kneeling position.

I jerked my head to the left, and then to the right, as I scanned the area looking for any sign of movement. I strained to listen for any noise that would indicate a hidden presence, but the strong breeze and bird song made such detection unlikely.

The sky was rapidly changing from black to dark blue and the dawn chorus was in full swing as I rose to my feet and staggered towards the tree line twenty yards to my right, I needed to reach cover quickly before Jedzeel found me.

Desperately, I sprinted towards the safety of the trees dodging and weaving; expecting to feel another excruciatingly painful, and most certainly, a fatal blast of energy hit my body with every stride.

Upon reaching the first line of trees I fell in a heap behind a large oak where I laid gasping for breath, drained of all energy. If Jedzeel found me now I would be entirely at his mercy and completely unable to respond. I lay behind the tree breathing deeply watching my chest rise and fall as I sucked in each lungful of air.

How had I regained consciousness so far from the spot that Jedzeel had subjected me to what I had considered to be a fatal burst of power from his energy weapon? Perhaps the force of it caused me to stagger like a ham actor in a death scene, gasping the words *Goodbye cruel world*, with my final breath.

Slowly I regained control of my breathing, and from somewhere deep inside I found the strength to prop myself up with my back against the tree. I was totally confused. Why hadn't Jedzeel killed me as promised? Was he toying with me while cloaked? Had he

dragged me to the spot where I awoke and was now playing out some perverted sick game, prolonging my execution until he grew tired of the entertainment?

My armband had taken the brunt of the energy blast, to which my acutely painful wrist bore testimony, but he must have seen that I was still alive.

Daybreak was well and truly underway as I summoned up the energy and the nerve to glance around the trunk of this impressively large oak. The park was deserted, hardly surprising given that it was early morning. Nothing moved, and only the occasional strong gust of wind and a chorus of songbirds disturbed the reverence of a new day dawning.

Withdrawing back to my original position I slumped against the tree and closed my eyes; I was overcome by a feeling of exhaustion; the energy blast had left me extremely weak. I shuddered to think the damage it may have inflicted on my nervous system and internal organs. Surely it had to be the equivalent of being struck by a large bolt of lightning. I once read of a man that had been struck by a bolt of lightning – apparently all that was left was a pair of smouldering shoes, at least my feet were still in mine.

I began to deliberate on the possible scenarios and fatal outcomes when being stalked by a cloaked *PhElr*, and the more I thought on it the more a defiant anger grew inside me. *Why should I participate in his warped fantasy? He is such a lethal killing machine that I am as good as dead anytime he decides to squeeze the trigger*, I thought bitterly to myself. Buoyed by my spirited rage I grew bolder and crawled to the side of my sturdy wooden protective shield and surveyed the area more closely.

Somehow the skyline seemed different, spaces existed where there should have been shapes. I had been so intent in my search for movement that I had failed to notice the uneven landscape. In an area adjacent to the school there should have been a park with swings, a roundabout and a slide, they had been a feature of the park for as long as I could remember, but alarmingly they were gone. The workmen's hut, toilets, bowls green and tennis courts were similarly absent. I glanced to the left where I expected to see the rugby stadium and sports centre; these immovable structures too were missing. In fact, there was a profound change to the surroundings that was so familiar to me - the park was devoid of any buildings. It consisted of acres of neatly mown grass with clusters of trees dotted here and there, and a much larger gathering of trees near the Victorian gates at the East end of the park.

Dreading the outcome, slowly I turned my head to the right in the direction of the school, which as I feared was also disturbingly different. Gone was the extension that housed the maths and English classrooms. Also removed were the lower school and the new science building. Standing before me was an almost perfect replica of the old Park House painting displayed outside the Headmasters office, or rather would be displayed outside the Headmasters office in 1971. It was evident that I no longer stood in twentieth century Pontypool as even the hedge that had bordered the school grounds was yet to be planted.

I sat back against the rough bark of the tree stunned; this was like a bad dream. Clearly, when the energy discharge from Jedzeel's weapon that was intended to blast me into oblivion struck my armband, the immense surge of power sent me hurtling into the past. The only remaining question was when?

Every pupil that attended St Alban's had been taught that Park House was built in the late 17th Century and had undergone various changes. If pressed I would guess I had tumbled into the Georgian or even Victorian era; I had no way of knowing the exact time frame.

A severe jolt of pain in my left wrist caught my attention. I pulled up what was left of my shirt sleeve to examine the cause; the armband was badly damaged and the skin

around what remained was red and blistered. I realised the armband was still radiating heat and urgently required removal. The buttons appeared intact and I began jabbing at them. Twice I entered the command code 15041955 until it dawned on me that the device that had saved my life was beyond salvage, the need for command codes had long since passed. Gingerly I grasped the remaining part of the gauntlet and wrenched it off my forearm. A sea of intense pain suddenly swept over me taking me to the extreme edge of consciousness. With great difficulty I fought back the waves of nausea, breathing in through my nose and exhaling slowly through pursed lips.

A few minutes must have elapsed before the pain subsided to a level where I was able to think clearly. I glanced down at my forearm; the skin was severely blistered, little wonder that it generated such intense pain. *Where in Georgian or Victorian Britain do you obtain Aspirin and Vaseline Petroleum jelly or TCP?* I wondered with a grimace.

And then I was struck by the proverbial thunderbolt. I had two armbands in my possession when I was enveloped by the high voltage energy beam. If I could find the second one my stay in this era might be short lived.

Using the tree for support I struggled to my feet and began retracing my steps. Heading towards the park gates I passed the patch of open ground on which I had knelt begging Jedzeel for the life of my best friend Tom. Scanning the ground before me with an intense stare I searched the area anxiously in the early morning light. A feeling of frustration slowly grew into mild panic as I covered the area for a second, and then third time with no success. I had to consider the possibility that Ty Lin's armband might have been destroyed. It might also have been flung into the past and materialised in any one of a hundred centuries.

It was despairingly apparent that it was not here, and that was when the sense of extreme isolation swept over me. I was alive in an era where not one person on this vast planet knew me, everyone that I cared for wouldn't even be born for a century or more - I was truly alone.

I was engulfed by feelings of anguish and guilt as I recalled the awful consequences that followed the acquisition of the armband.

"An actor. A bloody actor," I repeated to myself overcome with grief as tears flowed down my cheeks. Could things get much worse? Was I doomed to spend my life in industrial Britain burdened by my knowledge of the future?

My mother and pesky brother would never know what had befallen me, another statistic in a vast ocean of statistics. And like Joseph Wilson, another suspected runaway never to be found.

My knowledge of industrial Britain was somewhat limited, but I knew that this was a desperate period in which to live without any means of support. There was no National Health Service, no state benefit for the unemployed; no one would bat an eyelid if I went hungry, in fact tens of thousands died of hunger and disease during this period, including many children.

I recalled the history lessons: most men and many children worked the mines or steel mills where fatalities were commonplace; many lived in workhouses where conditions were appalling. Education was the privilege of the rich, consequently the poor were denied the opportunity to read or write, sanitation was crude and running water was a luxury. Travel was by horse and carriage for the wealthy, on foot for the lower classes. The combustion engine was many years away, though steam rail travel was in its infancy. Pick pockets, thieves and vagabonds were rife, with transportation to Australia their reward when apprehended. And of course, there was no electricity in most buildings and homes. Telephones were rare, and radio and television were many years away. God, life had to be extremely dull in this time period.

As I sat against the large oak deep in thought, the sun began to rise. I was still cold, and the warming rays of the early morning sun were most welcome.

The distant neighing of a horse caught my attention and I twisted my body to the right so that I could peer carefully in the direction of Park House. Sure enough a horse was trotting through the park in the direction of the Victorian gates. Its rider was a young girl; she looked no older than thirteen and was dressed in grey trousers and a black jacket. "Well done, Bessie," she said, praising the horse as it broke into a canter. The horse, a magnificent white mare, was around fifteen hands high; it neighed and shook its head as it broke into a gallop. I shuffled my body a few feet to the left around the tree to avoid detection, and then twisted my body to the right as she rode past my position and watched as she continued towards the Victorian gates; however, the horse then veered to the left and disappeared into a group of trees.

I shuffled back into place and relaxed, again my mind began to wander as I bathed in the warmth of the morning sun. My thoughts returned to the final moments before Jedzeel had attempted to blast me into oblivion. I had goaded the megalomaniac into revealing the rotating frequency of his energy shield - 105.8.2. Somehow, I had to relay that critical information to Ty Lin, Ledarn, Sanja, Mark and my future self before that fatal encounter with Jedzeel.

I began to doze once more when I heard the neighing of the horse and the pounding of its hooves long before it raced out from the trees. However, it was no longer alone, the horse and its rider were being pursued by three large dogs. The dogs bore the appearance of hunting dogs, but they looked bedraggled and hungry and were growling fiercely as they chased the horse. The mare, now in full flight, was snorting loudly as it strained to increase its speed. The girl was leaning forward urging the horse to go faster, but the dogs were making up ground with every stride displaying an astonishing turn of pace. As the horse passed my position the dogs were already snapping at its heels.

The horse began to panic, weaving unpredictably as the dogs forced it to run in a large circle before it finally stopped and pivoted back and forth as it sought a means of escape. The dogs now surrounded it, snarling, salivating, and cautiously edged ever closer.

The girl was terrified, crying out, urging Bessie to flee.

The largest and most vicious of the three dogs suddenly leapt at the horse's breast causing the horse to rear up where it frantically kicked its front legs at the savage attacker. The girl lurched backwards desperately clinging to the reins while the rearing horse staggered on its hind legs, hooves thrashing wildly. However, the dog had misjudged the distance between itself and the horse and was struck on its head two or three times before collapsing to the ground, where it remained motionless.

As the horse dropped its front legs the girl became unbalanced and was thrown over the horse's head landing awkwardly in a heap. The frightened rider-less horse galloped away in the direction of Park House closely pursued by one of the dogs, but menacingly the other dog began circling the girl who struggled unsteadily to her feet. It growled and changed direction as though it was uncertain when to launch itself at the defenceless teenager.

Frantically I searched for a weapon, a stick, a stone, anything that would defend the young girl from a mauling. Out of the corner of my eye I spied a small branch lying on the floor at the foot of a tree. I grabbed it and ran towards the girl shouting and waving my arms like a man possessed. "Shoo, shoo, get away from her you beast," I yelled loudly.

The startled girl and the dog turned to face me as I raced towards them. "Come on then attack me you spineless hound," I challenged. Unfortunately, the hound accepted and leapt at me with fangs bared.

I managed to parry its initial attack with the branch, but it just growled and leapt at me a second time sinking its jaws into my right arm, shaking its head as it tried to tear flesh. I fell to the floor crying out in pain, whereupon the dog released my arm and sank its drooling fangs into my right thigh. Yelling loudly as my leg jerked in pain, I began to thrash the branch at its head and repeatedly tried to use my left leg to prise it away.

Suddenly a figure launched itself onto the back of the dog and grabbed it around the neck; it was the girl. As she wrestled and tugged at the dog's head, I dug my thumb into one of its eye sockets in desperation forcing it to release my leg. It did so as with a yelp of pain.

The dog backed off momentarily providing the opportunity for the girl to stagger to her feet to poke and prod it with the branch; I could barely raise myself as my right arm and leg were immobilised. The pain in my right bicep was excruciating and my shirt sleeve was drenched in blood. The muscles in my right leg felt as if they had been lanced with a burning red-hot poker.

Exerting great effort, I raised myself with my left arm and balanced unsteadily on my left knee, barely able to defend myself or the girl against the next attack which I expected at any moment. However, it never came because without explanation the dog raced away towards the bottom of the park.

The reason was suddenly apparent as two large dogs flashed past us in pursuit. "Henry, George," the girl squealed in delight. "Kill it and rip its heart out," she yelled loudly.

"Are they your dogs?" I asked painfully.

"No, they are the Squire's dogs, they are the most fearsome dogs in this valley," she added proudly.

"Sarah are you hurt?" yelled a man, as he ran towards us.

"A little... Bessie threw me," she replied. "Thankfully, this gentleman saved my life and has been gored in the arm and the leg for his troubles."

The man was panting heavily as he reached us. He was about forty years old and wore a tweed jacket and flat cap, over his arm hung a shotgun. "I gathered you were in danger when I saw what resembled a wolfhound chasing Bessie."

The girl who was clinging to my left arm stiffened and cried out in alarm, "Is she injured? Did it hurt her?"

The man smiled while shaking his head. "She is safe, I shot the beast and Tom is calming Bessie."

He turned his attention to me. "Who might you be, and what are you doing on the Squire's land?" he asked brusquely,

Before I could answer the girl interjected on my behalf. "He saved my life; the hound might have killed me if he hadn't intervened."

The man grunted in acknowledgement but swung his gaze back at me and raised his eyebrows in expectation.

"My name is Steve Morris, and I am travelling from Abergavenny to Crumlin. I seem to have lost my sense of direction as I came over the mountain, though I do recall passing a tall tower and a small round building a while back," I answered, flowering my journey of fantasy with the mention of local landmarks. "I was passing through this meadow when I saw dogs attacking the young lady and her horse."

"He must mean the Folley and the Shell Grotto," Sarah again intervened. "He is not the first person to take a wrong turning after coming through Mamhilad, Edwards."

Addressing Edwards by his surname indicated that Sarah held a higher social status than his. Perhaps she was the daughter of some noble man or military officer of high rank. My fortuitous intervention could be the first good thing to happen to me this day.

Whatever time in which I now found myself, a friend with influence would be most welcome.

Edwards obviously agreed with her assessment as he thrust out his hand. "Pleased to make your acquaintance Master Morris," he said enthusiastically. "My name is Edwards and I oversee the maintenance of the park estate."

The effort of trying to move my right arm caused me to wince in pain; instead I grasped his outstretched hand with my left hand in true scout fashion.

"I cannot move my right arm Mr Edwards," I explained apologetically.

"No matter," he replied with a sympathetic smile, "I will take you to Park House where we can administer aid. This young lady is Mistress Sarah; she is the daughter of Colonel Hardman, the Administrator of Squire Hanbury's estates."

The names Colonel and Sarah Hardman seemed somehow familiar. I nodded politely as I struggled to place them but gave up after a few seconds. I couldn't focus on anything other than exhaustion and pain.

Sarah had set off hurriedly towards Park House; no doubt eager to be reunited with Bessie. Edwards beckoned me to follow.

"Those wounds need cleaning and binding young Morris." Seeing the pain on my face Edwards gently placed my good arm around his neck and grasped me around the waist to take the weight off my damaged leg enabling me to limp towards the house.

"Mrs Evans, the Squire's housekeeper, is practiced in the art of medicine and has sewn up many a person," he said quietly. "Mind you she is chapel and doesn't believe in strong drink to relieve pain," he chuckled, with a sadistic grin.

My mind was in turmoil; mention of Squire Hanbury placed me in the late 19th Century towards the end of Queen Victoria's reign. Frantically I tried to recall the first-year history lessons about John Hanbury, known by all as Squire Hanbury. He was born around the middle of the 19th Century and died shortly after WW1. During his tenure of Park House there were many lavish parties, the rich and famous attended - including The Prince of Wales who was a frequent guest.

The mention of Mrs Evans, added to Colonel Hardman and Sarah, also rang a large bell. But for the life of me I couldn't recall why.

The journey to Park House was difficult, each step caused great pain as we shuffled and limped along the drive that ran from the Victorian gates at the bottom end of the park to the large turning area outside the grand entrance to Park House. As we drew nearer, we stopped for the fifth or sixth time and I was able to scrutinise features of the house that I had never seen before.

I was struck by the number of large chimney stacks, upwards of ten or more. Obviously redundant by the middle of the twentieth century, they were removed. Open fireplaces made way for scores of large cast iron radiators. Gone was the East wing extension, so badly damaged by the blast. In its place a few large windows and two side entrance doors adorned the side of the building. However, the most striking feature was the brickwork. No longer coated in a grubby grey render, it was clean and pristine. The house presented a magnificent spectacle. I could almost visualise the gentlemen in their dinner jackets, and the ladies in their extravagant dresses and hats, being helped from their carriages by the servants of Park House as the rich and famous made their way into this magnificent building to attend one of the many grand balls for which it was known.

The image evaporated as my mind superimposed the landscape and structures that was so familiar. I visualised the extension and the lower school buildings with the science block located behind it. I could hear the chatter and laughter of hundreds of pupils quite clearly. I could see their ghostly images running, playing football, skipping, giggling, some camped on the edge of the playground, and the plethora of activities that take place

each break period. The flashback reminded me of an old 1939 black and white film I had viewed many times. It also displayed the ghostly images of all the schoolchildren the main character, Mr Chipping, had taught. In the final moments of his life, as he lay on his death bed, there was a heart-rending scene where he too saw ghostly images as he touchingly visualising each one bidding him farewell.

I started to fill up as I remembered the times Tom and I had ambled around the playground deep in conversation. How I longed to be back there. At this moment I would even endure the confrontations with O'Hare to return to the time to which I belong.

Eventually we reached Park House and Edwards guided me towards a side entrance door where we entered the building. Sarah met us as we struggled along a narrow hallway with its high ceiling and patterned marble floor. She directed Edwards to make me comfortable in the cigar room where Mrs Evans would meet us. Smiling, she made reference to changing her attire and promptly disappeared along the hallway and up a flight of stairs.

Edwards continued to support me as we awkwardly negotiated our way through a doorway and into a small room. As befitting a cosy cigar room, it had the minimum of furniture: four chairs, two padded stools and a small table. The walls appeared to be lined with thick mauve coloured wallpaper adorned with flowery motifs dotted here and there.

I slumped onto one of the chairs out of sheer exhaustion; the exertions of the last thirty minutes had clearly taken their toll. I let my head fall back and closed my eyes while Morris gently lifted my right leg to place a padded stool beneath it. He positioned the stool under my thigh and then carefully placed a second stool under my calf muscle. Excusing himself he left the room in search of Mrs Evans.

The room had one small window which overlooked the park. I studied the window frame which looked like the wooden frames of my time, sectioned into small squares and painted with shimmering white paint, probably the gloss equivalent of the day, but with a heavy lead content no doubt.

As I gazed out at the area where a roundabout and swings would one day exist, I began to construct a cover story, a plausible reason for my journey to Crumlin and an explanation for my clothing and shoes that would surely attract comment.

I reasoned that the wealthy guests at Park House would be familiar with the latest fashions from around Europe and the exotic fabrics imported from the East, but possibly not so familiar with the styles and materials from the Americas. My cover story would therefore include an upbringing in the USA, somewhere on the East coast – perhaps Boston, Massachusetts.

Next, I would need a reason for returning to the native country of my parents. A fatal accident involving my father would elicit sympathy and understanding for my mother's desire to be among her relatives at such a time.

Finally, the untimely and tragic death of my beloved mother would explain a grieving orphan's need to contact his mother's brother, Uncle David, believed to reside in the hill-side village of Crumlin. So touching was my plight that I almost felt sorry for this young orphan and the dreadful circumstances that had led him to this place.

My train of thought was broken by the heavy-footed sound of someone approaching, the footsteps grew louder and then suddenly the door was flung open and a large round-faced woman entered the room.

"Now then dear let me have a look at your injuries," said the rather plump middle-aged woman cheerfully. Her greying hair was tied up in a bun and was covered with a white linen cap. She was carrying a large wooden box in her hands which she placed on the floor near my painful leg, and then she pulled a chair forward onto which she deposited her matronly backside.

“You will have to remove your garment,” she said pointing at my trousers. “Your shirt too,” she added with a grimace as she caught sight of my blood-soaked shirt sleeve.

Slowly I unbuttoned my trousers. Rising painfully, I raised myself onto my left leg to allow them to drop to the floor. Unfortunately, the congealed blood had bonded with the material of the right trouser leg and my skin which had to be removed carefully - inch by inch - causing me to wince in pain.

“There you go dear,” said Mrs Evans sympathetically. “You can sit down now so that I can tend to your leg.”

Bending down she opened the lid of the wooden box and started to search through its contents, finally emerging with a piece of cloth. Turning her head toward the door she yelled in a booming voice, “Where’s that water?”

The sound of someone scampering down the hallway could be heard long before a tall thin man appeared in the doorway. In his hands was a large white porcelain bowl which contained water, much of it dripping over the sides due to his haste to meet Mrs Evans demands, clearly not a woman to be kept waiting.

Mrs Evans placed the bowl of water beside the wooden box and proceeded to dip the cloth into the water which she then used to clean the blood off my leg. Each time she approached the most painful areas I tensed and let out a cry of pain.

“You have four deep fang marks on the top of your leg and a couple underneath, there are also other bite marks and deep scratches dear,” reported Mrs Evans. “Most of them have stopped bleeding and just need some of my special preparation to help them form a covering. The pain will diminish over the next few days and you will be able to walk, though your leg will be a little stiff for a while.”

Once again Mrs Evans bent over to rummage through her wooden medicine box, this time she emerged with a large opaque bottle. The contents appeared blue in colour and when she pulled out the bung a strong smell of iodine permeated the room. Using a wooden spatula, she carefully applied the preparation to the deep gauge marks and liberally covered the fang punctures causing my leg to sting, and in the blink of an eye, tears to well up.

This woman must be related to my mother...the TCP queen, I thought, as I clenched my fists and fought to hold back the tears.

“Nearly finished,” Mrs Evans declared jovially. “I just need to cover the area and then strap it,” which she duly did a few moments later. Finally, she tied the strapping with lengths of linen.

Next, she turned her attention to my right arm. Removing my shirt proved no less difficult than removing my trousers, the congealed blood acted as a particularly strong adhesive.

“That looks very painful,” she remarked. I flinched each time she bathed the torn flesh and painful bite marks. Once more she reached into her medical chest and emerged with a needle and some twine. “Now be a brave soldier while I sew your flesh together,” she said in a matronly tone.

I looked away, focussing on the wallpaper while clenching my teeth as she began to pierce my skin with the needle. This fiendish instrument of torture was about three inches long and looked considerably thicker than the needles mum uses to repair my school uniform. I groaned in pain as she pulled the twine taut, almost passing out as the severity increased. Progressively, I felt waves of nausea sweeping over me, and found myself breaking out into a cold sweat.

After what seemed like an eternity, Mrs Evans announced that she had finished sewing me back together.

“There you are dear,” she said merrily. “Nice crisscross stitches, now you will be able to thrill the maidens with tales of your tenacious audacity.” Placing the needle and twine back in the medicine chest she continued with a smile.

“No doubt you will relate how you risked your life in holding off a pack of ten hounds to save a lady with nothing but your bare hands.” She gave me a wink as she began to apply the magical preparation to the fang marks on my arm as she had done with my leg - the stinging pain was no less severe.

“Thank you so very, very, much Mrs Evans,” I hissed through my teeth, as the tears again welled up in my eyes. “You are indeed an angel of mercy.” Privately, however, less gentlemanly thoughts filled my head.

A few minutes later my arm was strapped in the same attentive fashion that my leg had been, mercifully the stinging had subsided.

“Could you just take a quick look at my other arm Mrs Evans?” I asked softly. “I burnt it on an ember that flew out of a fire last night,” I lied, mentally crossing my fingers.

“Ooh, that looks badly blistered,” she muttered, her face etched with concern. “It must be extremely painful, but I have an oil balm that will take some of the heat out of it and will reduce the swelling,” she said, her face beaming with pride.

Once more she bent down and searched through the contents of her miraculous medicine box.

“Here it is!” she announced triumphantly, as she straightened up clutching a brown medicine bottle containing some type of liquid. Holding the bottle above the large blistered area she carefully tipped it until the thick liquid dripped onto my arm. Once again, I flinched in pain; however, the sensation created was hot and fierce rather than the waves of stinging pain I had endured earlier. She inserted the bung and placed the bottle back into her medicine chest and then she began to tenderly rub the oil over the blistered and surrounding area of skin. When she had finished, I could feel the oil soothing the suppurated area, it was as though my skin drank it in. It must have contained an ingredient to relieve severe discomfort as moments later all sense of pain dissipated.

“I will apply some more oil later this evening,” she said. This surprised me as it was the first indication that I was anything other than a trespasser to be patched up and kicked out.

“Before you depart Mrs Evans, please tell me where you gained your excellent medical skills and in particular how you acquired your medicines which are quite remarkable?” I enquired, genuinely impressed.

“Thank you dear,” she said in a quiet, almost grateful, tone. “Mr Evans, God bless his soul, was a skilled physician and an accomplished apothecary who spent many years in the service of the royal court, where I both observed and helped in the preparation of his experimental potions. When he died a few years ago, Colonel Hardman kindly offered me the post of Housekeeper, though my duties are often more medical than domestic.”

She stood up and gently touched my cheek in a motherly fashion. “You will recover given time,” she said, with a sympathetic smile.

Bending down to pick up her medicine box, she added, “Now, I must leave and attend to my other duties.”

As she left the room, I leaned back in the chair appreciating the blessed relief Mrs Evans medicines had brought. I wasn’t in the least bit bothered that my underpants and socks were the only items of clothing that protected my modesty as I closed my eyes and began to doze.

“Young Master Morris,” said Edwards loudly, breaking my slumber, “Mistress Sarah has requested that your badly torn clothing be discarded and replaced with these garments.” Shirt and trousers hung over his right arm.

“These belong to Master James, Sarah’s older brother, who is in London for the winter. They appear to be of your size,” he added, separating the garments.

“Please forgive me for falling asleep,” I stammered sheepishly, I could feel my cheeks burning in embarrassment.

“You need not apologise,” Edwards replied unconcerned. “Evidently your injuries have drained your strength.” Placing the clothes on the nearest chair, he continued, “I will return when you are properly attired. Cook has prepared some broth which will arrive presently. When you have been suitably fed, Colonel Hardman wishes to meet with you.”

After he had left the room I began to dress, however, putting on the trousers proved to be a slow process due to my right leg stiffening up and the restricted movement of my injured arms. After a long and painful struggle, I succeeded in fastening the buttons and managed to place my arms into the sleeves of a rather large and heavy brown shirt which I then slipped over my head. *Buttons must be an optional extra*, I thought to myself, as I sat waiting for the arrival of the food, I was ravenous. The heavy brown shirt was quite baggy, and the trousers were a little long in the leg. However, I reasoned gratefully, *beggars can’t be choosers*.

All things considered; I couldn’t complain. I had survived an assignation attempt and avoided becoming a mutt’s dinner all in the space of twenty-four hours...I think, depending on how long I was unconscious.

I was delighted to hear dishes clinking as one of the kitchens staff walked down the corridor. This was followed by the sound of footsteps which grew ever louder before a man appeared in the doorway with a tray of food. He placed the tray on the table and left the room without uttering a word. On the tray was a large bowl containing vegetable broth which smelled heavenly; by the side of the bowl lay a couple of freshly baked bread rolls.

Quickly, with mouth-watering, I broke up the bread rolls and immersed the pieces in the thick soup pushing them beneath the surface of the liquid with my spoon. Eagerly I gulped each spoonful of the broth along with large mouthfuls of the soaked bread. The temperature of the broth was ideal, just cool enough for me to swallow rapidly. The bread had been cut in thick slices, enabling me to mop up around the edges of the bowl. As I finished the last spoonful, I belched, loudly. At the precise moment Edwards entered the room.

“I assume the food was to your taste, Master Morris?” he said a little sternly. “If you have regained your strength, I will lead you through the house to Colonel Hardman.”

I rose tentatively to my feet, whereupon Morris once again placed my left arm over his shoulder and grabbed me firmly around the waist. And so, we began a rather comical three-legged shuffle through the corridors of Park House, some of which looked vaguely familiar as I struggled to gain my bearings.

At length, we emerged into the main foyer, its high ornate ceiling adorned with regency moulded cornice and distinctive ceiling roses instantly recognisable. The sweeping staircase leading to the upper rooms where I had spent many tedious lessons stood to my left. Gone was the drab industrial carpet so familiar throughout my time at Park House. Before me lay a rich Burgundy coloured carpet of high quality.

The curved balustrade dull and uncared for in the 20th century, manhandled by a generation of pupils, was covered with endless coats of varnish and positively gleamed. Each spindle exuded a dark, luxuriously rich, highly lacquered sheen.

Truly, this magnificent structure resembled one from *Gone with the Wind*. You could almost imagine Rhett sweeping Scarlett off her feet, the skirt of her heavily embroidered dress billowing as he carried her up the staircase.

The walls of the foyer were lined from floor to ceiling in ornate oak panelling. The raised mouldings resembled large picture frames whose canvas had been removed, the style of which I had seen in films of the courts of French aristocracy. Like the staircase, the lacquered panels bore evidence of the care and attention lavished on Park House in stark contrast to its future state.

Before me stood the Headmasters office, and to the right the main Admin office. On a couple of occasions, I had to visit the Admin office to get information about school events.

“This is Colonel Hardman’s office,” Edwards declared loudly, as if to warn Colonel Hardman of my presence.

Knocking on the door, Edwards removed his supporting arm and signalled me to enter the room as the door swung open.

“You must be the young man who saved my precious daughter from a savaging this morning,” said Colonel Hardman, looking up from papers scattered around his desk. “Please step into my office so that I can thank you properly.”

Colonel Hardman was a tall upright figure of about fifty. Though he had short brown hair, a few grey hairs were visible which fitted perfectly with my first impression of Sarah’s father.

As I shuffled painfully into the office, he pulled out a chair for me to sit on. “I am aware of the injuries that you suffered in coming to the aid my daughter,” he said quietly. “Now, tell me how you unexpectedly came to be on the Squire’s land?”

Nervously, I cleared my throat, as I prepared to relate my tale of woe.

“Though I was born in Bristol, I was raised in the Americas, in Boston, Massachusetts. However, five years ago my father, who was a railroad engineer, was killed in an accident and my mother and I returned to Bristol to be near her parents.”

I paused and lowered my eyes, as I continued in a low quiet voice. “Sadly, my mother died last month leaving me alone with people I barely know. Her dying wish was for me to seek out her brother - David, my uncle. He lives in Crumlin, or at least he did some years ago.

Last week I began my journey from Bristol to the Eastern valley of Monmouthshire. Yesterday I reached Mamhilad and was directed over the mountain to this area where I happened upon the incident with your daughter. I am sorry if I have trespassed on the Squire’s private grounds, evidently I turned right instead of left.”

I raised my head and made eye contact with the Colonel, his face had softened, and he nodded sympathetically. “These are hard times and I owe you a debt of gratitude.”

He stood up and began to pace back and forth in front of the window. “We have much in common young Morris, I too was an orphan. I joined the Army and it became my mother - it raised and cared for me. I served my country in the Far East where James and Sarah were born. Sadly, adversity often strikes most unexpectedly, and Sarah’s mother died shortly after Sarah’s birth, but we endured and so will you.”

It was my turn to nod sympathetically at our painfully shared experience. “Sarah and I deeply appreciate the bravery you exhibited this morning and she has asked me to help reward your chivalry.

I am uneasy at the thought of a young man who has travelled far, may find himself in dire circumstances should he not locate his mother’s brother.

I can offer you menial employment in the stables where I expect you to work hard. I will also expect you to attend chapel on a Sunday morning. I will not tolerate cursing or blaspheming, drunkenness or fighting, gambling or thievery. In return, your efforts will be rewarded with two meals a day and a damp-free room in the servant’s quarters. Should you wish, you may use your down time to locate your uncle.”

His military background was apparent, his bearing and demeanour exuded an air of authority. As he spoke, he stood in the *at ease* position, hands clasped behind his back.

“You have a brave pioneering spirit, which I admire. Reminds me of myself,” he added, nodding his head as he reminisced. He reached for a pipe that was sat on his desk beside an ink pot. He struck a match and began making the sucking sound pipe smokers make when trying to ignite the tobacco.

“Edwards will show you to your room presently, and tomorrow will explain your duties. Welcome to the Squire’s staff young Morris.”

I began to thank him, when as if on cue, the door opened, and Edwards entered. “Take young Morris to his billet in the servant’s quarters please Edwards,” the Colonel ordered.

“Mr Edwards,” I said respectfully, as we struggled up the staircase. “What is the date; I have been travelling for a week or more and cannot remember how many days have passed?”

“It is the fifth day of January, in the year of our lord 1890,” Edwards replied. “Do you even know who the monarch is?” he added, with a slight hint of sarcasm.

“Her Majesty Queen Victoria of course,” I replied casually, as we reached the top of the extremely long staircase. I was knackered.

We climbed, or rather hopped, up a second set of stairs which led to the top of the building where Edwards helped me into a dark, cold, austere room, consisting of a single bed and a small table.

On the table stood a large oil lamp which Edwards began to prime before lighting. He removed the fluted glass shade and carefully lit the wick, waiting a few seconds to allow the wick to burn before replacing the glass shade. The brightness of the lamp increased and appeared more than adequate to light the room.

“Goodnight Master Morris. We rise at thirty minutes past five and eat promptly at six o’clock. There is a chamber pot under the bed which you must empty each morning.” As Edwards left the room, he closed the door behind him.

I sat on the bed staring dejectedly at the stark white bedroom walls, listening to the sound of Edwards footsteps as he descended the staircase. His footsteps became fainter as he walked along the hallway on the floor below, and finally stopped.

Here I sat, separated from my warm cosy bedroom in Trevethin by a few miles, and...oh, some eighty years. Even though I often complained about our small draughty house in Elm Close, at least it had a toilet, not a smelly chamber pot to pee in. Still, all things considered, I hadn’t done badly; at least I had a base to work from, a bed and a meal and time – plenty of time to form a plan of action.

I would wait for help to arrive from the 25th century while searching for the emergency armband. The only clue to its location was the obscure reference made by Ty Lin, *Close to one of the oldest monuments in your country*. Stonehenge seemed the obvious starting point. St Paul’s in Londinium was also a possibility. Doubtless other ancient monuments and locations might also fit the bill. Unfortunately, Ty Lin was unable to provide any further information during our hypothetical discussion; information that was now crucial.

Searching for an invisible object in an unknown location really was the proverbial needle in a haystack. Presumably, the short-range radar-like detector in my head would register an alarm as I neared the armband, however, therein lay the problem. I would have to crisscross hundreds of square miles unless I narrowed down the search parameters considerably.

I was also extremely foggy on a definite course of action. The formation of a strategy to prevent the course of events that ended in me catapulting through time was essential. Somehow, I must prevent the blast which killed Christine, and neutralise Jedzeel before he butchered Ty Lin, Ledarn, and of course my closest friend Tom.

A contingency plan must also be formed in the event of me being trapped in this era never to return to 1971. Somehow, I must convey a warning which would include the vital rotating shield frequency of 105.8.2.

Sighing, I slumped down onto the lumpy bed and stared blankly at the ceiling. My eyes filled up with tears that stung considerably as they began to roll down my cheeks. I was a long way from home and no one, it appeared, was able to help me. With a little discomfort and pain, I wiped the tears from my eyes and sniffed a couple of times to clear my nose and head.

Foregoing the need to undress I tried to push my school shoes off with each foot in turn, this took some considerable effort and I breathed a sigh of relief as they finally dropped to the floor.

I began to wriggle my body until I was able to slide under the blankets, where I nestled until I found a comfortable position. I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer, futile perhaps, but it provided a measure of comfort. Possibly this was part of a grander scheme to which I wasn't privy, maybe God was the only person that could sort this mess out.

After ending my prayer with an audible "Amen," I started to drift off, drowsiness sweeping over me as I warmed up. Closing my eyes, my final thoughts were of home.

"Good night Mum. Good night David," I whispered.

"God bless."