

## Prologue

3.15pm. 11 August 2335.

The view was pleasant but nothing like it might have been. The grass sloped down to the cliff and the sound of the waves seemed as good as it had for the 60 years Elizabeth had been listening to it. The cottages beneath the headland would have added life to the bay but they had now almost collapsed having been abandoned at the time of the last shelling. The most important element of the scene was, however, the one she had never seen. The hills and beaches of the opposite shore of the estuary were totally obscured by the tangle field.

She could tell that they were working on the generating sets. She knew this because she had seen them going up there in the morning but she could have seen it just by looking at the field. She had spent so long looking at it that she felt she knew it almost as her only friend. She knew how the mist inside it was always moving and reflecting the light in different ways. Today she knew that it was weaker than normal, quite sufficient they had assured her, just a bit weaker. Not that she cared about it or, truthfully, anything else in the world.

Just then a flier came through the field high above the boat. Soaring on the wind and glistening in the sunlight. She ignored it. The ones that were going to strike close to the field always came through lower. A few moments later she glanced behind her to see which village it was going for but it had disappeared. She thought little of it. She had never seen one return through the field near where it had come from; no reason why they should but where was the logic in an instrument of random destruction? She thought of it as a messenger from a war that was won or, for all she knew, lost, hundreds of years before she was born.

The boat came through with such speed that she had to work hard to convince herself that it had not tacked up from along the coast. She lifted her binoculars to look at it, a ghost ship from nowhere. Built to a design from centuries past it was riding the heavy swell and sailing in perfect order straight towards her.

The small cockpit of the boat appeared empty. A simple device with a wind vane was linked to the rudder and held it on its course, past the headland, too close for safety but clear through into the bay to be thrown onto the small shingle beach exposed at the low tide.

The path down was difficult. She tried to remember when she had last attempted it, two, or maybe even ten years ago. With nothing to punctuate time it was so difficult to remember. The noise of the waves grew louder. It made her feel alive as it echoed from the rocks.

At last she touched the boat. The wood felt warm and smooth. Over her head the sails snatched back and forth as gusts found their way past the surrounding cliffs. She found herself checking that she only touched the smooth surfaces. No hidden crevices that might carry organisms with plague mutations for which she had no immunity.

The tide was rising. Soon the beach would be covered and the boat would break up on the rocks leaving no trace for border security to come rushing to incinerate.

She heard the first cry quite clearly despite the noise of the waves. She staggered back. It had never occurred to her that there might be somebody in the boat. The tangle field would have left them unconscious and she would not have seen them lying on the cabin floor. She stepped cautiously up to the window and saw two children sitting up half conscious and confused. There was no sign of an adult.

"Oh my God. Who are you?" The children looked vaguely up at the sound of her voice. A large wave drove the water up around her feet. Soon it would lift the boat. She had little time to think. She saw one of the children crawl up the companionway steps and out of the cabin. Instinctively she stood back. The child managed to half stand and look at her. It blinked slowly at her and started to cry.

"You poor thing. Don't you see? If I come near you to help we'll both get the plague."

The child looked down. His sister was crawling out behind him. They both managed to get up enough to look at the Elisabeth. Another wave came even higher and the boat started to move.

It lurched to one side and ground down on a rock. The children started screaming.

"We'll die. It doesn't matter about me - it would be a relief. But you poor things"

Another wave. The boat lurched back towards her onto another rock, which smashed a hole in the planking.

"You'll die anyway if I leave you there"

She went up to him and, with supreme effort, lifted him down. His sister followed. They were coaxed through the waves to the last of the dry sand.

"Come on! Up the cliff path."

The children were beginning to shake off the effect of the tangle field. They could not understand her speech very well but they got the message and managed to climb the path.

"Come on home to my house. We may not last long but I shall do all I can for you"

When she arrived at her cottage she soon reprogrammed the household systems to provide for the children. Clothing, toys and numerous essentials would arrive automatically from the manufactory. The children were soon clean, tidy and well fed.

She tried to talk to them but all she could find out was their names. The older was a boy called George and, possibly a year or two younger, the girl was Tania. She resolved that even if their time was limited she would let them know who she was and that she cared for them.

Later in the day she telephoned her nearest neighbour from further along the coast. She told him what had happened

"Elizabeth, you must be mad"

"I'm not mad Harold. They were dead from the moment they came through"

"Couldn't border security have salvaged their little boat and sent them back"

"It was too quick, they would have been too late. Anyway they would never have been accepted back. All the zones have the same rules. If in doubt kill and burn."

"What about you? You'll die from their mutations if the security don't get you first."

"I've been dead for years Harold. You know that. I am glad to trade a few lonely years for the joy of these two for a short time. What would you have done? I couldn't watch them drown."

2

I was 12 and proud of my knowledge of the zones. I couldn't travel anywhere away from our house and see things for myself but I made up for it by reading everything I could find on the network about other places. The screen showed an aerial view of a large town. "That's Bristol." I pronounced. "Look, see the river coming up through it".

The camera zoomed in. Close up each building could be seen to be a perfect example of its chosen architecture. Everything was freshly cleaned and painted. Flowers bloomed in beautifully landscaped gardens. Well-dressed people walked briskly about their business. Carefully segregated routes carried vehicles, which showed no sign of age or dirt.

"Look at this George." Elizabeth told me. "Avon Zone must have something important to show us. We've never seen views like this before." She glanced at me with her old eyes always showing something resembling slight surprise that I was still standing beside her and was fit and well.

The shot now focused in on a single man who was completely out of place. He had long straggling hair and a beard. His clothes were visibly torn and his feet were bare. He was running but the camera on the aircraft had no trouble following him. At the edge of the picture people could be seen running away in all directions. Finally the man came to a street that was blocked. In front of him a solid line of guards stood in biological suits.

"What are they for?" I asked.

"He must be an incursor." Elizabeth replied. "A fugitive from another zone, maybe this one."

"Might he be all right, like we were?" She had been very honest with us and told us exactly how she had found us.

"No, they wouldn't be showing it if he had been."

"You mean this isn't live. When did it happen?"

"Just a few days ago I imagine."

The man was now surrounded and the guards were closing in on him. Many had guns.

"I can't see why they aren't shooting him" Elizabeth commented.

"That would be horrible." Tania cut in.

"Yes, I suppose so, with the cameras." Elizabeth was too mesmerised by the scene in front of her to notice Tania shudder. The end was coming. The man clearly knew that he would be killed as soon as he could be taken out of the way. He was dodging back and forth between the guards in their clumsy suits. Suddenly there was a glint of steel. He had drawn a knife and cut one of the suits wide open. He grabbed the man inside it just as several more came at him from behind. Soon he was led away.

A heavily accented voice-over came on. "Those terrible scenes took place just five days ago. We have found where he came from."

The screen now showed a very distant shot of some sort of glider, which seemed to have landed in some tall scrub, which would have concealed it from view. After a few seconds the glider was seen burning up as flamethrowers worked across it and the surrounding area. The narrator continued:

"We do not know exactly what route he took to the city but we have analysed records from our detectors and know that he travelled through these areas"

"Now tell us why you have detectors all over the place" Elizabeth remarked cynically

A map was displayed showing our own estuary and the areas between it and Bristol. Areas between the border and the city had been highlighted. The camera started to show scenes, which were presumably from the places on the map.

"What on earth is all this about?" Elizabeth asked.

"These areas have been evacuated." The voice-over spoke right on cue. "And will be sterilised with fire." More flamethrowers were shown systematically working across farmland.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

"It's ridiculous." Elizabeth replied. "They're being hysterical. They think, or they are pretending to think, that the man could have infected a tree or an animal or something"

"Couldn't he"

"He might be like you and not infect things anyway. Assuming he wasn't; no he could only infect other people if he met them, unless he cut himself and some of his blood went on their food or something. It's almost impossible. Anyway anybody who had been infected will have been evacuated with the others."

"Why are they doing it then?"

"I'm afraid they want to make trouble. They're paranoid. They started killing off porpoises at one time because they thought we were infecting them and letting them swim under the field. Don't worry, they won't do anything much."

She turned the picture off when it started showing the infected guard in a sterile looking bed with huge red blisters forming as he succumbed to the plague.

The next day a further transmission from Avon zone was shown. This time it showed two more people with the plague. Apparently the man had had contact with them earlier. Other shots showed an interviewer talking to the mother of one of the victims:

"What would you like to say to the zone that sent this man?"

"That's idiotic. We didn't send him" Elizabeth cut in.

The mother herself was so absorbed in her grief that she could only mumble a few words. Further coverage followed during the next few days and it started to include shots of damage from fliers.

"They're blaming us for them again now I see" Elizabeth commented, "Some of that film must be pretty old."

Avon zone was threatening to shell the border unless the attacks stopped. At first it seemed an empty threat but convincing shots showed heavy guns being moved up. These also had several sequences of fliers coming out of the field with a commentary accusing us of sending them. A map showed that the guns were on the coast directly across the estuary. The next day

heavy earthmoving machinery arrived to dig gun emplacements to return fire from the hillside above our cottage. Film of this was shown that evening on the newscast to Avon sector and also shown on the local news.

The last time of shelling had been several generations back, long enough ago for the craters to have become overgrown and almost blended into the landscape. Living with them all around had left Elizabeth with a complete lack of respect for the terror involved in their creation. I was far less relaxed.

Elizabeth called Harold and asked what we should do if it started.

"We go to the generating station. They won't shell that. If they hit it the field would go down and birds would go through and they would all get the plague" he replied.

"How do they know where it is?"

"It's the only thing that never moves. It's on all of the maps. They don't know where this cottage is, their maps will show the old cottages down in the bay."

Listening to the conversation I knew exactly what the problem was. We had discussed it many times.

"The children will be fine." He reassured her. "They can hardly say that they are a plague risk after ten years can they? Perhaps some good will come out of this, perhaps it is finally a chance to get them into school."

I could tell that Elisabeth was not convinced but she did her best to reassure us.

It started in the morning promptly at 9AM. Avon zone liked to create an image of efficiency and punctuality. We were watching the morning programmes when suddenly they were interrupted by pictures of one of the guns firing. A few seconds later we heard the bang - it confused us momentarily because we had never appreciated that sound, if loud enough, could be heard through the field. Next we heard the whistling sound as the shell flew close overhead and then came the enormous blast as it exploded on the hillside. Mud and stones flew, breaking several windows. Tania started to scream as thick smoke blew down to us bringing with it the smell of the explosion. We ran to the car. As we drove away a second shell landed close to the first.

A crowd had gathered at the generating station.

"Do we stay in the car?" I asked. I knew that we weren't supposed to be there.

"No you can't. We've got to go inside. Harold will be there. He knows all about you."

The crowd was so confused that they took no notice of strangers. Many from the outlying cottages were rarely seen in the village. Living under a constant threat from the fliers and the plague the people rarely gathered in groups and always preferred not to live together in villages or towns.

Harold decided to take the risk in good humour. He walked up to each of us in turn and gave us a warm handshake. If our survival had been due to Elizabeth's resistance rather than our own immunity the whole village would have died anyway.

As the shelling continued all around it we remained trapped in the generating station and started to get to know some of the other children. Harold and Elizabeth watched with increasing concern. Our hastily rehearsed story about us being Elizabeth's grandchildren who had come to stay because our mother was ill could not stand any scrutiny. Our years of complete isolation, however, became an advantage because it made us appear to be foreign to the area. Our odd replies to details about our home were explained by the fact that it was a long way away on the other side of the zone.

After three days the shelling finally stopped. There was one final salvo, which seemed to land somewhere between us and the coast and then suddenly there was silence. Avon zone were apparently satisfied that the fliers had stopped coming through. Soon we got the all clear from the area commander. It seemed surprisingly quick and some people were wondering if he could really know that this was not just a lull before the next bombardment but he seemed quite certain.

When we emerged from the building there was little to see because they could not risk anything close to the station but when we started to drive home there was destruction all around us. Most of the shells had landed in the fields making large craters but there had also been several direct hits on houses near the road. In one place the road had been hit and we had to wait

while soldiers made a temporary route around it and checked the area for anything that had not exploded. Unexploded shells were considered a risk not just because they might still explode but also because they had not been heated enough to kill all traces of plague. Even some large fragments from the ones that had exploded would be sterilised with flamethrowers.

Driving back past our village we came to a checkpoint on the road.

"Only residents permitted." The tall young soldier was leaning down to speak through the car window.

"We are residents."

"Proof of identity please"

Elizabeth produced her identity card.

"And the children please"

Elizabeth panicked. Unable to think of anything else to say she replied "they left them in my cottage. We didn't have time to pack you know."

The soldier went to his terminal. What are their names please?

"They don't normally live here." Elizabeth replied. "They're just staying with me."

"Just give me their names madam"

"George and Tania Adams" she replied, instantly giving us her own family name.

There was a pause as he entered the names. Elizabeth desperately tried to think of an address that might be accepted. The pause grew longer.

"The terminals are down. Apparently the shells have damaged the network. I shall escort you back so that you can collect the cards."

We all knew exactly what this could mean as the soldiers drove behind us towards the cottage.

"We'll have to say we can't find them." Tania suggested.

"They'll just check on their terminals when they come back on" I replied.

We rounded the last bend. The cottage had been hit. Tania was crying but Elizabeth saw a glimmer of hope and tried for it. She ran into the ruined cottage and soon reappeared covered in dust.

"The cards have been destroyed and the records have been lost. You must contact your superiors to get new cards issued. Our home has been destroyed. They will need the cards to go and stay with friends." She turned to search aimlessly for personal possessions among the wreckage. Some of the soldiers started to help her and we heard another calling his superiors to explain the urgent need for new identity cards.

We stayed with Harold. To this day I still wake suddenly in the night thinking I have heard the knock on the door to tell us that our identities are not valid but it has never come. I shall never know why. The network was damaged and the most likely reason was the effect of the damage after generations of neglected maintenance.

Our sudden introduction into village life was difficult for us but it had many benefits. Seeing boats in the harbour was a major excitement for me as I matched up the reality with what I had seen on the screen and what Elizabeth had told me about our arrival from Avon zone. Soon we were learning to sail.

The instructor had a small launch and we were in a group of ten children racing around it in small solo boats. We were only a few hundred yards from the coast but the field was very close at this point. A sudden gust came up and one boat lost control.

"Hold on, try to come about" The instructor shouted.

The boat was heading directly towards the field. I struggled to control my own boat as we watched.

"Let go and get well in" shouting this the instructor pushed an emergency button. A marker buoy was ejected from the front deck of the errant boat just before it entered the field. A fine line uncoiled from it. The launch sped towards the buoy and recovered it. Some minutes later an unconscious body in a life jacket was hauled out of the field. The other sailing boats had gathered round.

"Let's go home, he'll be alright when he comes round" The instructor was lifting the

unfortunate boy out of the water. "He'll need a new boat though, it doesn't take long to sink them in there."

I knew the answer to this and I told them. "It's because of the metal in it. Otherwise it would go right through." Everybody stared at me.

"Well done George. You're right. Where did you find that out?"

Realising my mistake I mumbled something about a book.

3

That year our summer picnic was special. Harold could come. Harold was fun to be with but above all he could carry the picnic table. I was old enough to carry some things but this only just made up for Elizabeth's increasing frailty. Despite this disadvantage she still presided over the occasion and ensured that everything was done properly. While Harold tried to keep up with Tania and me with a football she spread the tablecloth and put the cold meat and salad out onto plates. She had even brought a bottle of wine

I knew that for Elizabeth this was a place of memories. For years she had come almost every day to look out over the bay contemplating both the beauty of her surroundings and her own loneliness within them. For us it was a strange place. Elizabeth had been completely open with us and described how we had come through the field and come to shore in the bay. Now we took Harold up to the edge of the cliff and point down to the exact place.

"Where did it come through the field?" Harold asked to see if we knew.

"Out there" Tania replied. "It all looks the same so nobody could remember where it was."

"From here it was just in line with the last rock on the headland." Elizabeth told us. "It came in fast and cut right across the bay".

The meal was perfect. We all joked about Elizabeth's peaceful life before the two of us had arrived. We even managed a nervous joke about how lucky we were to be out of Avon sector. Finally we finished the strawberries and cream and sat back. The adults enjoyed the last of the wine and almost fell asleep while we played lazily at a board game. Tania kept looking up and trying to line up a point in the field with the rock on the headland.

Suddenly she shouted. "I can see our boat coming"

Harold woke with a start. "You made me jump. It's not your boat. It'll just be one coming down from the sailing club". Nevertheless he sat up to look and saw an old wooden boat, quite unlike anything from the zone, emerging from the field.

"My God. Elizabeth. It's another one coming through. After all this time." He reached for the binoculars. "I can't see anyone in it. Simple self steering gear just like before. No, wait, I can see a body on the cockpit floor."

Elizabeth was watching with him now. "What are we going to do?"

"We assume it carries plague." Harold said categorically. "What happened last time was pure chance, and very unlikely chance at that."

"But the border guards will kill them." Tania said.

"And we can't reason with them by telling them about last time." Elizabeth added.

"It's a calm sea and the tide is falling." I pointed out having kept my habitual check on the daily forecast. "If it comes in on the beach nothing will happen to it for hours."

"Unless they come round and make a run for it." Harold observed.

Elizabeth started towards the path down to the beach. "Judging by the state of these two when they came through they won't be running anywhere for a while Let's have a look before we call the border guards."

We approached the boat with enormous care from upwind. It lay on its side in a way that Elizabeth found eerily identical to what she had seen before. Climbing up on a rock we could look down into it and saw just the one body slumped in the cockpit.

"He must have hurt his head when he fell" Elizabeth observed looking at the blood we could all now see on the man's forehead.

Harold raised the binoculars. "No Elizabeth. He was shot".

In solemn silence Elizabeth and Tania gathered up the remains of their picnic, trying not to look down at Harold and me setting fire to the boat in the bay below. Just as they were folding the tablecloth the sails caught sending out a shower of sparks. Little remained by the time we all started to walk home.

4

One of the benefits of going to the village school that I most looked forward to was the trip to the generating station. This was organised every year for the children who were 14 years old and was a long established institution. I tried as hard as I could not to appear too interested but was determined to use it to find out as much as I could.

The bus passed by the administration building where we had sheltered from the shelling and approached the main security gate. We were all checked off against an official looking list and had to show our identity cards. This sort of procedure still made me somewhat nervous but our new identities and cards seemed to have become completely accepted by the system and we had no difficulties.

The main building looked old, if well maintained. We were taken to a neat entrance with flowerbeds to either side. Through the door we went up a long staircase with polished wooden handrails to a gallery, which overlooked the main hall. I ran ahead to look down at the field generator below me. It looked old and not very large or impressive and was mounted on a single large trailer. The trailer had eight axles but could clearly have been towed into position when the fields were established. The axles had been propped up on timbers to take the weight off the wheels but, even to my inexperienced eye, the entire installation looked as if it had been set up in a great hurry. Cables from the generator lead off across a floor, which was still bare earth. Gravel paths had been formed across it but between them I thought I could almost see footprints of men who had walked on it when it had been exposed to the rain hundreds of years before. The rest of the group soon arrived and a guide in an official uniform started to talk to us:

"This is it. This is the generating set that keeps us alive. It works in tandem with a second set on the other side of the estuary in Avon sector as it has for the last 300 years. If it failed the field would weaken. If both sets failed birds could fly through."

We all knew this but they listened politely. The atmosphere of the place seemed to have subdued even the loudest of my friends.

"When the field was established this building was built to protect the generator but nobody dared to disturb it at all so it is still on the trailer which brought it here. With the plague spreading there was no time to unload it before starting it up."

We learned that the machine had six modules and each one could be taken out of service in turn for maintenance. We saw this being done. A group of technicians were replacing parts while a leader read out instructions from an ancient looking book. It looked like a practiced ritual as they proceeded through the instructions step by step. There was no indication that any of them knew how the machine actually worked. I felt an enormous sense of relief when we were told we could go back outside.

5

The manufactory was treated with almost religious respect by the authorities. To them it seemed that the ability to make just about anything without any effort was the sum total of human achievement. A special coach collected us for our visit and a special guide was in it waiting for us. We didn't think that he was very special but there could be no doubt that he did. During our one hour trip he bored us with facts and figures about how big it was and how it had been built just

before the plague. We heard all about what wonderful people the first council had been to build one of these things in each zone so they would be completely self contained. At the age of 14 we were not the least impressed. Compared with what we saw in the pre-plague films everything we got seemed to be totally boring. Unless you knew somebody who would alter clothes by hand all you could get was things that were just going out of fashion.

We arrived to an enormous car park with suitable institutional looking flower beds around it and several bored, institutional looking gardeners tending them. Unfortunately some of the institutional drainage must have been blocked because a recent rain shower had caused an enormous puddle to form in the roadway beside the path we had to walk along to reach the door. In every school class there is always somebody who cannot see the obvious and in our class it was Billy. He was standing right next to the puddle when a truck drove by at speed. Somehow the rest of us were all elsewhere, but quite close enough to see the result. The special guide rushed to the rescue:

“Don’t worry” he said, shouting to be heard above Billy’s crying and our laughter, “as soon as we reach the door I can order you a complete new set of clothes, clean and dry in minutes.” The remaining short walk to the door was taken up with hundreds more figures about how fast the great machine could work if he put in a priority order. Sure enough just inside the door there was a terminal and, almost immediately the order was placed, Billy was whisked away to change.

When he re-emerged we stood speechless looking at him, not even sure whether to laugh. The boy was dressed up like someone in fancy dress in a style from two hundred years before.

“We have to order the basic style for a fast order” the special guide explained.

“You mean that’s what the machine was built to make?” I asked, amazed.

“Not surprised it can’t get anything right,” someone added in a loud whisper behind me.

“Not exactly” the special guide replied to me pretending not to hear the whisper. “That’s just what it first made, it is designed to make everything.

Billy rushed off and changed back, thrusting his new clothes back at the guide as we set off. He left lines of drips along the viewing galleries but, despite this distraction, I was genuinely impressed. The place was vast and, starting with the reactor, which could synthesise any element, it could make absolutely anything out of anything. I already knew this but to see it happening was another matter. I kept stopping, mesmerised by the quantities on the conveyor belts below me.

The amazing thing was the way it could change what it was making. One minute it had a row of identical bunches of flowers going by and the next minute the same conveyor had a row of dinner plates. It was hard to appreciate that everything used in everybody’s life had started from this one place.

The last section we were taken round was making food. Everything from cheeses to pies sped past us. If they had not been well out of reach I would have tried to grab one because it had been a long morning. At last we reached the end but the guide did not let us go back towards the reception. He opened a heavy fireproof door in the wall and took us through it. In front of us was another machine, which looked identical to the first, but was not in use. I thought for a moment that we were going to have to go all round it before we could have lunch but we got away with a lecture. He started with a question.

“If something goes wrong with the manufactory what do we do?”

Perhaps his usual audience was not very bright, or perhaps he was just paid to do it that way. In any event we were hungry and worked it out straight away.

“You need this machine to make new parts for it.” Someone shouted. “And you can make new parts for this one on the other one. Can we have lunch now?”

At the end of the tour we were all given the opportunity to place our very first order. This was less exciting than it seemed because we had all been using the system with minimal supervision from our parents for as long as we could remember.

“Do we have to?” somebody asked.

The special guide was slightly thrown by this. He must have been new to the job but he stumbled on the way to get it done.

“Yes” he replied. “Then we can have lunch.”

We all rushed to the terminals to place our orders. They would be ready after lunch and



they had to be small enough for us to carry home on the coach. Everybody else was ordering clothes and toys but I couldn't be bothered so I just ordered a teaspoon because it would be easy to put in my pocket. Besides which Elisabeth was always drinking tea so I thought she might have a use for it.

After lunch our orders were waiting for us: a long row of shirts, jackets, footballs, etc. and my spoon, which I put in my pocket and headed for the door.

"We are not finished," the guide said. "You must enter your opinion and suggestions"

"Why should we?" I asked.

"So it can make better ones"

"You mean to say that all this machinery relies on opinions from the likes of Billy to tell it how to make things?"

Billy was on the far side of the room, almost dry and cheering up. If he had been close enough to hear I wouldn't have said it.

To my dismay the guide started a long discourse saying, "This boy wants to know why the machine needs Billy's opinion". Poor Billy was sobbing by the time he finished using him as an example of how fashion was driven by the whole population. The things the machine produced were well optimised for their function but that didn't mean that anybody liked them. This brought a murmur of agreement, which was a bit strong for him. He went on to explain that we were obliged to help by feeding back comments on everything we got. If we persistently failed to enter sensible comments the supply would stop.

We all sat down again at the terminals and comments were typed in about the width of the collars on the shirts and the weight of the footballs. Slowly all eyes turned to me and even Billy started laughing at me sitting in front of a blank screen and a teaspoon.

I tried entering that I would have preferred a green one. The machine did not accept this; it simply put up a list of the range of colours available which included green. I tried saying that it should have been longer only to be shown the range of sizes. By this time even the guide seemed amused. Finally in frustration I rammed it into the gap between two desks and bent it, telling the machine that it wasn't strong enough. This brought on a long lecture on wasting manufactured items, which lasted into the coach and most of the way home.

6

Sector security exercises took place every six months. In mid-winter we had a short one-day practice when we all got out our green bio-suits with our names stencilled on the collars and went along for inspection at the generating station. We then had to listen to a message from the council before we could go home.

My first exercise was, however, a summer one which was a full two weeks. All children went off on their own to a camp for their age. Each year when we should have been at camp Elisabeth had found the manuals and gone through them with us. Apart from the basic instruction on what to do if the field failed they were based on a story. For each age there was a different story. Groups would watch a film and then prepare presentations in which they would act out parts of the story or sing songs about it. It was lucky that Elisabeth had made us read them because when we had suddenly found ourselves at school we had found that all of the other children knew them. The propaganda methods may have been primitive but they certainly worked. Every detail was etched into their memory. They made jokes about them but they still knew them.

The previous year's story had been about a man who had invented one of the vital parts of the field generators. When the first plague had come, even though it had been controlled, he had had the vision to join the original council members and contribute his invention to their plans for the zones. He was described as thoroughly good, clean and obedient to the council. Elisabeth had read the stories to us totally without expression. To this day I shall never know what she really felt about the ways of the council.

My first worry about the camp was that I might meet some children from the area where I

was supposed to have grown up. I had never seen a large crowd and I just assumed that everybody would get to know each other. I knew that our population had about forty thousand of each age but I never quite appreciated what an encampment of forty thousand children would look like. When I saw the scale of it my first thought was for Tania. I felt isolated without her and knew that she would feel even more isolated without me. My second thought was one of sheer awe and even some pride. Seeing the tents set out in endless rows across the fields gave a feeling of power.

This year the film was a history lesson. As usual it was in interactive docu-drama format. The lead characters were Charles and Charlotte. Some of the later films we had seen had different ones but these were the standard two. As far as we knew they were acronyms for "Character for Lesson" or something similar. They were entirely electronically generated and not particularly life-like but somehow rather engaging. This was helped by the way they could be re-programmed with different clothes so, although the film had been made at least two hundred years before, when they were not in period costume they always wore the very latest fashion and were actually icons that a lot of us seemed to follow.

Charlie and Charlie, as we always knew them, travelled through time visiting the locations of great events and speaking to all the main people. We had seen them deep in conversation with Roman senators, Chinese Emperors and Napoleon Bonaparte. The only slight variation was whether their dialog was with an actor or another computer construct. At times it was quite difficult to tell and became the subject of numerous arguments.

Since the format was so well known we were all rather surprised when they appeared on the screens to start the introduction. All became clear, however, when they said that they would be touring the world immediately before the plague. This was a very contentious period of history and was carefully avoided in schools.

The level of interaction in the films varied depending on what mode was chosen. When we viewed them alone the characters would talk to us directly and ask us to select questions and places to go. In small groups you could use a mode where we were asked questions about what we thought was right and wrong and we would be questioned if Charlie felt the answer was not what he wanted. We rarely used large group mode because it was not thought to be a good way of learning but in this mode the only interaction was a small window that would come up when a question was asked and tell us how many had given the required answer.

Charlie and Charlie were explaining.

"The world seems more prosperous than ever." This was Charles, standing with a view of an enormous city behind him. The massive skyscrapers were real works of art, each one a perfect sculpture on the skyline.

"The poor are still here but they can all have enough to eat provided they are prepared to work." This was Charlotte, walking through long rows of tiny houses that were scarcely more than sheds. "Although there are far more poor than rich the series of small wars which followed the world wars have shown them that they are far better off working with the rich than against them."

Charles was now wearing a space suit. He had travelled to the main base on Mars where he was looking out across the red tinged landscape. The dust was terrible but looking through it he could just see a vast mining robot half buried in the side of a hill.

The scene had now been set and it was time to talk to the President.

"Why can't you do more to help the poor?" Charlotte was asking. She was sitting in a vast cushioned armchair facing the elderly man across an expanse of sumptuous carpet. Although they generally only interviewed one at a time Charles and Charlotte always travelled together and Charles could be seen in a similar chair some distance away to one side.

"Helping the poor is a very high priority for us." His way of speaking was loaded with sincerity. He was either a very good actor or a fine computer construct. For the actor it might have been made easier by the fact that the politician was clearly acting the part himself. "Our problem" he continued "is the faction. Whatever we do we have to be permanently on our guard. Their terrorists are operating everywhere so it is very difficult for us to help the poor the way we would want to. We have to spend all our money trying to protect the world from their plagues. In the last one over half a million people died before we could control it. That is why we have to stop

people travelling out to their countries to help them.”

There was an audible gasp, which ran through the vast audience when Charlie said who he was going to speak to next. He was going to interview the leader of the faction. I had heard Elisabeth comment at times that she doubted the man had ever existed but this was not a problem for our docu-drama. He was in an office that was calculated to look like the base of a man with power but not as good as the President’s.

“Why have you been starting the plagues?” Charles was asking him.

“We haven’t had anything to do with the plagues.” He replied. “We are an organisation that opposes this tyrannical government but we do not start plagues.”

We now cut to Charles and Charlotte talking to each other. This was always the lead into a question and the window appeared with the question in it asking, “who do you think started the plagues?” They had reverted to their fashionable modern clothes and were sitting in a simple studio, which contained no more than their two chairs, a circular table and a screen in the wall behind them.

“Let’s look at the history first.” Charlotte said. “After the first plague the main government policy was to hunt down the terrorists with massive force throughout the world but two other groups formed within the governing council who opposed this policy.”

Charles continued. The pretence at normal conversation was rather feeble but we were used to them so we carried on listening. A glass of water had appeared on the table and Charlotte drank from it while he was talking. “The first group called itself the communication group. They advocated communicating with the poor masses to try to engage them and persuade them to stop. They were hugely successful because the networks were so good and could soon ask questions of most of the world population and get a reliable answer. The problem was that they did not get the answers they wanted. The people of the world voted for the soldiers to go home and said they would not talk about anything else until this happened. The communication council considered this and finally concluded that it was a democratic opinion and should be followed.”

The camera swung round to the wall screen showing huge crowds celebrating in the streets.

“The governing council wouldn’t accept it.” Charlotte was saying. “They could not accept the principle of world democracy because it threatened their power and wealth. The communication council were expelled from government and they became the faction.”

I already knew this bit of history and also knew what was coming next. They described the third group who were the survival council who decided that world plague was inevitable and first looked at migration into space and then at fields to make zones. As expected they were described in glowing terms and their departure from the governing council was put in the best possible light. This was all a bit irrelevant to the question and the crowd was getting bored and hundreds of whispered conversations started all around me.

Finally Charles said “Now let’s look at the evidence.”

The screen displayed a large industrial looking building. Text at the bottom said “Lahore, India”. The view was an aerial shot showing the whole complex and the road leading up to it. Fast moving armoured cars came into view on the road and helicopters could be seen landing behind the building. The view moved to shots of soldiers storming in through the entrance and hundreds of white-coated people emerging at gunpoint into the car park.

Next we saw a man being interrogated. We had not seen the crowd in the car park in any detail but they were presumably in good shape. This man was, however, looking haggard and purple bruises could be seen on his dark face. “We were working for the faction.” He said in a language we could not understand but was conveniently faded out and voiced over with a translation. “They sent us all the money we needed to build this laboratory. We were developing plagues to wipe out the oppressors so we could be free.” His vicious smile was accentuated by the bruises. He clearly showed no remorse.

More clips showed similar raids on other laboratories. Some were just rooms in houses and one was in a cave. This was interspersed with gruesome film of people dying in agony as more plagues struck.

Now Charlotte was interviewing the leader of the faction again.

"You have said that you had no part in this but why will you not condemn it outright?"

"I condemn what they are doing but not why they are doing it." He replied. "Democracy is the most fundamental right of man and they are being denied it and denied all hope of it in the future. They are pursuing the only means that seems to be open to them to do anything about it. We are accused of holding a vote that should never have been held and starting this problem. We admit to holding the vote but we are not responsible for the plagues. The accusations that we are directly involved with them is preposterous, the video evidence has been fabricated. And" he added slowly for effect. "The first plague happened while we were still in government so you can't realistically accuse us of starting that one".

It was getting near time for us to answer the question. I looked out across the thousands of people around me. I had no idea if they had ever talked about this sort of history before. I knew the official line: The faction started the plague and there was no doubt in the matter. I wondered if Elisabeth had only told us all about it because she knew our background or, as I was coming to suspect, was she far more aware of the situation than most people?

The view thus far had left the question quite open and I knew that there must be one last scene to come, which was intended to remove all doubt.

Charles turned to face the screen again and it was showing the leader of the faction again, this time in a laboratory full of test tubes in racks and large pieces of equipment in rows on white benches. It was a still photo and not very well focused but it looked very authentic. Next there were interviews with soldiers. Charlie and Charlie were nowhere to be seen, this was real news clips from the time. The subtitle told us that the speaker was a colonel. "I arrested him in the laboratory." He was saying. "There is no doubt about it, we have had the samples analysed, he was right there were the plague was being synthesised."

Right after this we had the vote. We all made our choices on our remote consoles and the result flashed up. Everybody had been convinced. Every single person had decided that the faction started the plague. It was a good show but left me wondering how, in a crowd with poor light, every one of thousands of people had genuinely found the right button and, more importantly, why it mattered what the faction had done 300 years ago given that we were told that they were all killed by the final plague anyway.

7

I had often seen fliers come through the field. They glided across the sky with their wings fixed in position for almost a minute before finally coming to life and wheeling round to start circling. I always felt that they looked at me as the wheeled around.

"You just think that because you sit around watching them all day." Elisabeth told me. "It'll do you no good." .

"They watch me."

"Don't be silly. They're just circling around."

"Why do that?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows but we know that the ones that circle don't come down so sensible people don't bother watching them."

The following summer I had my first encounter with one. It was the early evening of a perfect sunny day. I had been helping Elisabeth in the cottage garden and walked up just over the hill behind it with a book and sat down on the lush grass. I was watching the sheep on the other side of the field and must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew the sun was almost setting. The sheep had gone but that was nothing remarkable. I sat up feeling refreshed and a little cold from sleeping in the day. A gust of wind made me shiver, more the sound of it than any real cooling. Then another gust, and another.

I turned. The flier was less than 20 feet away. The wings, which looked graceful for soaring, were now beating the air in long fast powerful strokes as the thing hovered. Staring in disbelief I felt like a mouse transfixed by a barn owl. I wondered if anyone else had seen all this

before me only to die before they could describe it to others. I wondered if I was really awake.

Seen close up the pretence of a bird was poor. There were no legs or claws. The beak was a single spike. The shiny feathers looked stiff and unreal. The eyes were worst, threateningly mechanical, scanning me back and forth. White balls with black holes reflecting light from recessed lenses.

"What do you want?" My defiant childish shout seemed to echo off it.

Nothing happened so I shouted again. "Go away". I was so scared that I was rooted to the spot and couldn't get up and run.

Still nothing happened. It just kept hovering and scanning me with its appalling eyes. I have no real idea why I tried what I did next. I was young and must have made a connection with the thought that something about the bird looked archaic. I loved reading books about the old times and in one of them the author had put in a few phrases of ancient anglic. Hardly anybody learnt the language any more so they had impressed me in the book and I had even remembered one of them.

Looking straight at it I shouted out "I command you to go" with my best attempt at credible pronunciation in the old language.

Suddenly the beating increased and it flew upwards.

Now it was the familiar sight, the bringer of terror. Looking small but deadly, soaring down the valley towards the village. It seemed to dip as if deliberately showing me the cloud of yellow smoke from the phosphor on the back of its head. The white-blue of the magnesium burn flashed in my eyes even in the sunlight. The first fragments were falling now, embedding themselves in the wooden roofs of barns and houses. The main body targeted directly at the church.

I didn't dare tell anybody about the incident in case they blamed me for the loss of the church. I did, however, confound my teachers by insisting on being just about the only child in the zone who learnt anglic.

8

After two years at university I decided that I trusted my tutor well enough to tell him about my background. It was a frosty morning in early winter. I crossed the quadrangle on one of the ancient stone paths between the signs politely asking me to keep off the grass. The buildings around me were almost entirely original, only one corner had been hit by a flier and the stonework had been repaired so carefully that, had I not been told about the incident, I would not have noticed anything wrong. In many ways this reflected the atmosphere of the whole university. Life carried on as it had for centuries. Books and other paper records had fortunately been superseded some time before the plague so little reference material was lost to them when the zones were formed.

Reaching the door I hesitated. Would this enlightened culture count for anything if he felt threatened with plague? It was one thing to ignore the political squabbles of the outside world but quite another to accept the risk of plague. I was standing motionless half way through the door when my deliberations were cut short by a shout echoing down the worn stone staircase:

"Hello George. There you are. I saw you coming across the quad and wondered where you had got to. Come on up and let's see what you've done." He was always like that. If he was handing back an essay that had the lowest mark he had ever given he would still have been horribly cheerful about it. He was also a brilliant Engineer with a keen interest in fliers. He had been visibly surprised when I had gone to great lengths to be on his list of tutees because he knew that I found all the jolliness a bit hard to take. When we sat down in his office he decided to start asking questions, which made my decision for me. Soon he knew all about my arrival from Avon sector and the way I had managed to come out of hiding during the shelling. If he was alarmed by it he managed to conceal his thoughts completely. He simply took in my story like any other piece of interesting information. He sat back in his chair and smiled slightly as he looked at me.

"So now we know about your little mystery. Well it's quite a big mystery actually. I wasn't

the only one who was a bit puzzled by you, some of my colleagues had noticed your strange interest in the fliers as well, we'll have to do something about that."

"What?"

"We can't have them find out." He slowly looked me straight in the eye. "They'd have you killed you know, they wouldn't follow my attitude that curiosity outweighs safety. And killing you would be a real waste".

He didn't seem to see anything strange in saying this. In fact I almost wondered if he knew the meaning of the word so I just politely agreed that this would indeed be a great shame. He continued:

"You've known the obvious all along haven't you. Since you're the only person who can find out about the fliers you're going to have to." He stopped for a few seconds to think. "You will won't you?"

I nodded my agreement silently.

"What about your sister?" he asked suddenly "will she go too"

"I think she'll come if I ask. We often talk about it"

"Good" he pronounced and then jumped up and went across to his terminal. He started a series of rapid searches based on what was clearly a highly efficient data structure. Soon he was pointing to something on the screen.

"That's what you want. Gives all the background. It's not even on the restricted list so looking at it won't cause any excitement"

The paper was entitled "A review of current studies on guidance mechanisms for un-manned flight"

"Doesn't say "Fliers" in the title so nobody much noticed when it came out in one of the journals. It's damn good - gives all the background, even some of the calculations on what would happen to the field if we started shooting at them. Don't go chasing up the references in it though, you'll have border security all over you in minutes".

He immersed himself in the screens for a minute longer but soon gave up looking for whatever else he had hoped to find.

"You'll have to go to central zone first," he said suddenly

"Why?"

"Because as far as anybody knows fliers go into it and never come out. We don't know if there are any people in there"

"What you mean there might be people in central zone. Surely it's empty". Everything I had ever seen showed it to be too dark for agriculture and just left empty, a sort of necessary empty space in the shape of the fields.

"Every time you say surely you should wonder who wants you to say it" he replied and then went on: "Presumably you've tried to work out how to get through the fields. What's your favourite, back to a boat how you came in or glide like a flier?"

"I'd always favoured a helium balloon"

This remark completely floored him. Suddenly he looked at me as if re-categorising me as a thinking entity rather than just a receptacle for his ideas. He humoured me:

"Smart idea" then he had to add his own bit. "Why not use hot air, much simpler than helium"

I was pleased to notice that now it was now we who were doing this, not just me, but couldn't resist stating the obvious.

"Helium balloons don't come down. You don't want to go on floating around halfway across the zone until you come round. Everybody would see you and rush out to get you. Hot air balloons come down quite fast when you turn the burner off."

"I'd better hope it's not too fast and the wind doesn't drop" I replied, touching on a nightmare possibility that made me shiver every time I thought about it. What landed in the field never regained consciousness and never came out. "Hot air balloons and gliders would both be dangerous, the only safe way is a helium balloon."

"At least we've got the old maps which should show if there's a hill on the other side" I added, changing the subject and trying to impress him again with my powers of planning.

“But it won’t show if it’s covered in trees” he concluded cheerfully. “You’re going to have to do an awful lot of work on this if you’re going to have any chance of surviving. I’ll try to help. I’ll admit that this is the most exciting thing that has come my way in years but this is quite a close community here and if I try to do even a fraction of what needs to be done they’ll start asking questions.”

“Who are they?”

“Just some of my colleagues who would cause a lot of trouble” he replied. I wondered if what he really meant was just some of his colleagues who might steal some of his glory if I managed to achieve anything but I certainly wasn’t going to ask one of them and find out.

Some brief research showed me that gliding and ballooning had been popular sports before the plague. I found a number of references to them in technical papers and some in historical works. There were, however, no recent citations and gliders and balloons were conspicuously absent from the vast range of leisure goods available from the manufactory. I could obtain any number of different sports vehicles, boats, and even aircraft, but no gliders or balloons. I could think of no possible way forward so I returned to the professor in a state of total despair.

When I entered his study he gestured me to one of the comfortable chairs by the fire. In retrospect I imagine that this move from the upright chairs at the table was not even a conscious decision on his part but for me it represented a major step from being ‘just another student’. I tried to live up to my new status by presenting my fruitless research in a positive and strictly academic manner but began to wonder if I had overdone it when confronted by his unending cheerfulness when I had finished.

“Excellent start” he congratulated me “judging by your work so far we’ll sort this out in no time”

I looked at him blankly wondering if he had been listening to what I said. He did have this habit of looking at things on his desk or his screen while being talked to. I decided to try to make myself clearer:

“But I didn’t find anything. There’s nothing else I can do”

“True and false” he replied and then he smiled “Yes I was listening, you must excuse that I’m not very good at showing that I’m listening. Why do think that you couldn’t find anything?”

I was confused. A moment before he had congratulated me and now he appeared to be about to criticise me. I tried to give a straight answer: “Because there aren’t any gliders or balloons to be found.”

“Yes I know. But why?”

“I suppose they’re too dangerous. Might go into the tangle fields. I guess that puts people off.”

“Did you read any of the historic references on military use?”

I had grown used to his infuriating trick of answering questions with questions so I played along with it. “Yes, they were used as troop carriers, towed behind other aircraft.”

“And what happened when they were let go?”

“They landed a few kilometres away”

“So how would a glider in the centre of the zone be at risk of running into a field?”

“I don’t know, but presumably they are.”

“Never presume anything. The conclusion from your excellent research is that somebody, either recently or at some time since the plague has effectively prevented the use of gliders and balloons.”

This interview set me off on a whole new avenue for my enquiries, which would have taken me into the Byzantine methods, which the Zone Council used to control our activities. My research was, however, curtailed by warning messages from border security appearing on my screen and the professor telling me to get back to work and complete my degree. During my final year I therefore did little except to refine my ideas in discussion with him. One day in early spring he confronted me with yet another of his questions.

“Why do you want to know where the fliers come from?”

“So the zones stop blaming each other for them and stop the shelling.”

“What effect will that have?”

"It will give us peace"

"What will we do then?"

I couldn't see where this was going so I just replied, "not make war I suppose".

"What might we do then?"

He had lost me – I looked blank.

"Sort out our government may be?" he suggested, "Get rid of some corruption"

The penny finally dropped.

"So you think they already know?"

Before I left he gave me a history lesson about the many empires of the world that had survived for centuries by culturing a fear of the outsider, barbarian or infidel or communist or capitalist or anybody else they could find.

As the spring term progressed I grew impatient. The Professor had finally confirmed to me that I had an important mission to accomplish but here I was writing essays for him on obscure academic theories. He would not be hurried. He would tell me that the fliers had been coming for 300 years and I should look to my future and get a degree. After seeing one particularly feeble submission he even hinted that if my degree was not adequate he would not help me at all. The more I thought about the practical difficulties I faced the more I realised that I needed his help so I had no option but to follow his wishes. I now know that he had some idea of what lay in wait for me in the other zones and was hoping that a few extra months of physical and mental maturity would help me to survive them. For this use of his dominant position in the project I am most grateful to him but there was one particular misuse. One afternoon after a tutorial session, which I considered to have gone well enough, I raised the subject of getting through the field.

"I've done some sketches of a balloon." I told him holding out some rough drawings based on old books.

He looked at it and paused. His attention wavered to his screen and then the window, which looked out across the quadrangle in the sunshine. Many of my fellow students had spread out on the grass and were gathered in groups looking relaxed. He finally looked back at me and the atmosphere seemed a complete contrast to the freedom outside.

"How does it land anyway?" he asked without showing any interest in a reply.

I described the gas cylinders and explained how the valves could be worked from inside the basket." He looked distracted again but pressed on:

"It would be much too big to hide when you got there. Everybody would see it."

"It would be much less conspicuous than a hot air balloon when in flight" I replied "

"No, a balloon would show up too much." his reply was alarmingly quick this time. "You must go in a glider".

I looked up sharply at his reply. We both remembered that I had been worried about landing in the field. He visibly steeled himself and reached onto his desk for a thick set of papers. As he opened them I saw detailed plans for his glider. Although I was expected to fly in it I never felt that it was in any way mine.

The cable is fixed to a ground anchor which is left behind," He explained. "The winch obviously has to go with it for the return flight. And because it never has to fly properly the wings are very short, you could undo the mounting bolts and lift them off and make the whole thing almost as small as a collapsed balloon".

"I knew that you would need help" he began and then paused. I certainly didn't feel the need for this kind of help. "I have managed to obtain the fabric for the wings". He even went on to show me a sample of the fabric. It looked good and strong but his whole approach was such an obvious case of "not invented here" syndrome. He was determined that my idea should be his invention and I hated him for it, but I had to accept it.



it was like being in a room during the day with thick curtains drawn across the windows. Far above I could see the diffuse glow of sunlight but it was too dim to have any real effect on the landscape.

Entering the field had been like flying into cotton wool – except that the cotton wool seemed to start from the inside. I knew that I couldn't and shouldn't fight it but in the second before I blacked out I was desperately trying to think of everything. Had we made absolutely sure that the glider had no metal parts? Had I remembered to take my watch off? My panic started just as I lost consciousness and all that remained was a headache. Visibility was very poor and all I could see around me was moss and short ferns. Since that was probably all that could grow without more light I guessed that it was all there was, however far one looked.

I checked behind me and saw Tania coming round.

"All right?"

"Just about. You ok?"

"Nice soft landing. No trees or anything. Welcome to Central Zone."

She opened her eyes and looked around

"Doesn't look like there's going to be much to find. Simple as that. Nothing here but bogs and moss." In a few minutes we had struggled out from their safety harnesses and climbed out of the glider. We set out on a compass bearing for the centre leaving a carefully flattened pathway through the ferns behind us to mark the route back. There were a number of areas that were too boggy to cross and I soon started getting agitated about having to move off the compass bearing. Eventually we came to a halt at the edge of a stagnant lake. I looked at the map.

"This isn't shown. It could be quite small. Looks like there's higher ground to the left"

Moving around the lake we came to a road. A thin layer of slime covered its surface but nothing else. Tania looked at it and laughed.

"So much for all of your compass bearings. The roads are still here. Probably find the road signs as well. Never thought of that did you?"

She left me finding a pocket for the compass as she strode off down the road.

After a few hours we were getting close to the centre. The road signs had gone but we had counted the junctions quite easily. There had been no change at all in the landscape and no sign of life other than crawling insects. Tania stopped for a rest.

"Haven't we seen enough? I don't fancy spending the night out here"

"We need to go to the centre. If there's anything to see that's where it'll be"

"There's nothing here. Can't you just accept it and go back?"

"If there's nothing here why are you bothered about staying for the night?"

We continued.

In the distance we began to make out a shape on the road. It was round at the bottom with a long thin pyramid on top. As we drew closer we saw more of them, set out at regular intervals along the road. Then we finally realised what they were. They were fliers with their wings bent upward to the point where the tips had been tied together above their backs. They were supported in this position by heavy posts driven straight through the birds' backs. Standing next to the first one we were struck by its sheer size. The top of its long body was at the height of our heads and the wings towered over the featureless landscape. It was covered in moss and slime but its body was clearly intact. Its incendiary had not ignited.

"My God" I whispered. "Did you say there was nothing here?"

Tania shuddered "ok there may be something here but I certainly don't want to find it. If it can do that to a flier we'll probably be next, staked out on the road with it."

"But how the hell did it catch them?"

"I don't want to find out"

"We're going to have to but first let's look at this one". We walked around it and tried pulling tentatively at a few feathers. These turned out to be made of pieces of fine synthetic film. It was flexible enough to bend to let the air flow by as the wings flapped but incredibly tough. With our bare hands we were unable to remove or even tear a single feather. Bending them back revealed a hard surface beneath. Without tools to cut into it we were acutely aware that most of its secrets remained inaccessible. I was determined to find what I could and soon I was working over every part trying to memorise details that had never been seen in 300 years of surveillance.

I finally moved on to the next flier. Its head lay slightly to one side with a large slime filled eye socket looking up at us. Tania started cleaning it out.

"What's the point in doing that?" I asked as I moved on.

"Don't know. I just thought". I paced impatiently wanting to get finished and back home. Suddenly she ran back and shouted to me. I cautiously approached and the gleaming eyeball swivelled to focus on my face with its dark metallic iris.

"It must have a bit of power left after all this time. I want to see if it can hear me like that one that flew up to me"

"Try to find out what got it"

I turned to face the top of its head assuming that, to mimic a real bird, this would be where its audio sensors would be. I shouted, "How were you trapped?" in my best Anglic.

The eyeballs rotated slowly. It appeared that it had heard but could not understand.

Tania leaned in and shouted, "What got you?" Again the eyeballs moved but nothing else. "We could go on like this for hours" she observed "just trying to find the right keywords."

"I think I found one last time when that one flew up to me and that didn't take too long. Trouble is that I think it was "go" and this thing's not exactly going anywhere is it?"

We tried to work out how it could give us information even if it did understand what was wanted. "It must have some sort of data output," I concluded "even if only for fault finding, some sort of visual or audio."

"If it had speakers it would have told us to get lost by now"

I agreed. "So it must have a display - or somewhere to plug one in"

Tania went back to it "Tell us where your display is you stupid machine". We had both been studying Anglic and she shouted the abuse at it with a fantastically convincing accent.

To our amazement this produced a reaction. An area of slime just above the beak started to glow as a light came on behind it. She rapidly cleaned it off and a holographic image appeared in the air in front of it. The image was somewhat cloudy and was tipped at the same angle as the head but the text was clearly legible:

NORTHERN ORDINANCE

Mk VIII DRONE

DISPLAY MODE

The data banks were immense and undamaged. We found detailed diagrams of the machine's mechanisms giving the status of each. The nuclear fuel cell power unit was at 3% of capacity. Some of the servomotors, which powered the legs and wings, showed as functional but all of the linkages were identified as broken.

There were video images of its last flight with a date display showing us that this had been almost 200 years ago. The patchwork of green fields and villages seemed to move and sway as the bird had soared over one of the sectors. We thought that it could have been Cardiff sector but could not be sure. Then the field loomed up and the image jumped to the other side of it. It was dark now and the ground was featureless. The image locked onto a single distant building. The bird was diving now, gathering speed, heading directly for the building, which could now be seen to be a dome. At the edge of the view there was a glimpse of some captured fliers with their wings above them. Then the picture went blank for a few seconds and then showed the desolate landscape at ground level with a large rat in the foreground. The rat soon moved on and the image jumped to another one. After the third rat we suddenly saw our own faces peering into the eyes just a few minutes previously. There was no clue about what had happened when the flier had come down.

We tried to work backwards and get it to show where it had come from. We watched long sequences of flight through different zones and soon learned how to display the power cell status with the image. The available power increased the further back they went and we finally worked our way back to the start of the flight with a sequence showing 98% power availability. We tried to make the final step but a message came up.

ERROR: ACCESS DENIED

I kicked it in frustration "I bet there's someone back home who could get through that but they can't come here and we can't move it."

We tried again and again but there were no clues about where it had come from or how it had been captured.

"What now?" Tania asked

"Try to find others that aren't dead I guess"

"Then home and see if the professor knows what's going on"

"We ought to try to get a look at the dome - if only from a distance to see if it's still there."

"You won't be satisfied until something gets us will you?"

We had spent a considerable time looking at the images and even the dim sunlight, which had been reaching us, was now fading and it soon became quite dark. Tania had to reluctantly admit that returning to our glider for the night was not an option. We decided that it would be safest to pitch our tent on the road, the marshy ground to either side looked like a popular haunt for snakes and rats. It also looked cold. We finally chose a site next to one of the fliers, which was at least protected from one side. Tania started to unpack some food while I looked around. On the horizon ahead of us there was a pool of white-blue light. I had assumed that it was an effect of the sunset on the opposite field but it was now apparent that it was not disappearing with the last of the daylight. I soon realised that it was artificial lights and guessed that they had strong ultra-violet for growing crops in the dome.

We ate slowly and talked about what we might find ahead. Somehow the thought of ordinary people who grew real crops seemed reassuring to. Nevertheless I insisted that we took turns to watch through the night.

I took over the watch well after midnight and decided not to waken Tania for the early dawn. I sat watching the desolate landscape as the meagre light spread across it. I could visualise the dawn at home, the dawn chorus from the birds, animals starting to stir, and even insects venturing out. Here there was nothing, no movement and no life. I felt a deep sense of sadness for the community I expected to find ahead of us.

I turned slowly around, feeling in no hurry to see more of the emptiness. Out of the corner of my eye she saw something move. Looking up suddenly I saw a flier coming in almost directly overhead. I shouted to Tania. She emerged sleepily out of the tent:

"What is it?"

"Flier"

She looked up "Do you think it's going in?"

"Looks like it"

Suddenly we felt the numbing sensation, which we knew from going into the tangle fields. There was nothing we could do. I saw Tania begin to fall and I saw but was unable to move to help her.

The next thing we knew was coming round. I was up first and ran over to Tania who was bleeding from a cut on her elbow. I reached to pick her up and saw the flier gliding very low on a course just off to the side of the road. I looked around and this time he saw a large vehicle heading up the road towards them with powerful headlights illuminating the landscape around it. It had enormous bulbous tires to make it amphibious and only just fitted along the road alongside the line of fliers.

Tania was coming around now, ignoring her injury. We scrambled to move the tent.

The flier started to show some signs of life, beginning to move its wings. The vehicle stopped and its lights went out.

"Sit down" I shouted

"What?"

"They're going to do it again"

We just managed to get down before we were knocked out again. Coming round the next time we saw the lorry starting to move again. The flier was down on its belly in the marsh. What had been gleaming metal was now covered in mud and moss thrown up from its landing.

We just managed to get the tent down and around to the other side of the flier it was next to before the massive vehicle roared past us. Just past us it stopped again.

"Here we go again," I said quietly not wishing to be heard by the hunters.

Next time we came round we watched as the machine turned and drove across the marsh

to the flier. The great bird started to move again and we found ourselves unconscious one more time before we saw a long crane arm lift up from the back of the lorry. It held a massive wooden post, which it positioned above the flier's back. There was a single loud bang as an explosive charge drove the post down through it.

Having captured their bird the crew immediately relaxed and I had a chance to look at them. They settled down in the light of the headlamps of the lorry and passed round a large bottle from which they each drank at length. I could only assume that this was a cure for the severe headache, which I was suffering from and presumably got them as well. Their method of capture depended on the human brain coming round from a pulse of tangle field faster than a flier but the headache was the price they paid. They did not seem very concerned by it and a celebration was clearly starting. Judging by their clothing and equipment they seemed to be a remarkably prosperous community in their strange environment.

Tania was so tired and scared that she was visibly shivering. Although the place was not actually cold it had little to recommend it to anybody except a natural explorer. I was tempted go over to the crew and ask for some of their drink and a comfortable bed for the night but this was obviously a small community and we would probably have been seen as strangers and killed as plague risks. I tried to think up some reassuring remarks for her but I have never been good at that sort of thing so for the first time in many years I reached out and took her by the hand. Slowly her shivering stopped and I realised that I was going to have to do a lot of things differently if she was going to survive in the places where we were going to go.

The recovery crew finally finished their party and loaded the captured flier onto the lorry. They drove back up onto the road and I saw one of them pacing out the distance so they could set their prize in the right place spaced out along the road with the others. Finally they drove back past us.

We made our way back along the moss-covered roads and across the bog back to our glider and I carefully checked the ground in the area that we would use for launching. It was not ideal but I couldn't face the prospect of dragging the plane all the way to the road. I cleared away the remains of what look like trees that must have died when the zones were formed. Finally I paid out the launching rope at drove its anchor as firmly as I could into the soft ground. We installed ourselves in the cockpit and lurched forward for the launch. As we gathered speed one of the wheels started to dig in and my last thought before entering the field was a desperate calculation to try to estimate whether we would make it through having slewed off at a considerable angle to our shortest path through it. As it was we finally came round to find ourselves crashed into a slope well away from our target and alarmingly close to the field.

10

Having seen what lay outside their protected country the stone buildings of the University seemed strangely vulnerable. Walking through the quadrangle I had the feeling of being the only person on a ship who knew about the rocks around it. As I gave my account of our experience to the Professor I found it hard to tolerate his habitual apparent lack of interest and became distracted as his gaze meandered around the room and the view through the window.

Suddenly he cut me short in the middle of my description of the loading of the captured flier. "Let's see what you found." He said, clearing the screen on his terminal and typing "findings" at the top.

"We found that we could get there and back" I replied and started to describe the drama of the return transit.

Again he cut me short: "Yes. That's obvious but it doesn't help stop the fliers does it?"

"We found out how they capture the fliers"

At this he just raised his eyebrows slightly and typed the word "relevant" in front of

“findings”.

There was a short silence, which was broken when he typed some sub-headings. “Objective”, “Origin” and “Identity”.

“We need to know why they are coming, where from, and who is sending them” he explained. “Did you find out anything about that?”

I couldn’t think of a reply. I had already described our attempt to view the full record of the flight. I slumped in my chair as he carried on with his attack.

“Look I am taking great risks being helpful to you with this project”

I resisted the urge to ask him what he classified as unhelpful. He carried on.

“You’re going to have to concentrate on what you’re doing. How many keywords have you found?”

I started to count them off: “display, view, flight...”

“What about important ones?” he interrupted

I looked at him blankly. I looked at the screen and saw that he had entered as much as he had ever intended to. I left the room wondering how I could persuade Tania to go back.

Driving back to the cottage I had the same sensation of the fragile nature of our existence in the zones. The generating station looked the same as always with its cluster of dull buildings but they seemed to offer far less security than they had before. We had always assumed that the people in Avon sector were just like us – what if they became so different that they stopped caring about the generators? I drove past the craters from the shells wondering just how different they were.

Tania met me at the door. Harold and Elisabeth were too old to come through the house in a hurry but when we sat down to talk they were as alert as ever. They were always fascinated by my accounts of the professor while, at the same time, somewhat dubious about his motives. After the obligatory serving of tea and cakes Elisabeth asked me where we were going next.

“We’ve got to go back” I replied bluntly, trying to get the worst over quickly.

Tania’s reply was predictable. “There’s no way I’m going back to that place. It’s a nightmare, the fliers don’t come from there, they die there”.

I started to explain about the keywords. “It was really stupid of me not to think of other ones, the professor came up with them instantly. I’m sorry. I’m just not much of an adventurer”.

“Perhaps he’d better go back and try them,” Tania suggested. “Has he got any real idea what it’s like to go there?”

Harold and Elisabeth had been listening intently to our conversation, she leaning forwards in her chair holding her cup and saucer and he sitting back with his eyes only half open but no less focussed on the discussion. Now he leaned slowly forward and looked at me with an intensity that I had not seen in years.

“You have come a long way to get this far,” he said slowly and deliberately. “You have started from a position that was nearly impossible and managed to make a good start in life. You have chosen to try to do something, which is going to be very difficult, but at least it’s worthwhile. You have made a mistake and you will make more but you must never stop trying. Your slick professor in his ivory tower may seem to have all the answers but he’s not actually doing very much and, as Tania says, he probably wouldn’t have done any better himself if he had been there.”

Elisabeth finally persuaded Tania that she would be letting us all down if she backed out and by the time we had eaten our evening meal she seemed almost positive about the prospect.

I decided to drive Harold back to his house in person. Leaving him in the care of a service drone to get home seemed unthinkable despite the fact that similar modules cared for him throughout every day. Returning along the coast road I noticed a car parked almost out of sight in some trees. Border security drove very ordinary looking cars; in fact this one was so ordinary that it stood out like a beacon. The lights were off and I couldn’t see anybody inside it but it would have been located and picked up if it had been left there for more than an hour. It was easy to see what was happening.

I drove back trying to hurry without looking as if I was. As soon as I reached the house I ran in and told Tania. I automatically assumed that they would be looking for her as well as me. In

retrospect there was no reason for this and she would probably have been perfectly safe but, in the event, she grabbed her coat and followed me out of the back of the house and we ran down towards the estuary. As we ran we saw several sets of headlights converging on the cottage. Without thinking we went for a boat.

The cliff path was steep and treacherous in the dark but we both knew it so well that we were soon at the head of the cove dragging the dinghy down towards the water. The tide was high so we did not have far to go but even as we reached it we saw lights behind us coming down the path. The little engine started easily.

“Where to now?” Tania asked.

“Just keep close in under the cliff where it’s darkest I suppose” I replied, not having any real ideas. “If we put the sail up and go along quietly we might be able to land further up”

“And then what? Your professor friend has told them about us hasn’t he?”

I was annoyed by this suggestion. I am not the world’s best judge of character but I knew that I wasn’t that far out. Just then we heard the engine of another boat behind us.

“Where the hell did they get that from?” I asked. Soon we saw the answer, it was a small trailable boat visible in the moonlight in the bay behind us, coming our way.

I turned our boat out to sea and set the engine at full speed.

“You can’t” Tania shouted.

“We’ve got no choice” I replied. We both knew that the little dinghy had no metal parts. We had built it as children, dreaming of going to find our family.

As we moved out towards the field the wind picked up and the sail filled. I quickly fixed a rope to tie the tiller in position. The other boat was moving towards us but not fast enough.

There was a loud bang. We ducked down but knew that the thin sides of the boat would do little to protect us if a bullet hit it. We just hoped that their aim would be poor in the steady chop out in the estuary. The boat juddered as a bullet went through near the front just as I was tipping the motor over the back into the sea and Tania threw her necklace in after it as we entered the field.

11

Fixing the tiller on a sailing boat does not guarantee navigation in a straight line in the best of circumstances. Our original passage through the field almost twenty years before had been in a larger boat with a simple self-steering device. On this occasion I had fixed the tiller with the motor running and then expected the boat to continue in the same direction under sail. Had the wind been behind us our eventual transit through the field would have been assured but it was blowing out to sea, at right angles to our course. Under the circumstances we were therefore lucky to emerge from the far side of the field at all.

I have no idea how long we spent in the field. I do know, however, that it was far longer than for a normal transit and that, as a consequence, we were unconscious for many hours. I shall never know the precise effect of such a transit because I have never repeated it and am determined that I shall never repeat it. What I do know is that I regained consciousness very slowly, drifting in and out of multi-coloured nightmares. In a semi-conscious state I was convinced that I was being attacked by fliers diving at me with their razor sharp beaks while I was unable to move in any way to escape them. In a logical moment the realisation came that they must do this sometimes - why have the sharp beak on a device whose only function is as an incendiary, which ignites in, mid-air. At last I was sure that I was conscious but thought that I was still in the field. I could see the boat but was surrounded by impenetrable whiteness on all sides. Eventually I realised that we were in a thick fog. The tiller was still tied but the wind had dropped and the sea was a flat calm. I had no idea of the time or where we were.

For the next several hours we rowed the boat - probably round in circles until darkness came and we gave up. I guessed that we would get some wind before dawn and we took turns to keep watch and wait for it.

When the wind came it was in short gusts, which, as far as I could tell in the half-light, were

from different directions and did nothing to clear the fog. Slowly they increased in strength building up short steep waves, which began to splash into the dinghy. Soon however, these waves subsided and I realised that we were in the shelter of a bay.

When, at last, we saw land the shoreline was unremarkable. There was a muddy beach with low rocks looming out of the fog at the top of it. We had absolutely no idea where we were. I tried to guess the chances of being back in Cardiff sector, across in Avon sector, or even right outside the zones. I felt that we could easily have been through more than one field in the night but we could equally easily simply have made a long oblique transit through a single field.

We lowered the sail and mast and I jumped out into the shallow water to hold the boat before it ran aground. Tania was all for getting onto dry land. I agreed with her that going back out into the open sea would be dangerous but leaving the boat on an exposed beach for everyone to see was also out of the question. We compromised and she agreed to stay in the boat while I worked it along the beach looking for some shelter. She picked up the few possessions that we had brought with us and stood ready to jump out and run for the dry land if an excuse came.

After a short distance we were sure that we could hear voices but, even when I stopped, the noise of the wind and the gulls made it impossible to tell what direction they were coming from, or even to be sure that we had heard them at all. We continued a short distance further and quite suddenly the fog cleared, as if blown out to sea by a single gust.

The first thing I saw was a massive harbour wall looming over us on the other side of a narrow channel which was obviously very shallow at this state of the tide. Looking into the harbour I saw boats, moored in lines, mostly dried out on the muddy sand. They were all brightly coloured traditional sailing craft. Many had fishing nets hanging from their masts to dry and, as far as I could see, none of them had motors. My first impression was that we must be in a tourist village; no doubt there was an all-tide marina just around the corner. Then as I looked closely I saw that they were real working boats. In among them some men in simple well work clothing were trying to repair the nets. They looked up and stared at us with weary scarred faces.

There had always been rumours of survivors outside the zones. "We must be right outside" I said.

"No we're not" Tania replied, "Look at that". Now we could see the whole village spread out along the shore with dirty looking cottages and cobbled streets and even a few horses and carts. At the end of the village the field shimmered in the new sunlight as it crossed the shoreline and reached up over us. From the angle of the sun it only took me a few moments to realise that we were at the western end of the coastline of Avon sector.

A man in a shabby black uniform and long muddy boots was walking towards us. I guessed he was the harbour master.

"Where are you from?" he asked in an accent so thick that I could only just understand it.

"Bristol" I replied, making a wild guess. "They were chasing after us, we only just got away." He was standing beside the dinghy now; the bullet holes were clearly visible.

He looked back and forth at each of us and, without saying a word, helped me pull the dinghy across the sand to a slip way. He helped me position it carefully by some other small boats.

"That will be fifty cents a day to leave it there" he announced. "If you give me the first three days in advance just now and make sure you pay the rest promptly then you can leave it there as long as you want." He started looking at my wallet in my trouser pocket.

I looked across at Tania. We had never even seen coins except in a museum.

"They took all our money." I said

"Well there's nothing free round here. If you want to leave it there and you can't pay by tomorrow you'll have to sell it." He picked up one of the loose nylon ropes and looked at it. These are fine ropes you've got here. From the old ways aren't they. You might find someone to buy it, if not I'll give you five pounds for it.

"Is there anywhere we can go to get dry and have something to eat?" Tania asked.

"Not without any money" he replied. He reached in his pocket for a leather wallet and carefully drew out a single dirty piece of paper. "Here's five pounds for the dinghy, it's the best you'll get".

I thanked him, refused his offer, and managed to get away as he sulked off leaving us walking up to the road at the top of the slipway. There were large numbers of people all around the harbour but they all appeared to be busy and ignored us. Reaching land after a long time in a rocking boat made me feel as unsteady as I had been in the boat so I found myself leaning against the dirty wall of a small fisherman's shed. From there I had a chance to try to work out what was going on. Both of us stood there staring, taking in the reality of what life would be like without a manufactory. The people were spending all day making things and mending them.

"It's medieval" Tania whispered.

"Almost" I replied. "Just about everything's gone. Not surprised he wanted our nylon lines, theirs seem to be made out of horse hair or something"

"It's worse than medieval" she continued "they've got nobody to trade with, no tin from Cornwall, nothing"

I looked down and pushed away some mud with my foot to reveal the remains of what must once have been a paved road. "All they've got left is a few kerbstones – so much for the vision of the zones".

Along the far side of the road facing the harbour there was a line of small cottages with what was obviously an inn at the end. It had a grimy sign hanging outside with a picture of a sailing ship on it.

Tania looked at it "I dread to think what they eat"

"Same fish as we do" I replied. Fish can swim under the zones, the water protects them a bit and their nervous systems are very simple anyway. One time they had tried with a submarine but it was never seen again.

We walked over to the inn and stepped nervously inside. There were no customers. It was, at least, quite clean but it was very basic. Wooden barrels stood along one wall. Simple tables and chairs were spread around the room. A fat and friendly looking man appeared through a doorway.

"You've got some fine ropes on that dinghy of yours, come from Bristol you say?"

I had no idea how he could have found this out from the harbour master who appeared to have gone in the other direction. The man seemed to enjoy my obvious surprise and carried on. "Got no money I hear but if you just let me have one of those ropes I'll give you food and board for two days.

"Just the mooring line" I offered

"That sounds fine to me" he replied.

I collected the line and we settled down to what became a mid-day meal. Some other customers had come in and soon we could smell fresh fish cooking. A girl came out and started laying the tables with crude cutlery made out of grey metal. When she came to our table, however, she produced shining stainless steel knives and forks. The man was standing in the doorway; he smiled and walked over to us.

"They were made just a year before the manufactory was burnt". He said. "They came from a family that had treasured them for eight generations to remind them what life was like. We only get them out for special occasions but a man who knows where to get new rope like that should enjoy the best".

I have always had a fascination for the minutiae of life and I love working out codes. Therefore quite without thinking I turned the fork over to look at the code stamped on the back. I knew where to find it, just where they put the hallmark on the ancient silver ones in the museum. As a child I had always wondered why a row of twelve digits appeared on every item produced by the manufactory and, as a teenager, I had spent many hours finding them on the most unlikely items. Tania used to tease me endlessly about it but I used to find it most satisfying because they could always be found if you looked for long enough. One time at University I had gone drinking with a fellow student from one of my maths groups and we had spend an entire evening, mildly drunk, examining the codes. We thought the last six digits were a code for the date but we weren't sure. Some time later the same student gave me the address of a discussion group in which someone had given a full explanation of them. They had apparently spent years working it out. I was fascinated, we had been right about the last 6 digits, and I soon learned how to work out the



dates in my head, often embarrassing friends by working them out at different times.

Tania almost shouted at me. "I know it's a fork, try eating with it"

I suddenly looked up; the fish had arrived. It looked excellent and I am sure that it was, but I never noticed because the fork was only five years old.

With the innkeeper standing close by I didn't dare mention it to Tania so I just tried to help her fend off the ever-pressing questions. Would we like him to offer some more of our rope or even the whole dinghy to get things moving. When I suggested that we needed to rest a bit before starting that sort of thing the questions became more direct about who we were and why we had been sailing. We seemed to fumble our way through and eventually a sort of suet dessert was served. I just managed a glimpse at the back of my spoon without looking too obvious and what I saw amazed me.

Right after I had found out about the codes they had changed them. Presumably they, whoever "they" were, didn't want everybody working them out so they replaced the code with another one, which was more complex, and two digits longer. The code on the back of my spoon had fourteen digits. It was almost new and had been made in a manufactory, which was under the same control as the one in Cardiff sector.

We went to our bedrooms almost immediately we finished eating. I was so exhausted that I took little notice of my surroundings but, having first seemed badly made and rough, I was surprised to find how comfortable the linen sheets and woollen blankets were.

In the morning I was woken early by shouts from the harbour. I jumped out of bed and ran over to the small window. The glass was uneven but I could see that the boats were being dragged across the sand to meet the rising tide. The window latch was wooden and stiff but I managed to open it and saw the whole scene. The boats were heavily built and did not move easily but progress was steady. The shouting that I had heard was coming from the captains who were instantly recognisable by their authority and shouted instructions to their crew but still carried more than their share of the load. Soon the lead boat was away and the last crewmembers were climbing into it from the water. The rest followed quickly and a sudden quiet descended as the fleet headed out into the bay. The only boat that remained was our dinghy looking ridiculously fragile with its light laminated shell construction.

After breakfast I went over to check the dinghy. Nobody had touched it. I untied the mooring line and took it up to the inn. Then I returned and folded the sails neatly, tipped the boat up to empty out the water in the bilge tidied all of the loose gear and examined the two bullet holes. They were very small and perfectly round with virtually no splintering. All I needed to block them were simple wooden plugs but, although there was plenty of wood about, I did not have a knife to work it. Walking back up to the road and past the harbour wall I soon found a boat-building shop. It was very basic, just a weather-beaten shed with two old men in it slowly shaping a plank to be added to a half-built hull. A slightly taller man seemed to be in charge but his companion was so hunched over it was difficult to see if he might have had greater height originally. When I asked them if I could borrow a chisel for a few minutes the taller man apologised at length for not letting me take one away with me, explaining that they depended on every tool they had. He was, however, happy to let me use one in their shed and knew exactly what I wanted it for. They watched as I shaped the plugs and just before I went back to the dinghy he asked when I was leaving the village.

I looked up suspiciously. "I don't know." I replied. "It could be a few days. I hope we won't cause trouble by being here."

"Of course you won't." The man replied, seeming almost hurt by my guarded response. "It's just that so many men have been lost from the fleet there are hardly enough of us to keep going. You seem to like working with wood so we were wondering if you could help us. We would pay you as best we can."

I was so surprised by this that I almost forgot to accept. "I would very much like that." I replied and then asked. "What happened to your men, how were they lost?"

I had visions of the zone council demanding labour from the villages for grandiose schemes and was in no way prepared for the reply. "The channel is treacherous." The man said. "A South Westerly with the tide on the ebb will bring up a sudden swell in all directions at once. A boat with

its nets out can be lost in minutes.”

There was no commercial fishing in Cardiff zone. The manufactory could make any sort of food as easily as it made anything else. The thought that people might die trying to get food had never occurred to me.

I quickly fitted the plugs to the holes in the dinghy and went back to the inn to tell Tania where I was going. When I returned to the boat-builders they welcomed me in and started to explain what they were doing.

“I had better work at the front end.” I said, seeing that this was away from the open door. “Just in case they see me here.”

They looked at me in surprise. “Who is looking for you?” The tall one asked.

“I don’t think anybody is actually looking for me but if the authorities see me working in here I would be in trouble.”

“In trouble?” He seemed confused by the idea. “Which authorities? The harbour master is out with the fleet. Why should he mind anyway? Why shouldn’t you work here?”

“I haven’t been assigned to it.” I replied. “I don’t have the authorisations or the starting permits or anything.”

“I don’t know what these things are.” He replied. “I don’t know and I don’t want to know. You said you came from Bristol but I’ve never even heard of anything like it there either.”

I was beginning to panic about my story being shown up but he simply said. “Let’s not worry about things like that. They don’t matter in a village like this. Let’s just build this boat.”

I returned to the inn for lunch only to find Tania had been persuaded to help with the work there as well. By the evening we were both exhausted again and only just managed to stay up long enough to help pull the boats back up the into the harbour when they came in with the fish in boxes but so freshly caught that I was sure that some were still moving.

12

Within a few days we began to settle into a routine and I finally realised that there was no central control over the village. No databases were being updated to record everything that happened. No authorisations were being granted. I gathered that a judge visited the area at intervals to hand out justice to anybody caught breaking their simple laws but that was all the authority there was.

With the routine, however, came the worry that time was passing and nothing was happening. Tania was more relaxed; she was enjoying the routine in the inn. I couldn’t help thinking about the professor. What would he think of us just drifting along without making progress?

I soon began to see that life in the village was a bit more complex than it had first appeared. However simple their lifestyle was it still depended on trade with the inland villages. Carts would arrive with grain and vegetables and leave laden with fish. On one occasion a long heavy four-wheeled cart arrived carrying rough-sawn timber for our boat building. It was oak and, judging from the width of the planks, must have been a very substantial tree. Cutting one of that size in Cardiff sector would have required endless arguments about the permit, here the best protection for the trees seemed to be the absence of chainsaws. When I mentioned the size of the tree to John I was, however, surprised to be reminded that they had not forgotten their past as he assured me that his supplier made sure that trees were planted to replace the ones that were taken.

The boat that I was building was made entirely of wood with no metal parts at all. I assumed that this was to prevent damage if it drifted into the field. For the dinghy this had been easily achieved with plastics and composites but without these the fishing boat had to be held together with complex joints keyed tight with dowels and wedges. I watched John spend a full two days working on the detailed housing of the front end of the final plank at the top of the stem. It needed to be made with great precision because the strength of the whole boat depended on it.

Like many craftsmen he was fiercely protective of his personal tools, only permitting me to use the ones, which hung on a rack by the workbench for general use. Looking at him work I saw some chisels which looked to be far better than anything from the local forge. I finally took my opportunity when helping him lift the plank into place to have a quick look at them. It was difficult to see very clearly because the shop was full of the steam which was used to make the plank bend but there was no doubt in what I saw. The chisel had a code on it. It was from a manufactory and there was no way it could have been old enough to have been made in the one in Avon sector.

"How much do you think they know?" I asked Tania one evening. We had grown used enough to the routine to be able to take some time on our own before needing to sleep.

"About us or about them?"

"Both." I replied. "Do they know about the shelling and the TV pictures? Have they any idea where we come from."

"Don't talk about Cardiff sector as where we come from. This is where we came from. Don't you realise that these people might be our family?"

I did realise. There was something about the place and the people which made me feel at home. To accept us without questioning made me sure that they felt comfortable with us.

"I think we ought to tell them." I looked at Tania's expression. She didn't seem surprised. "I think that we ought to be completely honest with them."

"I knew you would." She replied. It's what your professor would recommend: a tactic for getting information from them. What about the risk?"

"I know it's a risk. But the only alternative is to try to sail back in the dinghy or to steal one of their boats and I wouldn't do that."

The next day I asked John if he had time to discuss something with me and was invited back to his house after work. We sat in his small front room. His wife came in with some fresh cakes. I had half expected tea before remembering where I was. She then left us and I told him my story.

When I first said we had come from Cardiff sector he looked as if he didn't quite believe me. Then when I started to explain the details of how we had come through he began to realise that I was telling the truth and looked shocked. Luckily he took my assurances about being immune to the plague and unable to transmit it at face value. "We had no choice." I said. "When we came into the village we couldn't have admitted to coming through the field. Anything that comes through the field is shot in Cardiff sector." The main point was, however, that if there had been a risk the whole village would have already died and we both knew it.

I went on to tell him about our original journey and how Elisabeth had found us in the boat on the beach. He questioned me at length about what she had told me of when she had found us. How big had the boat been? What direction was the wind from? How big was the tide? I could not give him many details but could describe the boat that had come through during our picnic years later. It had resembled the fishing boats in some respects but had a cabin and a taller sailing rig.

We started trying to work out where we might have come from. He had been out with the fishing fleet for many years and had often been forced into other villages by the gales. All along the coast he thought that the villages were similar. He had never been to Bristol but was sure that the society there was similar. I described everything that Elisabeth had told me about how we had been found.

"Can't you remember anything?" He asked. "There must have been an adult on the boat. Who were they? Can't you remember your father or mother or anything?"

I couldn't. Elisabeth had asked often enough. But I didn't resent him asking. I felt he had the right, we had come and put him in danger and offered him no choice in it.

Before leaving that evening I asked him whether it would be safe to tell other people in the village.

"Why not?" He replied. "You can't understand can you? There is no threat here, you're not in Cardiff sector any more."

By mid-morning the next day the whole village knew. I walked round with pride expecting them all to question me about our advanced technology. I saw everything about Cardiff zone as

mine and was very frustrated by not being able to bring anything with me except the dinghy, but expected them to take an interest even in that now they knew where it came from. I thought that John had not been impressed because he was old and set in his ways but I was sure that the younger ones would. As it was all I got was a few sympathetic remarks about how hard I must have been finding it to work on the boats.

Growing frustrated I thought that they didn't understand.

"We don't have to do any work like this in Cardiff sector." I said to John as I helped him carry a new plank into the shop. "All we do is to order it from the manufactory and we get it."

He carefully positioned the plank on the bench and started marking out the joint on the end of it. I thought that he was never going to reply when he simply said. "We know." Before carefully scribing a line to mark the saw cut.

"We can get fish too." I said. This wasn't exactly true. The manufactory synthesised the edible parts of approximately a thousand different species of fish that it had in its data banks and replicated the flavour and texture of the real thing. It would not make the useless bits like bones and heads and most of it was formed to simulate a cooked condition. "Any type we want, no need to go to sea." I added.

"We know." He said again and looked up patiently at another plank where I was supposed to be marking out my own work.

He made his saw cut with his habitual measured precision. "Why do they give it to you?" He asked, looking up at me when he finished.

"Because we place the orders." I replied, confused. "We log onto the system and have to say exactly what we want. It carefully checks what everybody thinks about what they get so it can keep making things the way they are wanted." I was conscious of trying to teach him what we had learnt as children but thought that in this simple society even our basic knowledge would not be familiar.

"That doesn't explain why they give it to you."

I couldn't understand what he was getting at. "We don't pay for it, it's free, that's the point. Money doesn't mean much to us any more, we don't have coins or notes like you do and don't have much use for our payment allowance. All we have to do is use the system by the rules, answer the questions and put in the right codes and we just get it." I explained.

"What happens if you don't follow the rules?"

"The system shuts down and you have to start again. It's always happening. Just one wrong entry and you have to do the whole order again. By the time you leave school you have had so much practice that you hardly ever do it but children take ages to get it right." I had always been annoyed by the lack of error correction but had learned to live with it like everybody else.

He was cutting out the shape of the joint with his chisel. Each cut was started with the blade positioned with precision and then it was driven in with measured blows from his mallet. I was tempted to tell him about what I had found out about his chisel as final proof of my point but decided that I had made it anyway. His habit of asking questions seemed similar to the professor's but I saw them as nothing more than requests for knowledge that he did not have.

We worked on in silence for some minutes. I started to make a saw cut, very conscious that I would never be able to match his workmanship however hard I tried.

"Are there other rules that you have to follow?" He asked, without looking up and breaking his concentration on his work.

"Not many. We have a very free society." I replied, not quite believing the propaganda as I repeated it to him.

"So you could go right back and order what you wanted." He replied. He had finally lost his concentration and his chisel slipped. He looked at the result with horror. His mistake would be visible to the crew of the boat every time they used it. For myself I suddenly realised what he was getting at.

"We burnt our manufactory." He said simply.

I was looking at his work and the ugly jagged edge on the wood. My gaze moved to the chisel. He saw me looking and passed it to me. I turned it over and carefully spelled out every detail of the meaning of the codes.

"I thought so." He replied. "I never quite believed the stories about finding old stockpiles. They are playing a game. For now we still have alternatives. I can still work with the other chisels, even if it is a bit slower. But in years to come they may win, and then they can make rules for us as well."

"That must be the real reason for the shelling." I replied, as it all seemed to make sense. The effect was immediate. They both stopped work and stood in stunned silence. I looked from one to the other and couldn't think what else to say. It made so much sense – these people had shelled Cardiff sector to stop them trying to undermine their lives. The silence went on. Obviously they were shocked, and I wondered if I had finally said something so bad that their supply of goodwill would run out and we would be thrown out. When John eventually replied he sounded unsure what attitude to take.

"Do you really think that we would do that?" He asked.

"No I don't really." I replied quickly. "But." I went on. "I mean I don't know that you would do it for that reason. I know that we were shelled by Avon Sector."

"Are you quite sure about that?" He asked. "This was over ten years ago wasn't it? We heard the noise of the exploding shells and some bangs as if guns were firing but we never knew exactly what happened."

"They hit my house." I replied simply. "There is no doubt about that."

This caused another silence but this time the atmosphere was entirely sympathetic.

"Who fired first?" He asked quietly.

"I saw the incoming shells explode before our guns ever fired." I replied.

"I can't imagine who would have done that and why. Nobody here would do it. Could there have been other guns further up the coast that had already started?" He asked, clutching at straws.

"I was only 12 years old at the time but I am still reasonably sure that there weren't." I was thinking about my memories of that day. I started to tell him about it. How it had brought me out of hiding put me at risk but finally given me a safe route to come out.

Slowly we started working again. The steady sound of the saws and chisels was reassuring and made the memories seem all the more remote. We talked at intervals through the day and it became very clear that there were no other guns. John had sailed the length of the coastline in the zone several times and there was just one short section where there were no villages and that was where the shelling had been. It was generally understood that nobody should go there because they might get shelled or possibly find an unexploded one. Since the shelling had only ever happened in the one small area we could not understand why the area was not kept clear in Cardiff sector as well. The old cottages in the bay had been abandoned but the others nearby had all been kept in use.

I told him about the video that we had seen of the incursor in Bristol and then of the scorched earth treatment of the countryside where he had been. Since none of them had actually seen video images it was difficult for them to understand the concept but they soon accepted the general idea. They had never heard of any of what it showed.

"I would have heard." He assured me. "We all would. You can't do anything on that scale without everybody finding out."

Tania was upset by the change in the way people treated us. We were no longer just long lost cousins; we were a catalyst for change. We were making them confront things that they preferred not to think about. I identified the problem precisely when I told John that I planned to go and look at the Avon Sector guns.

"You can't go there." He replied. "You can't land on that part of the coast at all."

"I could land on any beach." I replied.

"There aren't any safe ones."

I knew that he was avoiding the issue. "I could wait for a calm day and go in with my dinghy." I replied.

"But you're not allowed to." He finally admitted.

"I thought that you had no rules. We were allowed to go and visit our guns." I added to make the point. I could remember looking around them and then watching as the crews finally

towed them away. With no real roads in this sector I assumed that their guns were kept in place.

Having been jolted into action the whole village started to check up on what I had been saying. They had little time between the fishing and all the other work needed to keep their lives going but whenever they had the time they would ask us questions about what we had seen.

I soon found that they were asking Tania the same questions as me so they could compare answers. They also asked any traders who came to the village. They did this in an indirect way as if admitting that they did not trust the authorities was a sort of disease that they should keep quiet about. Gradually they built up a picture. There had been no incursions in Bristol before the shelling and there was no scorched earth. The video was fabricated. They all accepted that we had seen it but nobody had any idea who had made the film.

Days went by and we finished the boat we were working on. There were late nights with the ring of the caulking irons sounding across the harbour as we drove the rough twine between the planks. Then we were rigging it, outside the shop now as the mast went up. Ropes and sails appeared from lofts and stores and finally it was launched. I felt immense pride in what we had done. The oldest boat in the fleet was dragged up clear of the harbour for its rotten planks to be used as firewood and on a fine sunny morning our new craft set sail at the head of the fleet.

As soon as it was gone John showed me the lines of the new one drawn out on the floor of the dark, low-ceilinged loft above the shop. I had known that he had been preparing the lines at intervals for more than a week but assumed that this would just be tiny improvements to the last one. What I saw when he raised his oil lamp to reveal the clear chalk lines was quite different. It was a shallow draft boat with short twin keels and a tall mast so it could run fast with the wind.

We had to duck to avoid the roof beams as we walked along it. At the far end there was a finely made chest. He opened it to reveal a beautiful set of models of different hulls. Only one side of the hull was modelled, just enough to show all the detail that was needed to make it, and they were mounted on boards that fitted neatly into a rack inside the chest.

"I have made one of these for each type of boat that I have made." He explained, sliding out each one in turn for me to see that they showed all of the slightly different types of boat that made up the fishing fleet. "But ten years ago I made this one but never built it." He continued as he raised the final one to show me what the new boat would look like.

"Even then we knew that something was going wrong. The shelling wasn't a problem to us; we just saw it as a problem for Cardiff sector. Our problem was that we felt that things were slipping out of control, something was changing but we didn't know what it was."

This was to be a boat for travelling, not for fishing. It also fitted every description that Elisabeth had ever given me of the boat she had found us in and my own memory of the one that came through the field when we had our picnic.

This didn't surprise John. Throughout his life a feeling of unease had been spreading along the coast in the form of rumours and stories of tools and small machines that were being sold by the itinerant traders who came to the villages. Nobody knew what was being given in return for them. Somebody, probably my father, had come to the same conclusion as him and built the right kind of boat to find out.

We went back down and started clearing space to set up the frames. I had many questions.

"Who is going to go?" I asked. "I won't be able to sail it."

"You can learn." He replied simply. "Others may go with you to start with but they won't be able to follow you all the way."

I had wondered if he would let me take the boat through the field.

"You'll trust me to bring it back?" My question was only half serious.

He smiled. "Maybe or maybe not. I am sure that you'll try but I don't know what you'll find so I can't be sure."

By that evening we had made good progress on the first frame. I went back to the inn to find that everybody knew what was happening. The effect of it would be that the boat building for the fisherman would get behind. Not only would the oldest boat in the fleet have to be worked for that much longer as its condition became more unsure but all the following replacements would be delayed until eventually they caught up. Even with this, however, they seemed to accept it. They

realised that as immunes we offered them a chance to make their future more secure and they saw providing us with a boat as an appropriate contribution.

Soon the frames were all cut and we were shaping the stem and sternposts to fit into the keel. All the time visitors to the village were being discretely questioned. It appeared that there was a formidable fence around the area with the guns in it. Notices on it warned about both shelling and unexploded shells. Even though it was over 10 years since the last shelling and it had been over a century since the one before everybody seemed to accept that they could not go in.

Many names were suggested as crew to go with us. The village had its fair share of young men who prided themselves in their daring and sense of adventure. They would tell endless stories of how they had stayed out a sea in the storms and fought their way home with spectacular catches but even though all we really planned to do was to land on a beach in calm weather, they all seemed to have good reasons why not to come. In many ways they didn't seem scared to come, they were worried about how they could come back afterwards and carry on with their lives having seen how fragile their society was.

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After a few weeks the boat was ready for planking and past the point where the last one had been when I had arrived so I was more confident with the work and it moved ahead faster. People from the village would look in and check on progress as if dreading the day when we would sail off and confirm their worst fears. These fears were confused and varied from person to person but all focussed on the one area of land and who and what was on it.

The hull was completed, turned over and sitting upright on its twin keels when John started making a framework to hold the self-steering gear. It carried a small vane made from sailcloth and a linkage to the tiller that could keep us on the same heading provided the wind didn't change. I told him that we wouldn't need it until after we had come back from the guns.

"Why come back?" He asked in a way that caused no offence. "How can we help you? All we could do would be to show you our fears about what you might find. You should carry on until you know what is happening."

"You don't think we'll find that out when we go to the guns?"

"No. You may find out more of what is wrong but you won't find out why. If we thought that the answer was there rather than just more of the problem we would have gone there long ago." He tried to explain. "We all know there's something wrong with what is happening in the zones. We know that they were set up in a hurry but there must have been a logic to them. The people who set up the zones planned to live in them and their plans have clearly gone wrong. The shelling must just be a symptom of the problem, not the cause." He sounded more like the professor every time. Telling me how complex the question was but never helping with real answers.

Soon the boat was launched. It wasn't kept in the harbour but around in the next bay where visitors would not see it. There were plenty of volunteers to teach us to sail it. Young men queued up for the fun of sailing a boat that could run at twice the speed of the fishing fleet. She cut the water cleanly and left little wake as we tacked back and forth among them while they worked their nets. For a full two weeks we had fine sunshine and went out every day with different crews who were keen to teach us all the finer points of their sailing technique and help us to trim the rig so she ran perfectly at all quarters to the wind.

The extraordinary aspect of the journey was that it would only take a few hours. We were heading into an area where these people had never been in at least a hundred years but it was only a few miles away.

"I know the history the same as everybody else." John remarked one evening as we set the boat on its mooring and stowed the sails. "The human race has always explored, across the seas and even then into space but since the plague it all stopped. I should have gone there years ago and so should lots of other people but we never did."

We could see something very fundamental had happened when the plague had come. The survivors in the zones were so scared that they never went anywhere they didn't have to, there were no adventurers. I tried this discuss it with Tania but she only complained about having to leave when she would have preferred to stay. Nobody else in the village seemed to understand it when I tried to talk to them about it.

We only had to wait a few days for ideal conditions to set sail. Falling light, rising tide, a light wind and fair weather. The whole village gathered on the harbour wall and stood in silence as we sailed out into the perfect evening. We had sailed past the area several times with the fishing fleet and knew exactly where to go. There was an abandoned town with quite a good looking harbour but even from the fishing grounds well out in the estuary we could see the high fences which would stop us landing. Our destination was to be a sheltered bay where the fence was partly hidden in trees at the top of the beach.

We slipped into the bay. There was just enough moonlight to see the dense group of trees that we were aiming for. We had checked the beach for obstructions at low tide but still had some anxious moments as we drew close. The rocks were only visible as an outline of white foam where the waves hit them. Finally I went forward and dropped the sails and was still standing by the mast as we ran onto the muddy sand. Now there was complete silence except the waves lapping onto the sand. Tania stood motionless at the tiller and we both listened for a response. I crept back to her.

"No sign of lights or cameras." I said in a loud whisper.

"Hardly likely." She replied. "They'd have to be hundreds of years old. Your professor may imagine conspiracies around every corner but Cardiff zone would hardly supply them with security for their guns."

We lowered the mast and went into the cabin to wait for first light. I found it difficult to talk to Tania; she felt cheated by being immune and simply wished she could be back home. On the other hand she knew that somebody had to find out what was happening and we were the only ones who could. She had no idea what we would find and could not bring herself to speculate.

By morning the tide was out and we were able to climb down from the boat and walk up the beach. I took a rope with us and moored it to the nearest tree. Then I pushed through the undergrowth to the fence. The first thing that was obvious to me was that it was not hundreds of years old. The razor wire was old and rusty but with the salt water so close I had no doubt that it would have needed complete replacement many times. I looked more closely and confirmed that this was not the product of some craft workshop. Each long spike was identical; the wire had been made on a machine. I pointed this out to Tania. She just shrugged.

"They knew this." I said. "They must have noticed it on the landward side of the fence."

"So they look but don't see." She replied simply. "We already knew that. Come on, let's get it done and get out if we can."

She passed me the wire cutters. They were old but not heavily worked and with strong new wooden handles they worked well. As each strand sprang back I expected to hear shouts, dogs or even guns but the silence remained and we walked through.

Just behind the trees there was the remains of a road running parallel to the coast. We walked along it towards the town. Enough of the surface remained for us to get through. At times I caught sight of derelict houses in the undergrowth on the far side. I could see that before the plague they would have been highly desirable beachfront properties.

"I wonder if people will ever live here again and enjoy the beach?" I asked.

She thought about this for some time as we walked. A flock of small birds burst out from a tree in front of us. We jumped back into the undergrowth and waited, watching out for any sign of attack. "I think it's better left to the birds." She finally replied. "Men will just make a mess of it again."

We walked on through the ruined suburbs of the town. All around us trees were growing up through pavements. The roofs of the houses had all collapsed just leaving a few walls standing in the undergrowth. There was no sign of any cars or anything else having been abandoned in the street, the people had just gone. When we came to an open square where solid paving had kept the plants down we began to see a wall further inland running parallel to the fence. We walked



over to it watching out for cameras but all we saw was the high concrete face with wire on top. Looking up and down there was a clear area so there was nothing up against the wall to let us climb over it so we started along it. Suddenly, rounding a corner, we saw a small building built right up to it.

Moving back into the ruined streets we worked our way around to look at the structure. It was a simple square block with a tile roof and had a door in the front. Coiled razor wire protected the roof to stop us climbing up on it but the door was clear. I walked up to it and found that it wasn't even locked. Stepping inside I saw another door ahead of me that clearly went through the wall. It was a massive steel one set into the concrete and no visible way of opening it. Beside it was a standard terminal console. I signalled Tania to come in.

"You don't seriously think it'll still work?" She said. "There must be an ordinary door somewhere."

I opened the lid and switched it on. Under a layer of dust the screen powered up showing standard prompts. Without thinking I typed in the entry codes.

"Those are the new ones she said. They must have changed a dozen times." But even as she said it the system accepted them.

"Looks like Cardiff Zone have been shipping a lot more than just woodworking tools I said."

"And whoever stole them will know we are here by now." She replied.

I ignored her and soon found the menu to open the door.

Flakes of rust fell away as the heavy door swung back into its recess. I was so surprised to have opened it so easily that I stood and watched for a few seconds before turning and running, pulling Tania with me out of the door behind us and away to the shelter of the ruined street beyond. We waited for several minutes expecting to see guards rushing through or at least hear an alarm sounding but nothing happened. Slowly we moved around so we could see into the building again and right through the inner door that was now fully open. Looking through we could see another small room similar to the one on our side of the wall. Checking as carefully as we could we went through. The second room had another terminal in it and a door leading out of it.

"Should we close up behind us?" I asked before opening the next door.

"Don't ask me." She replied. "I suppose we might because that must be normal procedure and would be less likely to attract attention. If there's anybody here to attract that it." She looked as if she wished we had been unable to get in at all.

I went to the terminal and closed the heavy door. When it closed the room became quite dark but there was some light coming in around the door ahead of us. I went over to it and found that the handle turned easily. I eased it open enough to look through. I could just see an area of concrete that looked as abandoned as the outside. There were weeds growing up and no sign of anybody so I cautiously moved through to look around. Immediately I saw a rusty notice that said "BEWARE PLAGUE" standing in front of the ruins and undergrowth.

Although I am immune this notice still made me shrink back in fear. No other type of warning notice would have this effect on me but our whole life is built on a terror of the plague. I had never seen one like it before. Tania pushed the door open enough to look.

"That's why nobody has ever come." I said, stepping out. "Just a few notices like that would stop anybody in the zones." She knew she was immune but still hesitated before following me.

"It could be real." She said. "If we go and break something open we could kill the whole zone."

I remembered the soldiers rushing out to incinerate the fragments when they had shelled our house and our fear of a shell that might not explode with enough heat to kill any plague in it.

We moved forward and saw that the concrete was the end of a road that lead on ahead of us. We were moving out of the town. We rounded a corner and saw a valley in front of us. We saw the guns, standing in the open a few hundred yards directly in front of us, and next to them was a large concrete bunker. Behind the bunker was a group of trailers and, judging by the small gardens around them, people were living in them.

"That's a stupid place to live unless you know when the shelling is going to start." Tania remarked. She paused and looked again. "Watch out, one of the doors is opening."

One of the trailer doors opened and a man came out. He was wearing a bio-suit and even at the distance we were at we could see that it was from Cardiff sector.

"He was right." She said. "Your professor and all his conspiracy theories."

We were so intent on watching the man that we scarcely realised what was happening as another, also in a bio-suit, joined him and they pulled back a cover to reveal a rough-terrain car. Soon they were racing up the road towards us. We ran for the cover of a ruined building. We heard the car pull up and the door open.

"Clear that building and I'll do the one opposite." A man's voice said through a suit speaker.

We ran through the back of the building and out to the street behind. I heard a sharp crack and suddenly felt as if a strong blast of sand had hit me. Tania screamed and we both dropped to the ground. I turned to see a man lowering a sort of bulbous gun. I expected him to raise it and fire again but he just turned and went.

I looked at Tania. She had hundreds of tiny black darts all over her exposed skin. I put my hand up to my neck and flinched as I brushed against more of them on me.

We didn't need to say anything, we almost laughed. It took us hours to pull out all of the microdarts, pausing as we ran. If we had not been immune we would have been dead in an hour.

The tide was in when we reached the boat and I rushed out, up to my waist in water, climbed on and raised the mast as fast as I could. Tania followed with the mooring rope and within minutes we were sailing out of the bay. Just as we rounded the headland we saw the car appear on the road in the bay.

I set a course down the estuary and straight out to sea towards the outer field.

It was only a short distance back past the village but I kept close to the shore. I shall never really know whether my parents had been in the boat that first took me to Cardiff sector but there must have been at least one adult in it when it set out. To be using a boat like that they must have known about the fields so I could not picture them falling out in the field so either they were intercepted and pulled out or, as with the other boat we saw come through, they were shot and then fell out. Keeping close to the coast was my best protection.

I saw the fishing fleet in the distance but did not turn to go and tell them what we had seen.

"They won't want to know." I said to Tania as she saw what I was doing.

"It wouldn't be so bad if we could do anything." She replied. "Now we know that your Professor's conspiracy is really happening but we also know that several people have apparently tried to expose it before us and failed."

The fleet was close enough to see the men in the boats. None of them turned.

"They must have seen us. Why not turn and wave?" I asked.

"To them we are ghosts now. Why wave at ghosts? They'll tell the village we have gone on our way."

The field was looming over us now. I set a course slightly away from the coast in case there was a headland on the other side.

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The transit through the thick outer field left us semi-conscious for at least an hour. Fortunately the simple self-steering gear held us on a steady course and when we emerged from the cabin we were well out to sea. Above us the sun was shining from a clear sky. To see this for the first time in our lives was an amazing experience. All of the films could never show the full brightness of the world outside the fields.

I turned south and we soon saw a coastline in front of us. We decided to avoid harbours again and landed in another sandy bay, but this time it was easy in full daylight and we were soon standing on a small hill looking inland. The landscape in front of us it looked very ordinary. There was no sign of life. The remains of the road could still be seen from before the plague. The thick asphalt had kept the trees away from the centre but the year by year the progressive covering with

leaves had given sufficient purchase for sizeable shrubs. The remains of a bridge lay where they had collapsed. A slender column, covered in ivy, now standing alone in the forest. Around it the remains of the deck lay blocking the road.

A tall grey tower could be seen ahead in the distance. Its jagged outline showing that it was ruined but unable to hide its origins as a human construction.

"We could look round here for years and never find where the fliers come from." Tania observed, stating the obvious.

"What do you suggest?" I asked. "We knew this was going to be guesswork but with a bit of luck we'll find some clues before too long"

She walked on, saying nothing, listening for, even enjoying the sounds of the forest. They worried me. We had no real idea what the plague had done to animals, there was very little mention of it in the literature from the time. A few hurried experiments on laboratory mice had shown considerable immunity and caused a sudden upsurge of hope for a vaccine or cure. Apart from that we knew very little. The sounds that Tania was enjoying came from a thriving population of birds. I saw no signs of animals but had no real idea what to look for.

Suddenly a flock of birds took off from behind the bridge. We stopped and listened anxiously but there was no other sound.

"Just a fox" I suggested "perhaps they survived in the wild"

"Or a bear" Tania replied, "Perhaps one of its ancestors lived in a zoo. If you go and have a look you'll quite likely not get hurt, it won't have seen a person before."

I looked round but her expression gave nothing away.

"Go on" she continued, "We need to get through the town before dark."

I went forward very cautiously, if there had been anything there it had gone. Not far beyond the bridge we came to a large obstruction in the road. Huge castings too massive to corrode away lay with small surviving steel components between them. In front of each the outline of long barrels could be seen.

"These were big guns" Tania mused, "I wonder how many of the people in the zones they killed with them"

"I don't think they cared, they were dying anyway" I replied. "Anybody outside the zones would be bound to assume that they people who had escaped into them had caused the plague".

Away to our left the shape of the outer field was clear. A massive dome with a faint dark line in where the sector division came up to it.

Walking on towards the town we had the luck that we had hoped for. We saw a flier coming towards us in the distance. The disguise as a bird might have been effective against those who had never seen one before but both of us recognised it instantly for what it was. The flight was much too straight and regular to be anything else. As far as we could see it had come from beyond the hills ahead of us. We hid as it flew directly over us and disappeared into the field and went on to the town feeling more optimistic.

The town was, in many ways, quite as bad as we expected. Even three hundred years had been insufficient to hide the evidence that its dying days had been terrible. Walking through the ruined streets we saw glimpses of a hundred individual tragedies. Cars crashed into shops and other cars, a whole area scarred by an exploded oil tanker, many buildings destroyed by fire and in it all the skeletons of those who survived too long to be buried. In other ways it was strangely hopeful to see how nature was using this environment and slowly but remorselessly reclaiming it. Plants of all types had grown up and the birds had found perfect nesting sites in the ruins.

"Another few hundred years and this'll be quite a pleasant place," I observed

This idea appealed to Tania "Once nature's dealt with the rest of the city it will be all ready for people to come out again and foul it up."

We were soon out of the city again into open country, moving on until early evening when we set up camp in the shelter of some trees. Continuing along the highway in the morning we saw another collapsed bridge like the ones we had seen before. The difference was that there was a clear roadway through it. I stopped and looked.

"That can't be," I said

"What can't be?"

“The way through, somebody’s made it after the bridge came down.”

Tania looked for a bit. “You know the fighting in the city” she said “The must have knocked it down and then somebody pushed it out of the way to bring up the big guns”

I wasn’t convinced. I couldn’t imagine how street fighting and looting could knock a bridge down.

“Supposing some people had survived,” I suggested.

“Then they would have done some more shelling” Tania replied. For her the matter was closed.

We looked closely at the bridge deck, which had been pushed off to one side to make the way through. It had broken up and the beams lay in a jumbled pile.

“Perhaps the animals mutated.” Tania suggested “Perhaps there are huge elephants who pushed it out of the way so they could walk through”. I had no way of telling whether she was serious but had no better explanation myself.

By the time we reached the next bridge we had little doubt that the road had been used in the recent past. In one region where dense forest to either side had almost managed to meet in the centre there was a visible track with no trees on it. It was also obvious that the users were not animals. There were faint but unmistakable parallel tracks of vehicle wheels. We walked on trying to watch out for wild animals, flyers and whatever used the road, not knowing which we should worry about most. Tania still refused to accept that there could be people outside the zones.

“They would have made contact in some way” she argued. “If only out of curiosity, to see how we were getting on”

“We never tried to contact them”

“But we never knew they were there did we?” walking on a couple of paces she thought up the answer to the tracks. “They were made by something without a driver, like a flier but on the ground. Perhaps the machines have mobile launchers for the fliers that drive out to different places to launch them.”

I still didn’t believe it but I had no real evidence to argue against her. Throughout the day as we slowly moved up to the crest of the hills we found more tracks but no sign of what made them. We had left the forest behind and, although this reduced the possibility of attack from animals, it left us very exposed among the low gorse bushes. Occasionally at junctions tracks seemed to curve away from the main highway around the side of the collapsed structures to join the other road. We were looking at one of these when the flier came at us. Close to the base of a slip road embankment we didn’t see it until it was directly above us. It was so low that we literally heard the whistle of the wind past its wings before we saw it. Seeing us it immediately started to turn. We tried to run for the shelter of the bridge piers but we were too slow. As it came up behind her Tania dived to one side. This saved her life but the razor sharp beak caught her shoulder. It tore into her so quickly that I had scarcely worked out what was happening by the time it was up and gone.

The force of the blow dragged here several yards ahead of me. I ran to her and saw blood pouring from the wound. I could see the bird circling round so I grabbed her and pulled her in by the column just in time to see it come by close enough to feel the wind from its wings. I saw the blood on its beak running back towards its head in the airflow. It circled one more time but could see no more easy targets and flew off towards the zones.

Tania was too shocked and scared to say anything as I tried to reassure her. The wound looked deep and my skills as a doctor are limited. I managed to seal the wound and stop the blood flow but apart from that I could do little for her. She could not move the arm and I was sure that at least one bone was broken. In the failing light all I could do was to make camp and try to keep her warm and as comfortable as possible. I watched over her all night as she lay half-asleep and half-awake, sometimes coherent and sometimes not.

In the morning the outlook was little better. She managed to drink some water but was in no state to walk any distance. I tried to reassure her that we had plenty of supplies and that she would recover her strength in a few days. I told her she would be strong enough to get home to see a doctor but found it difficult to imagine how she would. At mid-day she ate some food and we tried to work out what had happened. We both knew that fliers didn’t normally attack people.

"They must be programmed to attack everybody out here," I guessed. "Something to do with their objectives for the zones"

"I think it's just us," Tania whispered, struggling to concentrate, "They've never liked us. They've always hunted for us. That's why we've always been scared of them. Now we know we were right to be scared". She moved slightly and her face suddenly contorted with a new stab of pain.

It started to rain in the afternoon. Luckily a partly collapsed section of bridge gave us a dry shelter but Tania would not let me move her in until I had cleared it out carefully and checked for animals and snakes. By the time I had moved us in we were both very wet and she was shivering. I started to gather up some wood to make a fire.

"You can't do that they'll see us," she complained

"Who? I thought you said there was nobody here." I should have realised that she was in no state for arguments. She cried briefly before lying down again.

"If there are people here they might help." I tried to sound positive.

The fire burnt up well, drying us out, warming us through and even raising our spirits to a limited extent. The smoke curled away conveniently through a crack in the roof of our concrete cave.

The road was only a few yards away so I arranged a pile of bushes to try to conceal our camp. I was too tired to keep watch and settled to uneasy sleep. The sound of a car engine woke me up and I saw the light of its headlamps. In a state of complete shock I heard the car stop and the door open.

"Here they are Sam, let's go and have a look." The voice was that of an old man. The accent was strange but understandable.

A light shone directly on our poorly concealed hideaway. "Anybody in there" he called cheerfully "we ought to get you out of here before the birds get you"

Tania was awake now. She reached out to touch my arm. I glanced down at her and, after a moment's hesitation shouted back. "They just did".

Our rescuer, Johan Adams, was normally a man of few words but the excitement of the situation overcame this. Even while I was helping Tania into his pickup he asked:

"I've not seen you in town recently. Where have you come from?"

"Cardiff zone" I replied, not bothering whether he believed me or not. "She's badly hurt, is there a hospital in the town?"

"Yes, you know that, we were all born there" he replied and then, after a pause "Where did you say you were from? Cardiff did you say? How long have you been there?"

"Quite a long time" I replied, trying to be vague because his interest in the conversation had stopped him moving. "I think that's everything, we don't have much gear with us." I continued hopefully and he obligingly got into the cab and started driving.

He turned on the radio, which was playing music from before the plague and some other tracks that I had never heard before.

We drove for a good half-hour along the deserted road before he said anything else. With Tania moaning loudly between us conversation was going to be difficult anyway. Suddenly he shouted.

"Cardiff did you say?"

"Yes" I shouted back.

"Where's that?"

I was tired and don't like playing games anyway so I shouted back "Inside the tangle fields, but it's ok, we can't give you any plague because you must be immune to be here anyway."

The vehicle swerved and skidded to a halt almost sideways on to the road. I reached for Tania's seatbelt knowing perfectly well that my chances of getting away with her were non-existent. He saw what I was doing:

"Don't take it wrong" he reached for my hand and started shaking it even while I was still fumbling to release the belt. I looked up and saw an enormous smile on his face.

"You're an immune from the zones" he said, "We're not alone out here after all". And with that he started on a garbled explanation of the Gathering town. He produced a hip flask and

obliged me to drink with him. I never found out what it was but it actually tasted good. With some difficulty I persuaded him to carry on driving while continuing with his rambling story.

15

We stayed in the gathering town for four weeks. A community of a few hundred people living in an old market town their main business was, as the name implied, gathering. They gathered everything but their original and most important role was to gather people. A small number of immunes had set about searching the country, and later the rest of the world, to gather the people together. In this they had apparently succeeded and they now represented the sum total of humanity outside the zones. Now, finally, with astonished enthusiasm, they gathered us.

John was a proud man because, when in his early twenties, he had been allowed to go on one of the last great annual searches. A fleet of three ancient planes went out each year to look for signs of people. They flew back and forth across the habitable regions of earth in which human life would have become more and more obvious as the cities decayed and the farms became overgrown. For the previous fifty years, since a small community in India had finally agreed to come to the gathering, they had found nothing. One of the planes had crashed and another had been abandoned after a forced landing in Argentina so after the year when he went with them the search had been abandoned. I agreed with him that it was reasonable to conclude that any other people who had survived the plague had not formed viable communities and had simply died out. When I asked him he said that by working back from the various groups who had come to the gathering it appeared that just over one thousand individuals had survived the plague. Most of them had spent much of the next few years trying to attract attention before forming into little groups and ultimately joining the gathering.

Arriving at the town I saw glimpses of neat streets of houses before we reached the hospital. We parked in a well-marked emergency bay and John rushed in to fetch a medical team with a stretcher. Enormously relieved to see Tania in the care of apparently competent doctors I found a chair and sat down without thinking much about what would happen next. At intervals a nurse came out to reassure me and, it appeared, to have a good look at me. Gradually the word must have spread; probably John had rushed out to tell everybody, because soon the nurse was not the only person looking at me. A large crowd gathered, eventually the whole town came out to look.

To them we were a cause for celebration. To me they were a culture shock, which was intense, but of a most welcome kind. To Tania, when she regained consciousness after her operation, reality ended with Sam, a large Labrador cross with whom she formed an instant friendship. Having lived all her life in a society, which survived the fliers with a general strategy of dispersal she found the gathering of people impossible to cope with. When she was out of the hospital she tended to stay in the little house they had given us and stay away when the town gathered. This seemed to happen very often. If they weren't having a meeting to discuss what to do next they were having a party, or a dance, or just a random social gathering.

They lacked much of the technology which we had in the zones but did not seem to miss it. Apart from obviously not needing telecommunications they had gathered such enormous quantities of manufactured items that they had no need of the technology to make them. These products were kept in a row of vast warehouses on the edge of town and seemed to be freely available to those that wanted them.

My first days were made up of tours of the town, the farms around it and anything else anybody could think of. All of the houses looked perfect for their setting, indeed many of them obviously dated from hundreds of years before the plague. My guides enthusiastically informed me that this had been a much larger town and they had demolished all of the lower quality structures but still had some to spare. Around it there were farms. These were not fully automated like the ones back home but they used a good range of machinery and seemed to

enjoy working on them. If what I was seeing was the true story the whole place seemed utopian. Slowly and enormous problem dawned on me and, as soon as Tania was out of hospital, I talked to her about it.

We were sitting in the living room of our comfortable little house. A few trips to the warehouses had furnished it beautifully and a generous allowance of credit had allowed us to stock the kitchen with fresh food.

"They're expecting us to stay." I said

Tania scarcely looked up from the book she was reading. A real paper copy, almost unknown back home. "Yes. I suppose they are. Shame in a way." She fell silent again.

"I'm worried what they'll do if we tell them we're going back."

"Have one of their claustrophobic meetings no doubt" she replied "so long as they don't try to get me in the room with them that won't do any harm." She laid the book down carefully on the brightly polished table beside her. "You talk to them all the time, why don't you ask them?"

"I guess I'll have to." I didn't want to frighten her but I wanted to try to warn her that it might not be easy. "We ought to have a plan."

She looked up, confused. "Not another of your plans. What do you want one for now?"

"To get away if the don't want us to go"

"Ok you make a plan then" she picked up the book again, moving uneasily to avoid putting weight on her shoulder.

I tried another way to get through to her "They don't even know why we're here"

"I told the nurse. I think she thought I was joking or something." she paused. At last I seemed to have her attention. "She said something about an old town. Has anybody told you about an Old Town?"

I had been told about the Old Town. It had apparently burnt and been abandoned, I hadn't thought about it at the time. Now I realised what had happened. Somebody, somehow, had triggered the programming of the fliers so they attacked the Gathering Town. Tania made the final connection. The zones had had a two-year pause in the attacks from the fliers almost two hundred years before. By attacking one they had diverted them from the zones.

"So all we've got to do is shoot at one or two out here from time to time and go back in." I suggested. Just for an instant Tania took me seriously.

John's house was just along the street. It was just as comfortable as ours but, with Sam as his only companion, he apparently rarely felt the need to tidy it. Tania was so engrossed in Sam's company that I was not even sure she was listening as, perched on the only clear edge of an armchair; I explained our position to John. I finished by asking him not to tell the others.

Knowing how quiet he was I never expected much of a reply, as it was all I got was a slight nod.

"What did happen to the Old Town?" I asked.

"It was someone from the zones, like you." He said. "The flier came at him, he shot at it and it came down".

"What happened to him? Did it kill him?" I asked

"No, but he wasn't immune. That's why they think that we're still immune after all these generations. At least we didn't get plague from him."

In the silence that followed I tried to imagine what it would have been like. The fragile community, watching its houses being burnt by the fliers and wondering all the time if they would die of the plague which their great-grandparents had survived.

"I'm going to have to tell the others." He said finally.

The meeting wasn't just claustrophobic, it was ugly. Close-knit communities are fine when you're on the inside but when you're on the outside they let you know all about it. Instead of sitting around casually as we had previously we were asked to sit at the front of the large council room while they fired questions at us. Looking at them I actually wondered if whatever it was in their genetic make up which had enabled them to survive the plague somehow brought out their pack instincts with which they were now hunting me. The chairman of the meeting tried to sound fair. He quietened down the crowd and made a few comments about "reasonable concerns" and then he asked specifically:

"We want to know what you want to do, how you plan to do it and why you want to do it".

I just managed to get a reply in "We want to stop the fliers going into the zones, we don't know how but the reason why is obvious".

Far from calming them down this apparently innocuous statement incensed them. All kinds of accusations were shouted out:

"You deserve the fliers". "You left us out here to die". "Why help them when they live in luxury". "Saves us the bother of shelling them". And finally. "Lock them up before they do anything."

The chairman finally restored some sort of order and I managed to shout out a question.

"Do you know what the fliers are meant for?"

"To get your lot," A man near the front shouted back

"Did you put them there then?"

Suddenly there was silence so I continued "I think that the people who built the zones put them there"

"How do you know?"

"Let's ask one"

This caused derisory laughter, which slowly faded when they realised that I was serious.

16

Driving out as a convoy of three vehicles we soon left the town. In the lead in John's pickup our headlamps picked out the faint tracks to follow along the old road. He seemed to be the only person who ever ventured under the flight path of the fliers and kept the tracks open. In the deserted land our lights must have been visible for miles but we trusted his assurance that the fliers never flew at night. This was, however, the least of my worries. The group in the vans behind us appeared to be just one step away from a lynch mob.

John appeared to be his usual calm self, enjoying the simple humour of a radio presenter while watching out for obstructions on the road. However, having befriended us so willingly he obviously found our plans for the fliers very difficult to understand. I wanted to try to find out whether his offer to drive us to the crashed flier would include helping us escape if we needed to.

"What do you think they'll do if the flier's dead and can't help us"? I asked hopefully.

"Don't know" he replied after a slight hesitation as he swerved to avoid a large bush growing through the tarmac. "Guess they won't trust you whatever happens".

I looked across at Tania. His reply had obviously not reassured her at all.

"We really don't want to harm anybody." She said. "You've all been so kind to us we would never risk anything that might be dangerous"

John looked up as if to say something but seemed to change his mind. Tania shrugged. He was the sort of person who would never commit himself before he was absolutely sure of the facts. I guessed that this was an essential precaution for him because he was also the sort of person who could be trusted absolutely if he did commit himself to anything, nothing short of a bomb would stop him if he gave his word. I resigned myself to this situation as we drove slowly on along the track.

"What exactly are you going to ask it if it does respond" Tania asked suddenly.

"All I can think of is what the professor suggested" I replied. "Purpose, origin and identity". I was about to point out that at least he would be happy if we ever made it back to tell him when we stopped at a fallen tree blocking our path. John jumped out and lifted his chain saw out of the back. The lynch mob soon appeared and started pulling branches away as he cut them. As one came free I picked up one end of it. The only person near the other end was one of the ringleaders from the meeting. He was reaching down to pick it up when he noticed who had the other end. He seemed to glance behind him to see if anybody else was watching before quickly lifting it up and hurrying away from the group with it and clear of the lights. As we put it down he seemed to give me an almost sympathetic look before scowling again as he joined the others.



Finally we reached the flier. It was apparent that John checked on it from time to time because a relatively clear track led across a field to it. He stopped just short and we could see the shape in the tall grass. He produced a scythe from his collection of tools and soon cleared a space around its head.

We walked up to it. By this time we were being watched. They stood in a circle around us. When I looked up I saw that they were watching each other as much as us, each one waiting for a cue from another before deciding what to do. The bird had crashed into the side of the low hill. Much of it was buried in the soft earth, whether this had happened in the crash or perhaps during a deliberate attempt to conceal it was not clear. It had come down on one side; I guessed that the gunshot had damaged one of the wings.

I pulled away some ivy and Tania started to clean its head off with some with some rag. Underneath the dirt the outer skin was still in gleaming condition. I looked anxiously as she cleaned out an eye socket and shone my torch into it to look for a reaction. Slowly the eyeball turned towards the light.

"It's still live to some extent," I announced without bothering to look for a reaction.

I helped and we started to clean around the head and especially the lens on the top of the head. When I wiped the mud off the beak the light reflected off its smooth surface. I wiped down towards the end and just as I cleaned off the needle sharp point it seemed to twitch slightly and I jumped back. With the menus inactive I thought that it shouldn't attack us but I knew that it had ample power to rip through flesh so I moved as far back as I could. I looked up at Tania and shook my head slightly to get her to follow.

Somehow I felt that keeping the crowd waiting might make them look more carefully if there was anything to see. We worked back towards the safety of the damaged immobile wing trying to look as if we knew what we were doing. They seemed to be prepared to wait, occasionally offering muted comments to their neighbours. Finally we stood back slightly and they fell silent.

I tried the opening command "Display". The opening screen was bright and clear. The head had bent round at an angle to the body so it was almost upright. They read it in silence.

"What does that prove?" One of them asked.

"Nothing" I replied and then added "Yet" in case they went for me without waiting.

Seeing no harm in building up the suspense a bit further I explained that I needed to check the power level and went through the various screens to find it. This seemed to fascinate them and, I hoped, calm them down a bit. It also showed that the battery was near full power. It made sense; the thing had only just taken off when it was shot.

I whispered to Tania "OK now for it" and gave the command "Objective"

The display went blank for an instant and then came up with:

OBJECTIVES:

SELECT:

Segment

Mission

Series

Phase

Programme

"What the hell is that lot" Tania asked, trying not to be noticed.

"Haven't a clue" I replied, "Let's try segment"

Segment led us to another menu:

SEGMENT OBJECTIVES:

SELECT

Information

Details

Options

I tried information. This gave the display:

Outward segment, Mission 8, Series 16, Phase 2.

This gave me a chance to address my audience. "You may see," I announced, trying to sound as if I meant it, "This flight was part of a carefully planned phase of their operation. It was

the eighth flight in the 16<sup>th</sup> series of the phase". It worked, almost. Just about all of them looked as if they were believing every word and I almost managed to convince myself that I could soon carry the others.

"Is that the phase that is still going" someone asked.

"Yes, of course" I replied with great assurance, not really having a clue. "The first phase was just reconnaissance". None of them had the initiative to catch me out by asking what the third phase would be. I resolved to find out, but not with this mob on top of me.

They fell silent and I moved neatly back to the last menu and selected "details".

This gave me:

1. Transit to field entry point D
2. Map recording
3. Field strength measurements.

Right on cue one of them asked what map recording meant. This gave me the opportunity to show them the video image of the flier's short flight. There were genuine gasps when it showed the bearded man firing a gun straight at the camera. I was sure I had them all in the palm of my hand. All I had to do now was think of some sort of a credible finale and I would become their respected expert on fliers. They would believe anything I said and might even help me to stop them coming. It had to be "options".

I worked back down through the menus and the display came:

Revise Objective

Reschedule segment

End Segment

Suddenly I saw what was needed. I went back to the top menu and selected PROGRAMME and working back down I was offered:

Revise Objectives

Reschedule Programme

End Programme

I was so stunned I just stood in disbelief. Tania said, "End programme" but it came out as a sort of half whisper, half aimed at me, and half at it. I was just gathering my senses when a shout came from the behind me:

"Tell it to REVISE its bloody OBJECTIVES and blow up the bloody field generating stations. Then we'll see who's in charge in this country."

The key words were recognised. We all fell silent. The screen went blank. I heard the sound of something moving in the undergrowth and saw a long antenna slowly appear from the flier's back. Finally the display came back:

LAUNCH STATION CONTROL

Please enter password.

I couldn't get out of it. Nothing I tried would get it to cancel the selected option. I tried to make the best of it. My small comfort was knowing that all of the other options would have needed the password as well.

"It's stuck" I said "Your command has wrecked it just when we had the chance. We'll have to go back to the zones and I can go to the fliers I told you about in central zone and see what I can do". They seemed to be ignoring me but I went on. "They can't use radio from in there but I might be able to find a way to make something work".

They were slowly moving towards me. The circle was shrinking. The same man spoke again. "OK clever boy, make it work". He started to describe how the millions in the zones would all die and they need never fear them again. The collective mind seemed to like this and they moved even closer. I saw how wrong I had been. I was their expert but the expert had to do what they said. Each one of them made their own contribution to the menace. An otherwise inoffensive looking man thrust his face up to mine so I could smell his foul breath and explained how he would tear my body apart if I did not do as he said. His equally mild looking companion quietly explained how she would feed me to her dogs.

I tried to calm my nerves and set to work. I have always been quite proud of my ability to communicate with machines and liked to claim how much easier it is than communicating with

people. Having totally failed to communicate with the people I spent a long and desperate night trying to get through to the machine and, in the end, my pride was justified. There were hundreds of different displays, many of which clearly came from the launch station. The hours that I had spent at terminals with Elisabeth scolding me for wasting time suddenly had a use. In the screens I found clues, which I followed to find more and finally I pieced it together. When I got in they all crowded in eager to be the one to stop me from cheating them and ensure that the zones were destroyed.

“Revise Objectives” was not, however, as simple as they had hoped. It went into a mass of complex options of “Primary” “Secondary” and “Tertiary” and with everybody shouting out their ideas for control word such as “ATTACK” and “DESTROY”. I began to feel complete exhaustion. I stood and watched with a detached fascination as the programme kept reporting error messages as the powerful control system was driven into chaos.

Tania touched my arm to get my attention and pointed to the sky. There were hundreds of lights wheeling around like a faerie necklace around the moon. “Ladies and Gentlemen” I announced feeling decidedly light headed “look to the sky. The fliers have come out to kill us”. As they looked up I grabbed Tania and ran.

The gatherers stood like scared rabbits caught by a searchlight and just watched them come. We watched as well but from the shelter of a tree. This was not just an isolated flier like the one that caught Tania it was a continuous conveyor belt of them and it ripped through the group like a chainsaw. Each flier carried a small but powerful searchlight under its body and another white light on top of its head, we saw the beam of the searchlight play across the target during the dive and then the top light came briefly into view as the ascent began. Coming at intervals of about one second the manoeuvre was perfectly synchronised, only faltering slightly as one of the beaks drove deep into flesh lifting an entire body away into the darkness. One of these must have landed up sprawled across a bird’s head because it totally obscured the light. Shortly after we saw this happen we heard an explosion high above us and debris began to fall. This accident, however, did nothing to slow the attack, which was progressively moving in our direction. Soon they began twisting and turning, flying under the branches of the tree from all directions. Tania screamed as one came close enough for the wing tip to catch her arm. We huddled closer to the trunk and even climbed up slightly to get more shelter from a large branch but they kept on coming.

The fliers settled into a steady routine, coming in turn from each side and we realised that they could keep this up indefinitely, or at least until their programme worked out that it should use an incendiary. After the terrible screams from the gatherers we gradually found ourselves in a much quieter battle and I started looking at the display, which we had been working with all night and was still showing. By shouting between the dives I found that I could make it respond. It was difficult to see the written responses but Tania has very keen eyesight and was able to make them out. Gradually I worked the system out of all of the convoluted pathways where the mob had driven it and eventually I worked my way back to the options menu. Giving Tania a quick hopeful glance I shouted, “end programme” as loud as I could. Within seconds the fliers disappeared.

We ran as far away as we could and spent the rest of the night under a dense clump of bushes. I was fairly sure that John, who had been standing back from the group, had been the only other survivor and I knew that he would not come after us. I just could not believe that we would be safe under the flight path of the fliers when daylight came.

In the morning we set off for the boat trying to keep clear of open spaces. We saw no fliers at all and by the afternoon we had enough confidence to run across meadows after carefully checking the horizon. By late in the day we were clear of the flight path and could see the sea ahead of us.

We had to wait for the tide before we could set sail and headed due North to take us close to the coastline of Cardiff zone before we turned East through the field. Almost as soon as we recovered consciousness after the transit we saw a small marina in an old harbour. We sailed in and moored on a visitor berth as a group of fascinated locals gathered to watch.

“It’s a perfect replica.” I assured them. “Built to a traditional design using traditional methods.” I went on to explain that I had been so interested in ancient ships from long before the

plague that I had decided to build one and try sailing it. It took some time for us to make our excuses and get on our way.

17

Seeing the quadrangle in the sunshine as permanent as always was almost enough to make me lose my nerve. Nobody ever barged in on a professor without an appointment. How could I face him and accuse him of betraying us to the border security without any evidence beyond my complete trust in Tania, Harold and Elisabeth?

I walked around the edge. My usual route along the path round the pond in the centre was in full view of his window and I needed to be sure that he could not alert his contact, whoever they were, before I confronted him.

The place was deserted. I suddenly realised it was student vacation. In my rush to get there I had never imagined that he might not be there. Perhaps it was even a national holiday, I might be the only person there with security cameras following me from all angles. I walked on as far as the corner and, with some relief; saw a group of people coming towards me. They weren't exactly a crowd but I was not alone. Then I recognised one of my tutors and, almost immediately, he recognised me.

"Hello George, how's life in the wide world"

His greeting threw me for a minute – surely he didn't know I'd been outside the zone. He was smiling amiably and I realised that my imagination had got the better of me. "Not too bad" I mumbled.

"Looking for the professor?" he asked and before I could stammer a reply he went on "He'll be in the common room for a coffee, you can come on in with us, you're allowed in now you're a graduate" he smiled again.

As we started to walk he made efforts to start a conversation. "Have you started out in the world of work yet"? For a man trapped in a small zone he had a strange liking for talking about the world in general but this time I wasn't thrown.

"Not yet, but I'm sure I will soon".

He looked at my deep tan. To achieve anything like it within a zone would have taken almost continuous sunbathing. "Been a bit busy in the sunshine sleeping off all that revision I expect"

The common room was magnificent with a high ceiling, paintings on the walls and all the staff sitting at polished wooden tables drinking from elegant china cups. We walked towards the professor who looked up and stared at me in what was either great shock or a brilliant imitation of it. His conversation with his colleagues at his table stopped and silence spread across the room like a wave. I froze.

"George" he said "My sincere apologies, have you been waiting long, I totally forgot our appointment." He stood up and walked towards me. "While you're here why don't you join us for a coffee, you're not in a hurry to get away are you?"

As quickly as it had stopped the hum of conversation around us started again and we went over to a serving table presided over by a man with a black silk tie who looked like a butler. All the time the professor seemed to be looking round every face in the room. I tried to follow his gaze to see who he was looking for but failed to see who the friend or enemy might be. We returned to his table with my coffee. In the centre a newspaper lay half folded showing the headline:

**SIX CLEAR WEEKS, HAVE THE FLIERS STOPPED?**

He carefully moved it away and turned it over as he made space for my cup.

A good round of jokes about my sun tan soon got the conversation going. They all seemed to know that I lived on the coast and everyone had to try a question about how hard it was to study the sand on the beach. Nobody asked me why I had come to see the professor. Soon I became so involved in a detailed discussion about plans for a new course that I almost failed to notice when he stood up to go.

This time we walked past the pond. When we were well clear of the others he said:

“From what I could see nobody else was surprised to see you”.

“But you were.” I replied.

He stopped abruptly and looked at me, as if suddenly realising my suspicion for the first time. “I see,” he said slowly.

I looked around. I felt safer here than I would be in his office so I made no move to start walking again. “Why were *you* so surprised?” I asked bluntly.

Just then, high above us, I saw something glisten in the sunlight. He saw me look and turned to see for himself. We stood and watched and saw it again, closer this time. Then I saw it clearly wheeling in the morning breeze; there was no mistaking the shape of a flier.

“It can’t,” I said. “They must have remembered how to work the menus but they can’t have, they were all killed.”

“It just did” he replied. “We have a great deal to discuss. Who else did you tell?”

“Nobody” I replied, realising as I did so that once again he had met a question with a question.

“Only Harold and Elisabeth” he went on. I looked up shocked. “I just phoned your home number” he said, “It’s in your student file. When I gave my name she knew who I was and invited me for tea.” I tried to visualise the three of them sitting in the cottage and suddenly thought that they might have got along rather well.

“How are they?” I asked.

“You mean you haven’t seen them?”

Yet another question. I gave in and answered it. “No I came straight here” and then, added “from the gathering town”.

He smiled. He had another mystery. He also knew that I had no choice but to trust him.

Settled in the comfortable armchair in his office I recounted every detail of what I had done since I had last seen him.

“I’m sure that nobody saw us when we went to central zone” I said “and none of us have told anybody so how did they know to come looking for us?”

He sat in thinking silence and then, for the first time I had ever seen he looked genuinely worried.

“It must have been her”. He said

“Not Elisabeth, I don’t believe that”

“No, not Elisabeth”

“You mean you told someone else?” I asked

For once he replied to a question “Yes, I’m afraid I did and she must have told them. That’s how they knew they had to be prepared to re-start the fliers”.

I started to reply “To do what?” but then I stopped as I realised what he was saying.

18

Cynthia looked as unlikely an accomplice for the professor as I could possibly imagine. Short and round with an innocent, toothy smile she sat in a well stuffed armchair in her cosy apartment looking shocked and hurt. Our sudden arrival had taken her completely by surprise as the professor had virtually pushed her backwards to the chair, closing the door behind him as he went.

“You must have told somebody” He leaned over her and almost shouted, “they knew where he was”.

“I promise you that nobody could have found out from me”. She was almost crying.

“So how did they know where to go?” he had quietened down slightly but still added “and when to go there?” as an afterthought.

Cynthia visibly composed herself, wiped her eyes, sat up in the chair and looked very carefully at each of us. First the professor. He was, as always, apparently distracted, looking out

of the window, never even noticing her gaze. I saw that he was watching a bird in a tree. It was very unremarkable but he was staring at it intently, possibly deliberately to avoid confrontational eye contact but I suspected, more probably because he simply liked looking out of windows.

I looked back, she was looking at me now, as if searching my face to try and read it. Our eyes met and I looked quickly away.

"It wasn't me." I said. "I had been very careful. They had no reason to watch me."

She didn't reply. I felt accused.

Finally she was looking at Tania – or trying to. Tania met her gaze with intensity and she had to look away.

"How much do you know about me?" I asked.

"Everything" she replied.

I felt betrayed. I looked at the professor and wondered what other risks he had taken with my life without even asking me. Cynthia saw me.

"Don't blame him." She said.

"I don't believe he told you without meaning to." I replied angrily. "Or did you torture him to find out."

My attempt at cynical humour was a bad mistake. The professor reacted as if his bird had turned and shouted at him. Both of them gave me their undivided attention, each seemed to be waiting for the other to start. I braced myself for a lecture about how they were both just trying to help me and prepared to give suitably appreciative replies. I knew that it wasn't true; they both had their own agendas that I knew nothing about, but they were my only hope for help so I had to stay with them.

The lecture never materialised. The threat to abandon me to look after myself did not need to be stated. The atmosphere cleared and Cynthia stood up, crossed the room to a terminal neatly installed in a corner and logged onto a government database.

"Who are you?" I asked as she entered a password.

"Just a very small cog in a big machine" she replied. "Just one of the minor servants of our government."

I looked at the screen. For a very minor servant she had some very high level passwords. She was scrolling through lists of the secret records that the government kept on everybody in the zone, and all of the records were being displayed.

She came to my pages. The professor clearly knew what to expect because he was watching my expression as I read it. It was a complete description of my life. It even started with the exact date and location of when I had arrived in the zone as a baby. It recorded full details of when I had obtained an identity card during the shelling. My education and, in particular, my contact with the professor, was fully recorded. Finally it contained the exact times of my departure into Central and Avon Zones.

"Once they knew where to start it must have unravelled quite easily." she said, looking sympathetically at me.

"But how did they know where to start?" I asked.

She gave an unusually frank answer which I believed to be true "We're not quite sure but, at some time, you must have done something just slightly unusual." he said. "Just something so small you probably never knew you did it."

"How come they haven't arrested me?" I asked.

"Who do you mean by they?" The professor was meeting questions with questions again.

"The government, of course." I replied.

"The government is made up of several very big wheels" Cynthia replied. "And they are all connected together with little cogs."

"But surely the record is there for all of them to see?"

"And so are millions of other records," she replied. "The wheels must be guided to look at the right record."

"Or not" the professor added as Cynthia closed down the terminal and we returned to the chairs by the fireplace.

I began to visualise the structure of our government. Isolated power bases that had built

up over hundreds of years of stagnation, each one supporting groups of individuals in comfort, each one jealous of the information it gained and ready to use it as a tool to ensure its survival.

“So how come they tried to prevent us from escaping?” I asked.

“They didn’t.” The professor replied, making no sense.

“They were just trying to observe you.” Cynthia said. “They were from border surveillance. The decision to shoot would have been made at the last minute.”

I had never heard of border surveillance, only border security.

“The structure is designed to stop people trying to escape.” She explained. “If both functions were carried out by the same people then some of them would be in a position to escape themselves. With the surveillance and enforcement separated each one acts as a check on the other.”

I was getting to like Cynthia. She explained things that the professor just left me to work out for myself. I knew that the professor’s way was good for my education but it made life very difficult.

“So border security doesn’t know about us?” I asked.

“Not yet.” She replied. “Not until border surveillance can gain advantage by pointing them towards your file.”

“Surely they must have standing instructions to tell them.” I couldn’t imagine an organisation whose function was to observe but not tell anybody.

“There are specific events which trigger a report, over a hundred of them.” I thought for a moment she was going to recite them, I was sure that she could. She didn’t. She just explained that we hadn’t made the grade.

“What about the president of the council.” I asked. “Surely he gets to find out and he can’t be a power base because he’s only in office for five or ten years.” The council was elected every five years and they chose a president who could only serve for a maximum of two terms. Many of the councillors were well known in their communities and highly thought of.

“You trust the democratic process?” The professor was asking questions again but this time he didn’t wait for me to attempt a reply. “You’ve studied all the history books about what happened before the plague and how all the democracies did best.” He made no attempt at eye contact; in fact he was staring out of the window again, assuming that he had our attention. “Have you ever wondered why all the history you study is from before the plague? It isn’t because nothing has happened for hundreds of years since then, although not much has. It’s because they justify the way they govern us on what happened then, not what has happened since.”

“What was the difference?” Tania asked. I made a point of not asking leading questions to help him with his discourses and felt a bit let down that she had done it for him. In any event it prompted him to continue with renewed enthusiasm for his theories.

“The difference is that we are isolated so nobody has to bother about doing it properly. Nobody has anything to compare it with if they fail. There may be a sector which has done much better than us, but we don’t complain because we don’t know about it. Why do you think border security guard the fibre optics through the fields so carefully? Check your history books and you’ll see plenty of useless systems brought down when the populations found out how much better other ones worked. That was why there was so much opposition when they formed the world government in the 21<sup>st</sup>. century.”

“So they created isolated zones where nobody would complain?” Tania was helping him again but this time there was more to it.

“It’s easy to argue that the timing of having the means to make the tangle fields just when the plague came was too lucky to be a coincidence. I can see why they don’t believe it in the gathering town you know the history. Either the Faction or the Terrorists started it, we can’t be sure which but it was not the Survival Council. No, I think that our government didn’t create this situation, it’s just exploiting it.”

Cynthia interrupted. “You’re making the same mistake again. You’re suggesting co-ordinated action from something called the government. They don’t do that. I would know about it if they did and I am certain that they don’t.”

“You mean that they trust you enough to let you find out every time one of the big wheels

talks to another?" I asked, impressed.

"Her basic method is rather simple." The professor replied.

"What did you think of me when you first saw me?" She asked, smiling disarmingly.

All this was interesting, and it explained why nobody in power wanted to end the isolation but it still didn't explain why the fliers had re-started. I knew the professor's theory about the conflict being maintained as another means of keeping the population under control but it didn't explain how.

Over tea and cakes I ran through the story of where we had been. We had seen nothing to show any way in which the powers in the zones could have re-started them.

"We know that they're in contact with at least one other zone." I said, reminding them of what I had seen in Avon zone

"Do you know exactly who is in contact? Do you know who they are in contact with?" The professor asked and, without waiting for a reply, he added: "You see it's the one thing that Cynthia hasn't been able to find out however hard she tries and she could put that information to exceptionally good use, so make sure that you find out for her won't you". He returned to studying his bird in the garden, leaving me to wonder exactly how she would use it but in no doubt that the answer must lie in the place where the fliers came from.

19

Finally we reached the summit of the hill and saw the dome. It was a tangle field forming a sort of miniature version of the field that enclosed the zones. We had known that it must exist and I had known where it was from the images displayed by the crashed flier but it was still a shock to see it and realise what it was. We had left the marina late in the day six days previously, sailing slowly east along the coast before turning back under cover of darkness. After going through the field we had sailed much further down the coast than previously so that our trek across country had been well clear of the main flight-path of the fliers.

The valley was wild and overgrown like the country we had been passing through. I could see the line of the old highway with occasional glimpses of a small stream running near it with a tranquil pool just outside the dome. Tall trees had grown up everywhere except on the surviving patches of road and the occasional ruined building, a good number were growing through the dome. Looking at them I saw the clear areas where the buildings must have been and in one of these I saw the radio antenna. As expected it had a large power pack above the field supported on what looked like a structural glass column.

We had seen no sign of fliers on our journey so it seemed most likely that they all took off to the North directly towards the zones. The professor had, however told us to take nothing for granted so we waited and watched from beneath a dense canopy of tall bushes.

When one finally came the playback from the camera that the professor had given us was almost too quick to see. The flier did go directly south and it went at very great speed. It must have been launched from a form of catapult, which had to get it high enough to give it time to recover from the transit through the field of the dome before starting to fly. Within about two seconds it was beyond the hill opposite and out of sight.

We still had no way of knowing how reconnaissance fliers got back into the dome. We were sure that some of them did return, almost all of them were incendiaries but everybody knew that very occasionally some had been seen going back through the outer field and it was assumed that they were sent out to check what was happening. It was always possible that they transmitted their reconnaissance by radio and then just flew off and crashed in the forest, in which case there would be no safe place to camp. It had to be most likely, however, that they went back in the same way they came out and were somehow caught inside. We had agreed with the professor that returning fliers were so rare that there was no point in waiting for one, our next objective was to find John's road.

Working round to the West of the dome we found the clear track for his pickup. In his usual practical way it followed an old road leading off the highway in the direction of the Gathering Town.



He never cut across country unless he had to. He was also a man of caution and habit, well back from the dome there was a clear turning circle with no sign of any clearance further in.

We made camp in an old house near the road, which even had some of its roof intact. When we had cleared it out and unloaded our packs into it we felt quite comfortable and, following the plan, we settled down to watch for a couple of days. To try to make sure that John did not arrive and then drive away again before we could contact him we pinned a large note to a tree by his turning circle. The next day we had a lucky break, John arrived and was reading our note as we ran down towards him and called out. He stood and waited for us, not reaching for his gun or running to his pickup but not offering any greeting.

"How's life in the Gathering Town?" I asked, trying to smile as warmly as possible. "We've come back to try to find out why the fliers started up again"

"Well there's nothing to be seen here" he replied, looking down to avoid eye contact.

"We hoped you might help us" Tania suggested, "Lots of lives were saved when the fliers stopped."

"That was lives in the zones" he replied "How do you know there were none lost in the Gathering Town?"

Tania went pale and looked at him speechless.

"Were they?" I asked

"You never checked" he looked us in the eyes now. "I said you cared about us. They called me the friend of murderers. I said you cared but you never came to check."

We started to explain how we had taken so long to get back. He questioned some points in detail and it became clear that he was preparing to repeat the story to all who asked in the town. We tried to tell him that our main reason for contacting him was to make sure the town was not being attacked but he was nobody's fool.

We persuaded him to join us for some food and drink and managed some faltering conversation. If the fliers had been re-started by anyone in the town they had obviously kept it well hidden from him because we became convinced that he genuinely knew nothing about it. In a rather strained way we discussed whether it could have been done in secret. From what he said it would have been impossible. We had seen it ourselves; they all knew what everybody else was doing every minute of the day.

Across the valley a flier took off.

"Quite a sight" I said and then as casually as possible "ever see one land"

John nodded without thinking and then stopped when he realised that he was giving information away. There was a long silence until he said: "In the lake" and stood up before adding "you can see the waves". He mumbled a quick "Thanks for the food" before turning to walk quickly down to his pickup. As he got into it he shouted, "don't mess about with it" before driving off in a cloud of dust.

We walked down to see what he had meant. The pool that we had seen obviously extended into the dome, presumably there was some sort of a dam inside it. The fliers obviously glided in through the field to make a soft landing in the water without the need to recover control. As soon as I saw it I realised that since the field could only be a few yards thick we could just float through it in a small boat – unless there was a barrier to stop us. I was very tempted to try to float a camera through. Tania was not:

"Work it out" she said "two seconds to take off, five to turn and three more to dive. If they detect you they will get you in ten seconds. There's no cover round here."

"At night" I suggested. "They only come out at night if you mess with their programme"

She just turned and walked away.

The professor had said two days of observation and then go to the crashed flier and check the programme. "Just check it" Tania reminded me "Don't try to change anything, just check it".

That evening we finished off the bottle of wine we had opened for John. For two weeks as we had been travelling we had felt strangely calm and secure with a good supply of food and knowing that we were outside the area of the fliers and the gathering town. Now John knew we were there we had to trust him not to gather a mob to come after us. We did trust him but the

remaining lingering doubt left us nervous enough to want to move from our comfortable camp. It took us most of the next day to reach the crashed flier, moving slightly cautiously just in case.

I never saw John as superstitious or sentimental but he had not been back to where his friends were killed. The clear track stopped short and turned up the side of a hill so he could look out over the area to see if we were there without the need to go too close. When we went in we saw that the bodies had all been cleared away and the flier lay undisturbed. We spent some time organising a shelter where we could sit unobserved from John's vantage point but close enough to work the programmes. The projected images would be visible but that was unavoidable.

"OK let's try it" I said to Tania in the early evening after setting up camp "where to first?"

"Anywhere you like but don't contact the dome until tomorrow. Let's have at least one night in peace before we let the launch centre know we're here". She helped me clean the lens on the bird's head and we sat down in the last of the sunlight and called up the display. The sun went down and we could hear the wind rustling in the trees. The contrast with our last visit was complete and in this atmosphere I unloaded almost all of what the flier had to offer, recording it on the camera for the professor.

The top menu was divided into three parts. The first was commands for actions like COME and GO, UP and DOWN. I had stumbled into some of these when I had caught the flier observing me in the field near my house many years before. I had never been close to a working flier since then and they did nothing for the crashed ones. The second part was the controls, which set the objectives and responses to what it encountered. This contained the parts that required access to the launch control and included the crucial "END PROGRAMME" command. I agreed with Tania, this was no place to explore on such a pleasant evening but it worried me.

"Somebody might die in a zone tomorrow" I said "If a flier gets them before we do anything".

"I haven't seen them all rushing about trying to help us" she replied "There's at least 10 million of them so they can look after themselves for a day or two".

"What if it was somebody we knew?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Let's just do it in order so we don't get shot at or dived at"

We restricted ourselves to the third part of the menu, which was the data banks. None of the commands did anything but display the contents of the memory. There was plenty of it: the video that we had seen before, showing the short flight before it was shot down and pages of text about objectives. The current Phase was listed as 99 and had no text at all to describe its objectives and only minimal details. I could see that it had been set up in a hurry with no attempt at justification. I moved on to look at the original plans.

The main objective of Phase 1 had been to test the fliers and to protect and observe the zones. This had lasted for two years. I could remember reading that the flies had started their attacks on the zones two years after they had been formed. Nobody had realised that before that they had been attacking the dying remnants of the population outside to try to stop their shelling from destroying the field generators. I wondered how long this had gone on for, had the last of them died from the plague or the fliers?

The objectives for Phase 2 were the key to our understanding. I think the professor had almost guessed but seeing it written out in detail left us speechless. The key words were "to prevent stratification and stagnation" and "to promote competition, progress and exploration". The text that followed described the theory that human progress is driven by war; even the feeble attempts to explore space were a by-product of a world war. I shall never know whether this theory could have worked if the system had been left to run its course. As we went to bed in the shelter of the woods further up the valley all we could understand was that it had not worked, for some reason the result had been almost the exact opposite of what had been intended, or, at least, what was claimed to be the intention. We felt the need to distance ourselves from it; we could never sleep near the source of such an appalling reality. History is full of failed attempts at social engineering but this seemed to surpass the worst of them.

"Somebody thought they could play God." Tania said, looking at the last of the sunset. "Somebody on the Survival Council thought they knew all about people and dreamed up this crazy plan to provide the right stimulus to produce a perfect society." Although I am told that sunsets

looked best when the world was full of people hard at work creating pollution it seem incredibly beautiful to me because this was one of the first I had seen.

"They just weren't clever enough to know how much they didn't know." I replied.

The first clue I found in the morning was that the password had been changed. Even under the ideal conditions of a warm spring morning it still took me some hours to find the new one and start looking at the files held in launch control. Even then there was not much to see, some of the information I had already seen was repeated but most of the options were commands. Tania was hovering as I went into the menu with the "END PHASE" command.

"Don't try it, it'll only come back," she whispered quietly enough not to trigger any response.

We had been through it all plenty of times before. She was right; there was no point, unless I could find out who set up phase 99 they would simply set up another one. In the end I just started drifting around the menus looking at things like response settings. The fliers could be set to respond to different things that they identified in their image analysis. The options were complicated because the analysis was good; they could differentiate male, female, child and "biological suit".

"You should have worn a biological suit out here" I said, "Then you would have been categorised as an explorer from the zones, not a survivor threatening them".

"I'll remember that next time" she replied.

"Won't work any more, phase 99 is different". I looked up at her before carrying on. Phase 99 was very different, not pretence of protecting the zones, just random destruction.

Suddenly, as I was going into another ordinary looking menu the request "ENTER USERNAME AND LOCATION" came up. I tried to work round it but could not. The aim of the software writer has always been to make the commands as responses as human as possible. In this they have always been complete failures but suddenly I was seeing ones that succeeded. I was no longer communicating with a machine; I knew immediately that there was a person on the system.

Tania saw too and shrugged – we both knew that I had to try to pretend not to notice – it was all I could do. I drifted around waiting for him, to make another move. Even then I somehow assumed that this was a he not a she. He was waiting his time, not trying to throw me off even if he could, just looking for clues about me in the same way I was looking for clues about him. We saw a flier in the distance and cringed back into our shelter. We had no way of knowing if it was looking for us. We couldn't see if it was circling without showing ourselves.

Almost all of the control menus were now unobtainable so I went back to the data banks where I had been before and stumbled into phase 3.

"What the hell has it got a phase 3 for?" I asked Tania.

"Why shouldn't it have one?" she replied.

"Because that implies phase 2 is due to end sometime and it never did until we stopped it. The fliers just kept coming."

"Perhaps they did but just give the bird another command before Charlie thinks you're interested."

I carried on round and round in the menus just happening to drift into phase 3 occasionally. It was pure reconnaissance; the objective "to confirm that exploration was ongoing" was the key one. I had to keep drifting, giving nothing away, but there it was, so far down the menu that it was almost lost in the dirt at the edge of the lens "completion criteria" for phase 2. We read it and Tania put it in a nutshell. "All we had to do was to show we're a vibrant outward looking society and they would have stopped trying to bomb us into shape".

The wording of the objectives was rather vague but when we looked for the specifics in the responses menu it was quite clear. If border security had sent a few groups outside in biological suits the destruction would have stopped. The trouble was that they had no way of controlling them when they went out and they wouldn't have liked that.

We stopped for too long. Charlie got bored.

ENTER USERNAME AND LOCATION. The message had no logical place in the menu we were in – he had just put it anywhere. This time he froze us out completely until he had his reply. I made up some answers but he didn't like them:

NOT RECOGNISED  
BROWSE?

Charlie was getting clever. I went along with him and said yes. He gave a list of 10 names and 5 locations. Names 3 and 4 were George and Tania Adams. I had never heard of the others.

"So we're not alone" Tania sounded relieved.

"Don't believe it." I replied. "Remember he's feeling creative".

The locations were the 4 zones and "outside".

I picked one of the unknown names and said we were in Summer zone.

The screen went blank.

END PHASE

Tania looked at me. "What's he up to now?"

"No idea, doesn't look good" I replied.

"I hope he's not upset. The professor did tell us not to upset anything"

Charlie was upset, very upset.

START PHASE 999

OBJECTIVE: CARDIFF SECTOR SOUTH, DESTROY ALL PERSONNEL

It wasn't proper code and when he filled in the details he didn't even bother to check the spelling but the message was clear enough, he knew all about us except where we were. Then he did lock us out, completely and permanently. I tried all afternoon but never even found a hint of a way in. And the fliers came over in numbers. Not looking for anything, just going over us as fast as they could.

My eyes became glazed before I finally gave up and said, "He certainly wants us to go and find him"

"What do we do?" She asked.

"Go and try to find him I suppose" I looked for her reaction and added "In the flier's dome".

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Tania surveyed our construction with suspicion. The professor had taken his concept of going back to basics to the extreme and, along with our other simple non-metallic equipment he had provided us with a hand saw for cutting firewood. We had put this to good use cutting poles from trees and combined this with large amounts of rubble from collapsed buildings to protect our dugout by the riverbank. I was confident that we would be safe against the fliers even in incendiary mode.

John had appeared once while we were building it, we had seen him with a camera but made sure he could not see us from his turning point. The fliers must have seen us despite our efforts to avoid them. They flew out in numbers and even flew in occasionally but never seemed to react. Phase 999 was very simple and had no responses to observations outside the zones. We had no idea whether Charlie was watching our progress, wherever he was. The local wildlife, waterfowl and small animals, watched us with interest until they started finding their way onto our cook-fires. The water itself was totally devoid of life, virtually no plants and, as far as we could tell, no fish.

"Must be just right for landing fliers," I observed "nothing to get in the way"

Tania looked at me "Everything in it gets killed off, quite sure you want to go in?"

We soon noticed that just before a flier emerged or landed we could hear machinery working inside the dome. The fliers which landed always seemed to come in the morning so it was early afternoon when we listened carefully before placing a small raft in the river with a camera on it. With a single hard push and a little help from the current it floated into the field trailing a bundle of optic fibres behind it while we ran into the dugout.

The screen remained blank for several minutes while the camera recovered from the effects of the field and finally revealed dense forest. Scanning around showed the undergrowth to have grown so thick with no animals to eat it that it formed an almost solid wall up each side of the

water and over the top several yards above it. The field formed one end of this tunnel and the other was a concrete wall with a large door in it extending down to water level. We settled down to watch the door and before long it slowly opened revealing a water channel extending into the building ending in a ramp. Faint lighting inside gave hints of a cavernous interior beyond the ramp. With the door open to its fullest extent a flier shot out, angling upwards as steeply as possible without hitting the top.

Our raft and its cables were drawn away to the side of the river well clear of the line of any landing fliers so we decided to leave it in place during the night. Sitting in our bunker watching for activity on the other side of a field was a strange feeling.

"This is too easy." I said. "Border security could have floated a raft right through the field in the sea outside our house at any time."

"You're getting cynical like your Professor." She replied. "Perhaps there was a good reason that we simply don't know about."

"From what we've seen so far it doesn't look like it. It's difficult to imagine why but it seems that right from the start they wanted to keep everybody docile in the zones and avoid any possibility of any ordinary people getting out from them." To me the problem looked clearer all the time, the difficult part was knowing what I could do about it.

In the morning we saw a flier land. Our raft had drifted well over to the opposite side of the river but we could still see the door open, not as far as before. We saw the flier approach and picked it up with the camera as soon as it was through the field. Landing uncontrolled in the water in front of the door it submerged almost completely before floating up to the surface and drifting towards the door. At this point our view became very unclear as the waves made the raft rock but we saw the bird disappeared rapidly as some sort of grapple must have engaged to pull it up the ramp. Later that day we pulled our small raft back out and started to construct the larger one for me to go on.

It took two days to build it and when we had finished we were quite proud of it. We floated it through the field. At first it looked as if this extra test run had been a waste of time but quite soon we saw that the raft had been noticed. A loud roaring noise started to emerge as if a waterfall was starting up. Then the water boiled. From the steam rising out of it we could only imagine what it must be like inside. It was bad enough on the outside with the boiling region spreading well beyond the field.

Tania's reaction was predictable "Quite sure you still want to go in?"

The thought of the maelstrom inside the field was terrifying but the thought of going home to spend the rest of my life with a blitz of fliers was worse. I tried to explain this to her and ended up with a half-hearted "let's try to work on it. At least now we know how it keeps the channel clear."

We worked on it. Soon we had a detector for the microwaves which were used to heat the water and found exactly how far in the raft had to go to switch them on. They went off again as soon as it was removed. Two more days and we had found out that they were switched off as soon as a flier that was due to land came within sight. They always circled so this was a full three minutes before it landed. The next experiment was for me to float in through the field and then have Tania pull me out again all while a flier was preparing to come in. This showed that this field only left me unconscious for about a minute.

So it was that I was pushed through the field in a much-streamlined raft, which now almost resembled a canoe with only two minutes to orient myself and get clear before a flier landed. Coming round I saw that, exactly as planned, the door was open so I could go straight into the building where the banks were clear of undergrowth and I could get out of the way. We had already floated the small raft in to give me a radio link through my headset so I had the option of asking Tania to pull me back out but it looked clear so I paddled furiously forward with the weighted rope paying out behind me. Scrambling out on the concrete dockside I heard Tania's panicked voice shouting a final warning of the bird landing as I reached down and dragged the raft up out of the water.

Moments later it came. I saw the grapple mechanism catch it and pull it to the ramp where a conveyor took it out of the water and, for a few moments, nothing happened. Then, very slowly, a hatch opened along its back and something silvery seemed to stir inside it. Gradually pulling

himself up on his hands and knees as he recovered from the field Charlie climbed out. I just had time to realise what was happening when in one swift movement he raised a gun and fired at me.

The bullet hit the wall just behind me as I ran off down a maze of catwalks between vast machines. More shots were fired from behind as I sped past lines of completed wings waiting to be assembled onto bodies of fliers. The building was vast and I must have run for almost ten minutes in one direction before I realised that Charlie was no longer behind me. Hindered by his cumbersome suit he had finally lost me.

The machines around me were all rather similar to look at. All of the operating parts were enclosed with expanses of white panelling, which was securely locked in place. The only way to tell what they did was to look at the conveyors going in and out through long transparent pipes leading to other machines. Just like the manufactory the most remarkable thing about them was how slowly and quietly they worked. Everything was completely unhurried; each machine could work quite fast enough for the others. This was presumably why they had worked unattended for so many years. Or had Charlie and his predecessors been mending them?

I spent the day trying to orientate myself in the building while watching out for cameras that might be used to find me. There was no provision at all for people in the factory, no warning lights, no screens, no buttons to push or switches to work, nothing at all to see or do, only the conveyors to watch as they moved parts of fliers with measured slowness. The only concession to human access was the faint diffuse light from dim sources way above me. I decided to follow the line back, reasoning that this would take me away from Charlie. The parts on the conveyors became smaller, the assemblies became individual components and then unformed metal and polymers. At the back I found the fusion plant, which synthesised the raw materials. It was larger than any of the other machines and I could feel a slight warmth from it but otherwise it looked much the same. I couldn't find any way to stop it, I couldn't even guess where it's water intake was, Finally as I settled down to try to sleep under a machine that was assembling some sort of basic mechanical linkage Tania called me with the worst news possible.

"He's got the rope" she said "he must have pulled it with some sort of winch, it's broken off the branch it was fixed to and disappeared." She sounded as desperate as I was knowing that I now had no way out. We went over all the options. If I tried to swim the microwaves would kill me immediately. We had virtually no more rope for Tania to pull me through the field anyway. My only way out was Charlie's way out and that must be in a flier and I had no idea where it would take me.

Waking in the half-light of the building, surrounded by the slow rhythm of the machines I struggled to take stock. The floor was hard and cold and sleeping on it had left me stiff but otherwise I was fit. I had ample food in the form of tasteless dry rations and the river water in the dock was clean enough to drink through a filter. It was a relief to hear Tania's voice on the radio, partly because it reminded me of the sunshine outside and partly because it reassured me that Charlie had not found our second raft with the transmitter on it. But she was unsympathetic. After a cursory "Good morning" she asked, "What's wrong".

"I'm stuck in here" I replied.

"So you're in a dome. We live in a dome"

"I'm stuck in a building with someone who's trying to kill me"

"He may have gone. There have been six fliers out already today." She paused to think and added. "If he's gone all you've got to do is to break one of the machines."

"And if he hasn't gone he'll probably know where to find me" I replied. I tried to imagine who he was and what he wanted. Was he in charge or just following instructions? Had he been expecting to find me in the dome? Whichever way I looked at it he was going to wait for me. He had goaded me into trying to get into the dome and now he had me in he wasn't going to leave me to try to get out.

There were cameras high up on the columns that supported the roof, far to high for me to reach them. They were meant to be used to show whether the machines were working but Charlie would have programmed them to track me. He was simply waiting for me to get within range of his gun. I was sure that he knew that I was alone.

By now I was sure that he wasn't looking for me. I pictured him in front of a console in a

control room full of monitors waiting for me. He would be watching over a line of completed fliers knowing that I had to get into one to get out. I pictured him in a large comfortable chair with a relaxed smile on his face waiting for me as just one more job to be done. The image of his fluid motion, turning and firing, kept going through my mind as I followed the production line forward again.

We both knew that he had just one weakness. If there was just one tear in his bio-suit, however small, he would die. I looked for sharp things, anything with a good edge, however small. I filled my pockets with small gear wheels and links and anything else I could find.

At last I was seeing almost completed fliers. The pipes that enclosed the conveyors had grown steadily larger and were now double my own height and beyond them I saw the control room with its big windows looking out over the machines. I threw a piece of metal as hard as I could and it clattered against the glass before dropping to the floor. To my amazement Charlie appeared, gun in hand, looking completely relaxed. He must have known that I had nothing that could even break his window.

Moving around I could see his door and, right outside it, just to one side of the launch ramp, his flier with its canopy open. This was the only way out for him or me and he would be waiting for me to try to get it.

I called Tania and told her what was happening.

"You mean he came right up to the window?" She asked.

"No danger to him." I replied.

"Make yourself a bow and arrow. You don't have to be good at it, just enough to break the glass. I'll put lots of wood in the water and one of the fliers coming in will push a bit through."

A day later I had my bow. It was crude and basic but the branch had a good spring to it and my arrow was a heavy metal link. I carried it close to my body so it would not show on the overhead cameras.

"Throw something so he comes to the glass and then use the arrow to break it. He'll jump back but you might be able to throw something through at him."

I moved up as close as I dared and threw a gear wheel at the glass. Soon he was standing looking out, gun in hand. He must have seen me fire the arrow because he had moved back by the time it hit the glass. The window shattered into hundreds of fragments like a car windscreen and Charlie was very very fast. Before I could even think of throwing anything at him he was firing at me, jumping out through the opening and running after me. A bullet grazed my shoulder as I ducked under machines and ran as fast as I could, only stopping when it was completely silent behind me.

"He's too quick". I said to Tania. "If he's got a gun, I can't win with a bow and arrow. Next time he'll get me."

"See what he does when he's annoyed, try keeping him awake." She suggested. "Take good supply of things to throw at his windows and give him one every hour."

After two hours nothing had happened. My bits of metal clattered against the glass next to the broken window and there was no response. I tried arrows but found that my first shot had been a lucky one. I couldn't break the glass again. I fired one right through the opening into his control room; still no response.

"Go in." Tania said. "He must have gone to get help."

"It's a trap." I replied but eventually I went close enough to look through the door. There was a body on the floor.

Looking at Charlie's body bloated with plague brought the reality of the situation home to me. I had never seen a dead body before and found it terrifying. A tiny cut in one of the legs of his suit showed where he must have caught it as he had jumped through the broken window. I called Tania on the radio just to hear the sound of her voice. She reminded me about the constant stream of fliers heading out to destroy our sector and I went to the launch area and, almost casually pulled out a wire on the conveyor mechanism that transported the completed fliers to the launch area. Something stopped me destroying more than was necessary - I simply fired a shot from Charlie's gun into the diagnosis port and another into the main conveyor control unit and concluded that this would be sufficient to stop the maintenance robots from repairing it. If Charlie's

friends came out they could repair anything I did.

Charlie's flier was the only one of its type in the whole building. In place of the usual incendiary compartment with the magnesium flare on top it had a narrow empty space below the side-hinged door. Inside I could see some rudimentary foam padding but no controls at all. Remembering how Charlie had emerged I knew that I had to lie face down in it and saw a small one-line display set into the bottom of the shell where I would see it. The word "READY" was flashing.

I described it all to Tania.

"What am I supposed to do?" she kept asking "What if you don't come back?" "Why don't you wait until someone else comes out".

At times she annoyed me intensely and this was one of them "Suppose we did capture another of these special fliers would you go in one?"

There was a silence before she answered "No I couldn't. You just go - I'll keep the radio on when you're gone. If you're not back in fourteen days I'll go back to the boat". At that she turned the radio off.

I didn't dare try any menu commands before getting into the flier in case the door slammed shut and it flew off without me. I also didn't dare try to do anything at Charlie's console in case he had any friends monitoring it. The compartment in his flier was obviously a hand-made conversion and looked incredibly claustrophobic but I was committed to going so I stepped nervously in. Getting down on my knees I had to virtually collapse forward with my arms by my side in order to fit. I knew that it must have already been programmed to go back to where Charlie came from so I just shouted GO.

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Her hair hung well down over her shoulders. It was thick honey blonde and moved slightly across her cheek as it was caught by a light gust of the summer breeze. The soft folds of her dress seemed to shimmer as she stood facing me. I saw her beauty in an instant and just realised that I had a gun in my hand before my mind clouded as if I was entering another field. In my last conscious instant the gun fell harmlessly against the side of the flier.

The flight had been a nightmare of visions of what I might find. The route that I had taken had been far from direct. I may have visited all three zones; the blurred image from the beak camera that was displayed on my screen was too poor to see properly. At one point I thought that I might be heading for central zone and might be captured. My claustrophobia was intense and knowing that fliers never crashed unless they wanted to did little to calm my terror as we soared and dived across the landscape. Luckily I had scarcely eaten since entering the dome and had managed not to be sick. The landing had been hard and sudden and came just after I recovered from the six field transits, the last of which seemed to hit me in repeated pulses.

I awoke with an intense headache - no doubt a result of the fields. It took me some time to take stock of my surroundings. I was lying on a comfortable bed in a magnificent room. Daylight filtered through thick curtains to reveal a high ceiling with ornate plasterwork. Looking down I saw large paintings, a beautiful fireplace and grand furniture. Eventually I recovered sufficiently to get up. I was still wearing my clothes but soon found that my pockets had been emptied and I had none of my supplies. Cautiously I tried the door. It was unlocked and opened onto a wide corridor. Tall windows let in shafts of sunlight onto a rich carpet, which was not worn but also not well cleaned. Crumbs, dog hairs and even some bits of grass were spread about. I could only assume that these people had planned to harm me they would have done so already so I walked along the corridor and down a wide curved staircase.

"Hello, who are you?"

I turned to see the speaker. She seemed, if anything, even more beautiful than when I had seen her when I landed. She was standing framed by a doorway and was looking at me with a



totally relaxed and genuine seeming smile.

"Why not come in and join me for a glass of wine?"

I stumbled forwards and said "George Adams" but never mustered my thoughts enough to reply to her second question. Moving through the door I saw large windows opening onto a landscape bathed in early evening sunlight. Evidently no response had been needed because she poured me a large glass of wine. My first taste was good and reminded me that I had not eaten in a long time. I stood quite still just trying to absorb my surroundings. Near to the house there was an ornamental garden with slightly overgrown rose beds and statuettes crusted with moss. Further away this gradually turned into grazing and in the distance some cattle were standing motionless under trees.

A slight rustle of her dress caught my attention and I saw that she was sitting in one of the armchairs. I took this as my cue and sat in the one opposite her but was still unable to muster my thoughts sufficiently to start any conversation. She was clearly not troubled by this and took a lingering drink from her glass before placing it on the polished table at her side.

"I wonder why you came back in the flier. I wonder what happened to the man we sent out". Her tone was soft and slightly whimsical. No reply was expected and I gave none. "I wonder if you're from outside - somebody was saying they thought there might be some people outside". She paused as if this thought had left her confused.

Away to one side of my view from the window I could see the field stretching across the country. I was so used to it that I never bothered looking at it - Elisabeth had even said that staring at it was addictive. On this occasion, however, I saw her looking at it and followed her gaze. The normal featureless whiteness was swirling into vortices which grew intense at the centre and then quite suddenly one reached out from high up the wall lancing down on one of the meadows. I was wondering if I had really seen it when she went continued.

"The field is stirring tonight, letting its imagination run wild. There wasn't one of us in the top meadow to draw it. I wonder if it will come to the house". She looked at me slowly and carefully. "You can't draw the field can you? You're not one of us are you? I don't remember".

She drifted into silence for some minutes, looking out of the window totally oblivious to my presence. The alcohol was having its effect so I saw no need to do anything other than just enjoy the sunset. Eventually she turned and looked at me with great care for what must have been a full minute. "You must be from outside somewhere, I'm sure I have never seen you here before". I was just beginning to work out the implications of her apparently thinking she knew everybody in the zone when she looked around the room and said "there's nothing here to eat, get me something to eat - I'm quite hungry I need a good meal."

I was so thrown by this that I continued to sit where I was and said nothing. "I said get me something to eat" she said quite sharply "and I don't want to have to say it again". I was so shocked that I stood up and started to walk towards her.

"The door is that way" she was shouting now and pointing with real menace. I ran for the door and went out into the hall. The route to the kitchen was actually quite obvious; it was a small door in the corner with visible trails of spilt food leading to it. I had, however, no plans to go there. I ran over to the main outer door and started to open it.

I was too slow. She shouted from behind me "the kitchen you lazy dimwit". I turned to see her standing with one hand resting on the doorframe. I hesitated but this was a mistake. My head suddenly as if it had been placed in boiling water. The searing pain ran through me as I collapsed on the floor.

The first thing I saw when I came round was the muddy sole of a boot. It was not stepping on me. It was stepping over me. Turning with difficulty I saw its owner walking away across the hall without a glance back at me. I felt as if I was recovering from about twenty field transits, one after another. It took me some time to realise where I was and muster the strength to move. During this time another unkempt looking man with a ragged beard hurried through the door just pausing long enough to push me out of the way with his foot to enable in order to enable him to close it but otherwise ignoring me. I wondered if these two had been summoned to prepare the meal as I finally gathered myself up and headed out of the door.

The village was poor but I had seen poor villages before. The village in Avon sector was

not rich. In this village I saw the result of the random destruction of civilisation. There was some agriculture, which looked barely sufficient to provide food for even a small population. The village must originally have been an attractive place to live, quite comparable with the gathering town, but the infrastructure had failed and nothing replaced it. The smell hit me long before I saw the full truth. Walking down the rutted road from the gates of the manor house I felt a gnawing hunger but by the time I reached the remains of the church nothing could have persuaded me to eat in that place. Gaunt bearded faces stared at me with vacant eyes as I walked through. Many shied away closing rotten doors behind them.

Hurrying through the decaying streets I was soon out in open country in clear fresh air and my hunger returned. It was completely dark so all I could do was to move just off the track and try to rest under the shelter of a bush. During the night it rained and soaked my light clothing. I kept thinking about my comfortable room in the manor house or even a dry bed in the village but even as I lay cold and shivering I could not face the thought of returning to either of them. The fear of being trapped into close contact with the people there was enough to make me forget about food and warmth.

The morning was colder and brought more rain. Searching around for food revealed nothing that looked remotely edible. I saw rabbits in the distance but had no idea how I might catch one, let alone cook it. The route I was following could not be described as a road, it might once have been one but now it was just a muddy track that seemed to go on forever without any sign of human life. Eventually it joined another broader track which had obviously recently been used by a large number of people who had ploughed up the grass over a considerable width. Feeling more optimistic I followed it.

Towards evening I smelled food. At first I thought that it must just be a trick of my imagination but as I drew closer the smell of roasting became more distinct. Finally I looked down into a small valley to see a camp with a fire on which large joints of meat were cooking. Caution overcame my hunger and I waited and watched. In the centre of the camp was a massive wooden cart and I could see from the tracks that it had come down the track the way I had come. It had high wooden rails on the sides but I could see the glint of metal through them and knew immediately that it contained my flier. There was no sign of horses or other animals; it was being manhandled over the rough ground. Immediately I had hope. This could be my route out of the place if only I could find some food and follow it.

Lines of people were approaching the fire to get food. The lines were orderly to the point of being precise. When one person had their food the whole line moved forward. As one tall man moved into the light of the flames I could see why. Each person was chained to the one behind them.

Next to the cart there was a substantial tent with guards outside it. There was a clear space all around it which was lit with torches but the rest of the camp was not lit and as darkness fell the tent was in the only pool of light in the valley. I could just see the remaining embers of the fire and at one end of it I knew there was a large piece of meat that had been left to one side to cool.

Going in was deceptively easy. Relying on the chains they had set no guards at the perimeter so I was able to walk cautiously towards the fire watching all the time to see if the guards under the torches looked up. They were gathered in groups and immersed in conversations, which were frequently broken by roars of laughter. I saw people come and go from the tent but they never went beyond the light so I moved closer. Finally I approached on my hands and knees and reached into the large iron bowl to find a good-sized lump of slightly warm meat. Not trusting my luck beyond one good mouthful I started to retreat, standing up after a few yards. It was very difficult to see the ground ahead of me. I knew that there were large groups of people on it and I had seen that, chained together, they writhed around like an enormous snake often moving several yards across the ground. They did not seem to talk aloud, an all-encompassing murmur rose up from all directions with the clear voices of the guards cutting across it.

Setting out as carefully as I could I suddenly felt a powerful hand grab my ankle. Within seconds I was down with a chain wrapped round my legs and a hand across my mouth. The ground seemed to come alive around me and hands reached out at me from all directions. In my

terror I struggled and would have shouted if I had been able but I could do nothing. Slowly I began to make out the whispering voices:

“Move on, let Grey come”

“Keep moving, no it isn't one of them. We don't know”

Bodies kept moving past me as I was passed from one iron grip to the next. Eventually I could just see an enormous man with a long beard looking down at me.

He spoke in a coarse whisper “Who are you”

I shook my head and eventually the hand across my mouth was removed

“George Adams, from Cardiff Sector” I replied “but I'm immune so you won't get plague”

His look was either disbelief or incomprehension. Thick layers of scar tissue round his neck beneath the rough iron collar told me all about this man. All hope had been worked out of him. His long steady gaze conveyed nothing but sadness.

I had to offer him something. “I can communicate with the flier, I might help you escape”. The others around me all looked up but Grey just pulled up the sleeve of his shirt to reveal a number, which had been tattooed on his upper arm.

“No point” he said.

The crowd fell back slightly in silence waiting for his decision. Finally he spoke again. “Go away, go as far away as possible and only come back if you have an army with you and can stop them drawing the fields onto you. Go silently because if you are heard you, and your children and grandchildren, will become like us. You may take your food with you but do not return for more”.

He looked round to see who had the meat. There was no response until he looked long and hard at a group of young men. Eventually one of them came forward and handed me the meat, deliberately making me reach out as far as possible to get it. I could imagine that they were hungry. I could imagine that they must have seen me as a spark of hope for a way to get out. I could also see the tension and that Grey could only keep them back for a few seconds longer so I jumped up and moved off as fast as I could with the thought of being trapped in an iron collar to keep me silent all the way back to my vantage point at the top of the valley.

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I ate and slept and was woken at first light by sounds from the encampment. Once again the slaves formed into lines for food. Seeing one very large man I thought that I could recognise Grey and some of the others that I had seen in the night but I couldn't be sure. Just behind them a figure had collapsed and was being half pushed and half carried by the ones either side who were being pulled down by the weight on their chains. Soon a number of guards came over armed with an assortment of clubs and what looked like a sword. While the others stood round him, one of them reached to his waist for what was obviously a key and released the collar from the inert body. They then went to the back of the line to collect the last person and drag them forward to fill the gap.

The body was ignored for some time until a woman emerged from the tent. Her fine clothes looked ridiculous in the muddy clearing and a form of carpet was laid out for her to walk on. She nudged the body with her foot and, when nothing happened, she returned to stand by the tent. Spades were fetched for the last four people in the line and it was manoeuvred around for them to dig a hole at the side of the camp. Just as they finished their work two pheasants took off from the scrub in front of them flying right past the guards. Using this moment of distraction one of the slaves hit a guard with his spade while another started frantically hitting the chain with his. Hearing the noise the woman looked up. In a moment the whole scene had disappeared into a swirling mist, which seemed to stretch up into the sky above it. Seconds later it cleared to reveal all those in the area collapsed unconscious.

Guards went over from the tent to help their colleagues and as I watched them I slowly worked out what I had seen. Grey had talked about “drawing the fields” and now I had seen the

field very effectively drawn down. I wondered if the professor would believe me if I ever got back to tell him. Slowly I put together his reply "Think about it George, put the human body in close proximity to something for long enough and it will adapt or mutate to make use of it. Must have taken lots of practice, probably pretty painful to do it but what a weapon! Now what are you going to do about it?" I felt rather proud of this. I didn't need him any more. All he did was to ask questions and now I could ask them for myself. The trouble was that I had no answers. I was cold, hungry and very alone.

The guards fixed the four slaves who had rebelled in place by tying the end of the line to a tree and carpet was laid out for the woman to walk over to them. Stopping a few yards short of them she drew the field down again but this time she did it with far greater intensity with the vortex almost black. My first reaction was to wonder how the ageing field generators could survive having so much energy drawn from them but then it cleared and I saw what she had done. The four lay prone with their arms reaching up ineffectually around their heads. Blood flowed from their mouths and ears.

The tent was taken down and the slaves were lined up with long ropes. With painful slowness they moved forwards. Without thinking I followed. Throughout the day I watched them. I counted forty-six slaves. Possibly twenty were female but their condition was such that it was not easy to tell. There were ten guards and just the one woman who was clearly in absolute control.

Towards evening a flock of large birds flew over. The woman drew the field again and they fell to the ground. The guards went out to get them but I was lucky. From where I was I could see two had come down into some bushes and they missed them. That night I was hungry but when they moved on in the morning I re-kindled the remains of their fire. Preparing the birds was a matter of trial and error but they tasted good and there was plenty left over when I had eaten all I could.

Following them was very easy. They moved very slowly and, if they moved ahead, the cart left enormous ruts. Without the hunger to trouble me I started to think about plans. I was sure that the flier was being taken to a launching device and would be used to send another technician out to replace Charlie and repair the damage I had done.

During the afternoon I moved close enough to identify individuals among the slaves. Grey was easy to find because he stood so much taller than those around him. While others seemed just to put a token effort into pulling the rope he was using all of his strength with every pace. Nobody would ever accuse him of leaving his share of the load to others.

The next day the track crossed some low-lying meadows. With the very heavy rain the cart was soon up to its axles in mud. Groups of slaves worked with crude wooden poles to lever it forward. The guards came out with whips and used them indiscriminately as they became more and more angry at the slow progress. The following morning six more slaves were buried and I decided to go in. I rationalised it by thinking that I could persuade the slaves to help me build a launching device in the forest.

I had never tried to do much with the fliers' command mode but I knew how to get into it. The first thing the guards heard was the crash in the night as the great wings spread breaking away the rails on the side of the cart. They ran over and, just as they were close enough they were suddenly attacked by the beak. This time they may have heard my command but none of them would have spoken the language to understand it. Soon the woman appeared but luckily she either couldn't see or didn't immediately think to draw down the field, she just stood there looking angry and shocked in the light of the torches. This gave me the time I needed and I ran to Grey and his companions.

His look was the same as before "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Please trust me" I replied, "Look what I have done to the flier"

He reluctantly let me try to release the lock on his chains with the buckle from my belt.

The buckle did not make a good key but I eventually released him and started on one of his companions. The rest of the slaves were now standing and starting to move but they had no idea what was happening.

The guards had moved clear of the beak and were starting to get organised so I shouted another command and the tail started thrashing catching another couple of them. I had brought

some pieces of wood with me hoping that they would work on the locks but when I passed them out nobody managed to get them to work. Finally the woman worked out what to do and the area around the bird fell silent. I had the slight pleasure of knowing that the only people who were affected would have been guards. I left it as long as I could but finally had to run for the forest with just four of the slaves.

On the open meadow I felt very exposed and expected to feel the field descending on me at any moment. In truth probably nobody ever saw us go and the night was too dark for the woman to see us anyway but I still ran until I was well into the forest and moving up to higher ground. I could see little of my new companions as they followed me; four vague shapes in the dark with Grey just visible a head taller than the rest. Suddenly I heard loud noises from behind me and turned. There was no sign of anything moving nearby except the four of them.

Grey was soon standing beside me looking around. Moments later I saw that the noise was coming from the camp. Way out across the meadow it was in uproar, the bird was flapping its wings so violently that it was progressing slowly forwards in the mud scattering all before it.

"I see it's woken up again" I said cheerfully, "if anybody was following us they'll probably go back to try to help"

"I think we are safe for now." Grey conceded. We all stood in silence for a considerable time. Below us the scene of chaos unfolded as many of the lamps were suddenly extinguished. The screams of the wounded told the rest of the story. Soon it was clear that everybody who had survived had finally moved away and the only sound was the persistent thump as the wings crashed hopelessly into the ground.

"How long will it go on?" Grey asked.

I have always sought precision, it often achieves little but on this occasion it did serve to lighten the mood. "About 14 hours 20 minutes" I replied, "the battery was at 37% when it landed and the mark VIII drone has a range of 36 hours at full charge".

Grey reached out slowly and laid his big hand on my shoulder and looked at me and said slowly. "Why don't you start at the beginning?"

"I must turn it off first, before it goes flat" I replied "why doesn't the woman keep it quiet by drawing the field onto it again".

"She won't be able to do that again until morning" he replied "if we can't start at the beginning can you at least give us an idea of how you turn it on and off so we can help". Standing back a pace he added, "we don't know who you are or what you are seeking to achieve but we shall trust your judgement tonight"

"Even though I came back when you told me not to?"

"Even though you came back," he replied with the tone of his voice revealing nothing.

At that moment I decided to trust him "In which case I shall trust you with some very valuable information, the birds are ancient designs and they respond to voice command in the ancient language." To add to the impression given by this statement I made my last comment in that language "They have an entire command structure in Anglic". Feeling that I would have suitably impressed him I paused for effect.

I was therefore taken by complete surprise when one of the others replied in a clear confident voice in perfect Anglic. The voice was that of a girl or young woman, I could see nothing of the speaker so I could only guess who she might be. "In my book 37% of 36 hours is only 13 hours 20 minutes" she informed me "so you had better get a move on". My command of Anglic is far from perfect so it took me a few moments to translate what she had said. When I finally worked it out I headed off down the hill deciding never to under-estimate my new companions again.

When we approached the bird there was no sign of anybody near it.

"Do you think they've abandoned it?" I asked "will they be watching and hear us if we shout commands at it? If they hear us they might work out my command trick"

"Jemma is the only one who knows the language" he replied, "the only risk is that they might come after us. How long will it take you to stop it?"

"Just as long as it takes to get it to hear me". Given the volume of noise it was making this was a serious problem.

"Jemma has a strong clear voice, what should she say?"

I saw no harm in this and she shouted out “END COMMAND” several times and then “END PROGRAMME” for good measure as we ran away as the flier fell silent. There was no pursuit. I assumed that they were tending their wounded and planning how to take it out on the remaining slaves.

In the morning my assumption proved correct. We watched in horror as bandaged guards emerged to inflict as much pain as possible on the slaves without leaving them unfit to work. We then watched them painfully start to rebuild the cart.

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In the daylight I could see that Grey lived up to his name in full. He had long grey hair and a long grey beard. I could not guess his age but the years had clearly not reduced his enormous strength. He never mentioned my decision to return. Many slaves had been wounded in the night and some killed but nothing was said. He seemed incapable of recrimination or anger.

Jemma never mentioned it either but this was probably because she respected Grey's decision. She had a slight build, close-cropped hair and a mind that was sharp enough to enable her to survive in camp. Now she questioned every part of what I told them. She kept asking why I did this and why I did that. At least, unlike the professor, she was asking because she did not know the answer and wanted to know. Unfortunately I had few explanations to offer. Too often I replied “I thought that was what the professor would have wanted me to do” and she just looked at me and said “Oh I see”.

Their story was that they had lived together in a village until 10 years previously when they had been taken into slavery. I slowly pieced together a picture of society in Summer zone. Dominated by one or two hundred mutants with the extraordinary power the rest of the population had no escape from them. When they had learned how to spot the fliers without incendiary packs and bring them down they simply rounded up as much labour as they needed to haul them back to their compound in which, I gathered, they had a small stock and a large ramp to launch them.

Below us the slaves worked harder and achieved progressively less. They struggled to repair the cart and then found that they could hardly move it even when it was empty. By mid-morning the rain had returned and they slipped and fell in the black mud, which now covered the area. Grey showed that he felt ever blow as the guards lashed out at them. At times he looked as if he would almost go down to help them. Jemma felt the pain but was far more ready to see the bright side.

“That's Catherine well and truly stuck,” she said. Seeing my puzzled look she explained. “Catherine's the sorceress. That's the one who draws the field. She told her brother Henry that she'd be able to collect this flier. We tried to make it difficult for her but you seem to have finished the job”

“What will she do now?” I asked

“Send for Henry I suppose” she replied, “He'll come out with a load more slaves”.

“So more slaves will die and they'll get the bird anyway”. I said. “If we just started it up again and the power ran out would they leave it?”

“But then how would you get back home?” Grey asked.

“Perhaps I could find a way of getting into one of the ones they've already got.” I said. “Didn't you say they had a stock of them?”

“Inside the castle” Jemma said, “You ought to take a look at it before you say that”. She went on to describe massive walls of the old castle. Finally she concluded, “I expect they'd want this flier anyway.”

Below us the cart had finally reached the flier and they were trying to load it. We watched transfixed as they lifted the bird half way out of the mud only to have it slide back down again almost crushing several of them as it came. I didn't want to ask why Grey was so keen for me to get home. How could I disappoint him by telling him that even if I did stop the fliers coming there was still nobody who would help? I was still struggling to explain when I noticed that everybody in

the valley below had stopped and was looking in my direction. The woman was standing in the entrance to the tent looking directly at me.

"She's seen us," I said in panic "can she get us from there"

"Nobody move at all" Grey said, "she can get anything she can see but I'm not sure she's seen us"

We stood frozen waiting for the frightening feel of the field. "They'll kill us before we come round" Jemma said. I could see that she wanted to try and run but would always obey Grey. Nothing happened. What seemed like minutes passed. Slowly we began to hear the familiar sound of large wings beating behind us. Turning we saw the bird, flying close to the tops of the short trees on the side of the valley.

"I thought you said you'd broken the production line," Jemma said accusingly.

"There were quite a few complete ones in the launch area, they'll soon run out". I assured her.

I felt the rush of air from its wings and saw it soar down and start to circle below me. I assumed that it would dive on the camp, which stood out as an obvious target.

The slaves and guards were all running away from everything big enough to attract its attention. The woman looked around obviously trying to decide whether to bring it down. It soared out across the river.

"It should have started to dive by now," I said. They never circle for long.

Then it turned, banking high in a tight circle and revealing its back to us. It had no incendiary pack.

"It's a reconnaissance unit," I said

"Could have a tech in it" Jemma added "might be one returning from outside"

"The only one who was there when I was there got plague" I said without thinking and added that I had killed him. She looked up at me showing both fear and curiosity.

The bird flew wider across the river and this time it turned so sharply that even the woman below us could see its back. She waited for it to cross back across the river and then, without showing apparent effort, drew the field.

She miscalculated. She had left it too late. The long straight glide took it half a mile further so it ploughed into the ground in the low scrub only a short distance from where we were watching. We moved carefully back as two guards ran over to it but we were still close enough to hear them talking.

They quickly released the cover and saw that it was empty.

"I thought they were expecting somebody back". The guard sounded mildly concerned.

"What the hell is she going to do with this one now?" the other asked.

"She's not going to try to take it with us is she?" this time he sounded seriously concerned.

"No we couldn't, not with the ones we've got left. We'd be pulling it ourselves." He looked up smiling but saw that his remark had been taken seriously. "She wouldn't really," he added trying to sound convinced.

"If it was well broken up she wouldn't want it"

They argued for some time but eventually agreed that there was no way that Catherine would know they had done it if they broke one of the wings. One by one they started to prize away metallic feathers from around the joint where one wing was hinged from the body. We watched in silence. In the distance I suddenly saw yet another flier slowly circling.

"I've got a better idea" I said "Could anybody divert them for a minute."

Grey somehow managed to spot a flock of birds hiding in the undergrowth and with one carefully placed stone he had them all flying off in all directions. One of the guards had a throwing knife and expertly aimed it. They both went off to retrieve the kill.

"Just what's needed" I said and went down to the flier and quickly had it in command mode. The guards were just returning when I quickly said: "PATHFIND" before moving away as fast as I could.

As they approached the antenna went up. They were just trying to work out what was happening when they saw Catherine approaching across the field.

Jemma saw her first "Look who's coming" she said. She tried to sound confident but was

obviously still afraid of her.

I couldn't believe my luck Grey saw me smile.

"What's going to happen?" he asked.

I told him to stand back and watch. We moved back slightly further up the hillside but we had little time. The flier that I had seen circling was much closer now. It was moving in a perfect straight line without any soaring or circling. This must have been what caught Catherine by surprise. Every incendiary she had ever seen before had always circled its target giving her time to bring it down. This one was directed by its pathfinder and came straight in behind her just as she reached the two guards and started looking at the antenna.

I turned away and covered my eyes but I was so close that I could feel the intensity of the burning metal on them however I tried to protect them. Soon we were engulfed in the acid smoke and I could hear Grey choking and gasping for breath.

I had often seen the damage done by fliers and, on rare occasions, I had seen the impact but I had never been close enough to feel their full terror as a weapon. We ducked right down but above us the leaves of trees burst into flames spontaneously as the blast of heat hit them leaving just charred branches a few seconds later. By the time it burned out we were all shaking with fear and took a short while to realise that nobody was actually injured.

All that remained of the two fliers and three people below us was a smouldering pile surrounded by some still burning scrub. Grey was quick to see my expression of horror.

"They must have died in the impact" he said, "they made no sound at all, it must have been very quick".

Jemma was plainly jubilant and made not pretence at pity. She congratulated me on killing the sorceress.

All activity in the camp stopped. A small group of guards gathered and came running towards us while all others, slaves and guards, stood motionless and watched. When they had covered about half the distance they must have realised that there was nothing left to see. They stopped and seemed to stare at the scene in front of them for some time before turning around and walking slowly, aimlessly, back towards the camp.

Seeing this the slaves surged out to meet them. The guards with them made token efforts to stop them but, with their greatly reduced numbers, had little effect. So we met them in the middle of the waterlogged meadow. They were frightened and unprepared and when they saw Grey they immediately looked to him to lead them.

True to his nature Grey's first concern was for the guards. By the time he took control some of them had been put in the chains from which the slaves were quickly releasing themselves. The rest had run away and fortunately nobody seemed to want to pursue them.

Having prevented any immediate reprisals against the captive guards the next concern was the tent used by the sorceress. I ran ahead to the deserted camp. The door flap hung loose, moving slightly in the wind. Walking right around the outside I saw no sign of anything more than a simple, if substantial, tent made with traditional materials. As I came back to the front I saw several groups of slaves moving in my direction so I decided to risk pushing the flap open with a stick. There was no sign of an alarm or trap so I walked in. The interior was quite luxurious but looked as traditional as the outside. A large bed with brightly coloured covers was positioned along the far side and a carved wooden desk with a single chair occupied the centre of the tent. Glancing at one of the pieces of paper scattered on the desk I saw that it was hand written and appeared to be an inventory of stores. I was sure that there was more to find but by this time the first slaves had arrived.

They rushed in without seeming to notice me and started wrecking. One of them looked my way with a curious look and then seemed to recognise me.

"Did you find anything good" he said with a smile without pausing in throwing the contents out of a chest, "you were with Grey, weren't you, quick thinking to get here first."

Suddenly he jumped up and stood back. Seeing him the others stopped what they were doing. With difficulty I pushed through to see that he had lifted out a simple false bottom in the chest to reveal a standard issue government security safe. Standard issue that is, in Cardiff zone.

"Where the hell did she get that?" I said without thinking. "It's a mark 16, almost new"



“What is it?” one of them asked. Seconds later a large and particularly aggressive looking individual leaned towards me. “Who are you?” he asked “You seem to know what it is, you a friend of the sorceress then? What are you doing here?”

Luckily Grey arrived in time to defuse the situation but it made me realise that, as in the gathering town my welcome could be short lived. I really did need to talk to the professor. Either my diplomatic and social skills were lacking or the plague had given all surviving humanity a strong dislike of strangers. I knew what his answer would be; I just wanted to hear him say it. Every population now feared, and usually hated, every other one and, as with everything, this could be exploited by governments.

The safe was carried out of the tent and I was able to check the manufacture code stamped on it. There could be no doubt; it had been made in Cardiff sector in the last few years. What made it different from the items that I had seen in Avon sector was that this was a Government Issue item. They had them in offices throughout the sector and, in our closed society; they simply did not go missing. Sometimes they broke and would be sent back to the manufactory for recycling but they could not possibly go missing. This one must have been manufactured on the instructions of a senior government official for the specific purpose of supplying it to Summer sector.

I was having difficulty keeping the slaves away from the safe. It was not very strong; it didn't need to be. If anybody tried to open it it simple signalled to its control centre. Grey was beginning to look tired. Using nothing but will power he was keeping the crowd away to stop them killing the captured guards or trying to open the safe. He might have succeeded had it not been for the crates of whisky. The first thing we noticed was a slight improvement; sitting with Jemma and Grey we were suddenly aware that we were no longer the centre of attention. The slaves had gathered in a group around something and were making a lot of noise. Grey sent Jemma to investigate and she returned with a bottle. She had the top off and was about to drink some.

“Any idea what it is?” I asked.

“No but they're all drinking it”. She paused and showed me the label. It was an extra strength brand and, once again it was made in Cardiff sector.

“Take a look at the alcohol content,” I suggested. She looked and settled for a relatively small sip.

“How much is there?” I asked, “How much are they all drinking?”

“There's several crates” she replied.

“Most of them can't read and wouldn't understand an alcohol content anyway,” Grey explained.

Our little group of guards looked terrified. “Release them” Grey said and went off in the direction of the slaves.

The guards looked bemused as I let them go but needed little encouragement to run off across the meadow.

The noise had diminished and we went over to see if we could help Grey subdue the freed slaves.

“Henry will be here by tomorrow,” he was saying. “We need to be ready for him”. The noise had, at least reduced to loud whispers but the bottles were still being passed round. “All he's expecting to find is some trouble with the cart, if we are ready we might ambush him”

“Much hope” someone shouted from the back to loud cheers.

There was a loud crash from behind me and I turned to see the safe smashed open with gold coins spilling out of it. The crowd rushed over.

Grey was standing next to me “So much for your surprise” I said.

We just sat and watched as they gathered up the coins. Some of them who were slightly less drunk than the rest came over to us and I explained about the telemetry in the safe.

“Run away. ” Grey suggested.

“What about us?” Jemma asked.

Grey shrugged his shoulders and we set off.

Soon reaching the high ground we looked back at the camp. The tents had all been torn down, the only identifiable part of what had been there before was the flier, now half buried in the mud, and the broken cart in front of it. We saw no sign of anybody else trying to escape, they had all gathered into a single large group. Sporadic bursts of song could be heard mixed with shouts and cheers. As the evening came the noise subsided but still they did not leave.

“We should wait here until Henry comes.” I said, knowing that nobody would disagree. It was hopeless. We were quite close to the castle; he would arrive by dawn. When he arrived he would kill them all and all we could do was to watch. We would wait ready to help any who tried to escape, even though we knew that there wouldn’t be any.

“Not one of them will let his comrades down.” Grey said. “But we did. They respected me. You could see how the ones that saw us leave felt betrayed.”

“Stop talking rubbish.” Jemma replied, in a way that showed her unique position in the group. “They stayed back there because of the alcohol, we left because George has important things to do and he needs our help.”

This presented me with an enormous difficulty. It was true that I had very important things to do but I had no idea how to do them. If I was to return to Tania I had only a few days to do it before she had waited for her 14 days and returned home on her own. Grey was too preoccupied to concentrate on anything but the camp below but Jemma listened as I explained exactly how little idea I had about what to do.

“Whatever happens we’ve got to get you into the castle.” She replied when I finished my depressing analysis. “Whether you want to go back to Tania or just to try to find out who is in touch with your zone it’s all inside the castle.”

“I thought you said it had walls, ditches and watch-towers.” I replied, remembering what she had said about it.

“You’ve done well enough so far.” She smiled. I realised that she was probably the one person who had kept Grey’s hope alive while he had been projecting encouragement to the other slaves in their terrible conditions. “There are three possible ways in: We could pretend to be part of a group of slaves or we could climb over the wall or.” She paused for effect; she knew she had my attention. I had no idea what the other option might be. The smile came again, she was almost laughing when she said it. “We could go in on a flier.”

“But we haven’t got a flier. The one over there is stuck and I destroyed the other two.” I replied, not sure whether she was serious, or just playing a game with me.

“There is another one.” She replied and Grey suddenly turned anxiously to look at her. It crash-landed near our village years ago. I think that one of the magicians may have brought it down but they couldn’t find it. It’s almost undamaged.”

“Is it an incendiary or a reconnaissance one?” I asked without thinking. Grey’s look had already told me the answer. It was a reconnaissance unit – my chance to get away. I could see that Jemma had only just convinced Grey that I should be told. They both looked at me to see my reaction.

“It’s all right.” I said. “I won’t go back.” It would have sounded to them as if I had the highest possible motives and just wanted to help them. The result was remarkable. From that moment forward they trusted me absolutely. In reality my reasoning was rather different. In order to get back to Tania I was going to have to go back in a flier and somehow avoid going back into the dome with it. This would involve jumping out of it immediately it landed in the water and stopping myself from drifting through the field with it. The more I had thought about this the less I had liked the idea. While I was worried about Tania getting back on her own, she had good equipment and I thought that her chances were good and would be no better if I was with her.

We reached their village just two days later. It should have been a happy homecoming. Everybody in the village seemed to know Jemma and many of them appeared to be related to her. Grey had been a slave for very much longer but there were still a number who remembered him. The village was almost as poor as the one I had seen before but they rushed out to meet us and,

to my surprise, managed to find enough food and drink for a celebration. We all tried our best to play the part but we couldn't help describing the massacre. We had been expecting it, so we should have been prepared. We could have left and never seen it. As I sat in their rotting village eating their meagre food I just kept wondering how each generation manages to create something a bit more horrific than the one before. I was sure that the professor would have one of his questions to guide me past it but all I had was Jemma's smile as a beacon to help me to make my own way.

In the morning we walked out through the fields. These were far larger than I expected, a considerable amount of wheat was growing and on the hillsides I could see big flocks of sheep. At the village that I had seen a few days before near the big house there had only been untidy vegetable patches, and yet this village seemed equally poor. I asked Jemma if it all belonged to the one village.

"They come and take most of it" she replied, making me realise that I had touched a raw nerve. "Sometimes they come and take us but even when they don't take us they come and take most of the crop."

There was nothing I could say. It was easy to guess what would happen to the village if the crop was not delivered. We walked on in silence.

The flier had come down into an area of thick gorse bushes. The bushes had been left to grow up around it and we had to cut a path through them, only seeing the outline of the body and wings when we were very close. We set about clearing round it and I soon realised that the brushwood had cushioned its landing and it was, as promised, undamaged. As soon as I could reach the head I cleaned off the projection lens and activated the display. First I checked the power level and found it had almost half charge remaining. With great relief I went on to find out all about it. Moving on to the responses menu I found that it had been programmed to switch off if it came down to the ground. I realised that this must have been Charlie's work, the ones they brought down in central zone kept flapping their wings until they destroyed the linkages. Charlie had the flier in for conversion for technicians to fly in but when I looked inside I saw that the work had not been started.

By the time I had replayed the images of its flight and checked on all of its objectives and the "about" menu most of the village had gathered to watch.

"How did you find out how to do that?" Grey asked.

"I got lucky to start with." I replied truthfully. "After that I worked it out progressively. It all depends on speaking Anglic."

"Jemma speaks Anglic."

"But Jemma never got lucky." As I said this I realised how frighteningly true it was. It summed up her life. I deeply regretted saying it and at the same time resolved to try to help her find something better than poverty and slavery.

Through the heat of the day we worked to clear a space around it. Grey kept looking back towards the village.

"If we build a ramp like the ones at the castle they'll be able to see it if they come." He explained.

"We don't need a ramp." I told him. "These birds can hover, so I assume that it can take off straight up as soon as we lift it up enough to clear its wings."

"How come they don't do that at the castle?" Jemma asked.

"They don't know how." I replied confidently. "They have to launch them far enough off the ground for the response to start them up again. I can change the response."

She didn't look convinced. "How do you expect us to hold it up anyway? And if we lift it up everybody will be able to see it."

The whole village seemed to have something to say on the matter. Most of them seemed to privately agree with Jemma that we would need a ramp anyway so lifting it was a waste of time, but none of them said it openly to me. The discussion went round and round. We even went to look at some likely trees that could be used for the structure. With their primitive tools I agreed that it would be an enormous job. Suddenly Jemma came up with the solution.

"All we've got to do is to dig holes for the wings to flap in." She said, and they started right

away.

The digging was hard. Their tools were primitive and the roots of the gorse bushes were deep and tough. I felt guilty about sitting by the bird's head and working the menus rather than helping them. It probably wouldn't have made much difference if I had tried to help them, their hard lives made people from this zone as strong as three from Cardiff zone. They carved out the hard soil, tearing free roots and boulders, and loaded it into large baskets, which they hauled up to a spoil heap.

Jemma had joined me to work on the control. I was amazed how quickly she worked out how to use it. I had assumed that my university education had given me the skills for the job but she had virtually no education at all beyond reading, writing and counting and yet she had no trouble. I longed to congratulate her but feared being accused of patronising.

The password protection on the responses menu was less secure than the one on the controls menu, which activated the radio link. Inside the zones I assumed that the radio was useless so I concentrated on working on the responses.

"I hope it'll be able to hear me." I said as I finished.

"Why shouldn't it?" She asked.

"Think about birds that hover." I said. "I have only seen a flier hover once, and that was years ago when I was young. It had to flap its wings very fast to stay up. I just hope it hears me over the noise."

Grey was listening. "It will be like an insect." He said. "We must dig out plenty of space around the wings."

"If it flies at all." Jemma added.

The outstretched wings were a major obstruction to start with, getting in the way as the villagers struggled to dig around and below them. I half expected them to drop down as the earth was removed but they remained, fixed rigidly horizontal, reaching out over the excavations, looking even more un-natural than they had when resting on the ground but providing some useful shade to the work below.

Finally the bird was ready. Perched on a thin ridge of earth between two large holes it looked stable enough but I was obviously concerned about landing it back in the right place. Jemma had already made dubious remarks about having to dig more holes if I got it wrong.

Setting it in command mode I said the single keyword "UP"

The great wings started to flap powerfully and it lifted directly up. Dust flew in our faces and a cloud of leaves and brushwood swirled away from the bushes around us. Struggling for breath I shouted, "HOLD".

It stopped exactly where it was, about 20 feet above us. The wings were a blur of movement, even the tail feathers were moving in fast powerful beats to keep it stable. For an instant I glanced at Jemma to see her looking up in amazement with a hand held up to protect her eyes and the wind blowing in waves across her close cropped hair.

I wanted to try more commands. First I shouted, "RIGHT" and it turned and moved away to its right side. "HOLD" stopped it again. It was now facing away to one side, hovering over the gorse a few yards away. Fearing that it was almost out of hearing I shouted, "COME". It turned to face directly towards me. I saw the beak, the glistening metal spike with the slight menacing curve and the razor sharp tip. Behind it the metallic eyes, swivelled around to look directly at me through their empty black lenses. For an instant I was reminded of Tania with the cruel gash in her shoulder.

I assume that I would have come round and stopped it but as it was Jemma shouted "HOLD" with the beak a bare six feet from my face. The wing tips were coming so low that they were catching in the gorse. It was finding it very difficult to remain stable, first one side dipped and then it rocked over to the other. I shouted "UP" and it rose up, moving clear and gaining stability.

Now I started shouting commands rapidly, moving it in short jumps until it was directly above the ridge of earth. Hoping for the best I shouted "DOWN". It moved down exactly as planned. The wings reached back down into the holes until finally the body touched down on the earth. As soon as this happened the wings stopped, locking into position exactly horizontal as before.

I sat down and looked around. I could see from the faces near me that I was not the only one who had been shaken by the sight of it in flight. The machines had clearly been designed to terrify and even with someone like me who had seen them many times before they still had the power to shock.

We were just recovering when the horsemen came. It was incredibly bad luck; they had been riding along the road past the village and had seen the dust cloud and decided to check what it was. They were heavily armed with swords and spears. I saw them coming up the valley towards us. I knew that I could command the flyer to go at them but if I did it would get out of range and never hear my commands. If left alone after a go command I assumed it would resume its original mission plan. There was only one way to do it.

I shouted, "Go that way" to Jemma, pointing off to one side of the valley. She hesitated for just a second and then quickly realised what I planned to do and rushed out through the bushes while I ran in the opposite direction, tearing my way through the gorse, ignoring the thorns, only pausing to shout commands back to the bird.

By the time the horsemen arrived I had run well away and the flyer was hovering above them. They gathered beneath it, transfixed, not even attacking the villagers as the ran on ahead of them. I shouted, "COME". They could not understand the language so they had no idea what I was doing. This time I was ready to face the beak and I stopped it just far enough away to turn and line it up for the attack. On the command "GO" it went for them. Before he knew what was happening the first rider was driven through by the beak, landing on the ground with blood pouring from his chest. The machine did not stop, crushing others with its wings and it carried on across the valley.

In the distance I heard Jemma shouting and saw it stop and then it came back. The horsemen had no idea what we were doing and were again caught completely by surprise. By the time it arrived back with me the whole body was dripping with blood. They must have begun to work out what was happening because I only turned it around just in time as one of the horsemen charged at me. If it had not been for the gorse slowing him down he would have reached me but I was just able to shout, "GO" as he came at me. At close range the sight was even more appalling than it had been before and I felt violently sick and he was torn from his horse. Several of the others had taken shelter in the holes we had dug. One of them even threw a spear, which clattered harmlessly off the metallic feathers as it went by.

Soon the only survivors were in the deep holes and we flew the bird back and forth to keep them there. I moved forwards stepping over the broken bodies, as I got closer. When I was close enough to see clearly I stopped it directly above them.

Trapped and terrified under the beating wings they threw out their weapons. Just four of them finally came out, all that remained of the patrol of twenty.

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That evening the atmosphere was tense. Our high spirits from defeating the patrol rapidly gave way to gloom as the number of problems that it created became apparent. We had covered the tracks of the horses by driving a flock of sheep along their route leading up from the road but many other difficulties remained. We brought the prisoners down to the village but knew that they could not remain for long. Soon the patrol would be missed and every village along the road would be searched. Without their swords and armour they looked as if they had given up all hope of survival. They were put in a room in the back of one of the houses and before going to the impromptu meeting I watched their faces as the door was closed

Crossing the street I smelt fresh roasting meat. Imagining that a sheep must have been butchered to celebrate the victory I suddenly felt hungry, only to notice a dead horse hanging out from the back of a cart. Rationalising I could see nothing wrong with eating the dead horses but I couldn't bring myself to look back at the cart. Somehow it looked quite as bad as seeing the men killed by the flier. I went into the meeting with just one objective in mind, to get out and go home.

I walked in feeling that I was back at the meeting at the gathering town. All eyes were on me, silently accusing me of bringing the threat of destruction to their lives. My trouble was that I knew this to be true. Although I set out with the best intentions I had put the gathering town at risk and now I was doing the same to these people. In all of this I had not achieved anything other than to satisfy the professor's curiosity.

"I'm sorry to have brought this upon you." I said. "I came here to try to find out why the systems in the zones are all so rotten but now I have put you all in danger and I don't know what to do about it."

This left them completely lost for words. I could see that many of them had been expecting me to tell them all about how I had helped them by defeating their enemy. They were ready to shout at me but I had already said it for them. It would have worked, I could have walked away, but Jemma was having none of it. She jumped up and ran across to stand beside me.

"Don't apologise." She shouted, looking up at me, straight into my eyes. "Somebody has to try to change things, somebody has got to take risks or nothing will ever change." She held up her arm and drew her sleeve back. The scars from the manacles they used on the slaves stood out against her clear skin. The ugly black lettering of the tattooed number on her forearm was clear for all to see.

"What good has he done you?" A man asked from the back of the room. "You'll never get away with that tattoo, and when they catch you they'll kill you."

She rounded on him. "Can you imagine what it's like to be a slave? In the village here you tell the children horror stories about getting caught by a slave gang but you never really believe them."

I suddenly realised what was going on. This was the first time anybody in the village had ever seen a slave. People disappeared but the village treated it as if they had died. And now Jemma and Grey had come back from the dead to tell them what it was like. Their anger was driven by guilt.

A plan began to form. There were four others from the village that Jemma and Grey had seen alive as slaves. They would be freed and somehow they would escape, despite the hunt that would go after them when they were found to have gone. People began to look at me.

"They can't go anywhere with me." I said. "They're not immune."

How did I know? Was I sure? Could I check? The questions came at me and I had no answers. I realised that the sudden warmth they had shown to Jemma might not include me. Why should I be able to escape through the fields while they were trapped in this hell for life?

At the front of the group there was a row of children sitting on the floor. One of them suddenly said. "Couldn't we give them the four men you took prisoner and ask for our friends in return?"

"I'm afraid they don't do that kind of thing." Grey said, showing sympathy. I wondered if the child had lost a parent or a friend.

The room fell silent and I thought of the slaves. Only a few miles away. With the help of the large numbers who had arrived from the castle they would be moving again now. Stopping overnight every few miles. I remembered going into the camp at night. The solution came to me.

"We could go in at night." I said, "There are no guards. We could take our people and put our prisoners in the chains in their place. If a prisoner suddenly told the guards one morning that he was a different person they would ignore him."

"I even know their numbers." Jemma added. I wondered for a moment whether she would enjoy applying the tattoos.

I don't know why, but I insisted on washing the flyer before we set off. I insisted on taking the time to work over it with a rag and a bucket of water until every trace of blood and dirt had

been removed and the feathers gleamed white in the sunlight. I knew that it had been designed so it could kill but I still felt that we had abused a trust by using it in the way we had. We had been as bad as the twisted mind that had thought up the idea of packing them with magnesium and using them as incendiaries.

We had to take it with us at least part of the way. With the scrub cut back and trampled flat over a wide area around it we were sure that any search would find it so it had to be moved. Moving it any distance in command mode would have meant so much hovering that the power would soon have been drained. I had to programme in a mission that consisted of a transit in the direction we wanted to go. There was the risk that I might send it somewhere impossible to land and it would crash. More likely it might be seen when landing. I certainly had no intention of risking flying in it.

I displayed the maps from the memory. They showed the area as it had been three hundred years before. The field boundaries were shown but there were roads, railways and even towns extending into and through them. Nevertheless we were able to identify the bend in the river where we had last seen the flyer and trace the obvious route from it to the castle. The villages were all in the valleys so we would land our flyer on a hill near where the column would arrive. Looking through the maps searching for the best place to land it I saw a large square drawn clearly but with no indication what it was.

“What’s that?” I asked Jemma.

She didn’t know. Nobody from the village had ever been there.

I started looking for another one. I really knew where to look but I couldn’t quite believe it. There was only one type of structure that was ever built to that size. There was an identical square marking the Cardiff zone manufactory. I told Jemma what it was.

“You mean it can make anything?” She asked.

“If it was ever built and it’s still working.” I replied.

We had no idea whether it was there but the area in front of it, where the car park should have been, seemed like a good place to land the flyer. There was a remote risk that the manufactory was in use but, judging by what I had seen of the zone, it was very remote indeed.

As the bird flew off I wondered if I had just let my only escape route disappear. It soared away into the distance and we mounted out captured horses to follow it. Progress was slow because we had to avoid the roads and the prisoners had to walk. Two days later we were approaching the hill that I had chosen from the map.

From the distance it looked nothing remarkable. Most of the hills were covered in trees and this was no exception. We made camp among the trees to keep out of sight. Leaving our horses I set off up the hill with Jemma and Grey. We soon came across the security fence. It was well overgrown but I could recognise it as being identical to the ones I had seen before around the manufactory in Cardiff zone. It was fully intact and represented an effective barrier; I was also concerned that the alarm systems might still be working. We had to return to the camp and get some of the others to help us to pull a dead tree down onto it.

After watching for almost an hour to see if there would be a response to an alarm I was satisfied that it was safe and we went through. Soon we came to an area of low bushes. In places I could see tarmac surfacing and I knew we were in the car park and finally we could see the flyer. It was leaning to one side with its wing caught up on a tree and we ran over to check it. I worked quickly around it, enormously relieved as I found no damage. Jemma stood looking at me, and down at a patch of bare tarmac.

“I suppose you think that we’re going to dig holes through that lot.” She said. “You’ll have to find an awful lot of vital programming to do if it’s going to take that long and you want an excuse not to join in.”

Grey looked sternly at her for putting it so bluntly but she had a point. “Yes I know.” I said helplessly. I had vaguely thought about the problem but the prospect of a clear landing area had been too good to miss. “Perhaps I’ll find something to lift it”. I said. Beyond the car park we could see the line of a roof.

We crossed quickly to the building. I recognised the shape of the entrance foyer I had seen before. The door and windows were all overgrown but appeared to be intact. Very

cautiously I moved up to the door and tried to open it. It was stiff, and the creeper had grown across it but it was not locked. Soon we had opened it.

With the windows so overgrown it was almost dark inside. I could, however, just see the reception desk standing in perfect isolation on a clear floor. Part of me was convinced that I was entering a trap but something told me that I must go on and find out what was happening. Jemma was standing next to me, she must have been as frightened as I was but she knew how much I wanted to find out the truth so she never said anything. Grey was quietly sorting out a candle from his pack and a tinderbox to light it. He was about to do this when I saw a light switch on the wall. On impulse I went over to it and tried it. The lights came on, illuminating the whole foyer, clean and tidy. Jemma gasped. She had never seen electric lights before.

I remembered which door led to the production hall. I still couldn't believe that the whole thing was anything but a trap. Cautiously I tried the door handle. There was no lock; it opened easily. I pushed it and jumped back, expecting someone or something to rush through. Nothing came. I reached through into the corridor and turned the light on. It was clean and empty.

Slowly we moved on through the building. There were no locks on any of the doors. I assume that this was because it had been built as a 24-hour facility and nobody ever imagined that it would be left unattended. I decided to go up to the viewing gallery.

The light switches on the gallery only worked the lights for walkway itself, not the big arc lights for the whole plant. All we could see to start with was the small area directly below our lights. It seemed to be in perfect order. A row of boxes stood motionless on the belt. Looking carefully I could read the dust-covered labels – they were children's toys. We moved on. Each section had its own light switch and as we turned them on we saw more and more undamaged machines. Right at the back we came to the reactor. Instrument lights glowed softly on the console. Nothing appeared to be wrong with it.

I decided to risk going down. We worked our way back along all the galleries and down to the production floor. After some searching I found the switches and the main lights came on. We could move faster now but still we couldn't find any damage. The machine only made very small numbers of anything; there was no need to hold any stock. As we walked along any of the lines we would see one product that was almost complete and then quite different things further back along the line. We were walking back along one of the lines when I saw the first clue about what had happened. There were rifle barrels, large numbers of them going back along the line as far as we could see. Jemma didn't know what they were but, surprisingly, Grey did.

"I saw a gun used once." He said. "It was a long time ago, the man was very proud of it. Said it had belonged to his great-grandfather. Only had two bullets but he said it was worth using it."

What did he shoot?" I asked innocently.

"A magician." Grey replied without expression.

Nobody was allowed to have any guns of any type. As far as we knew the big field guns, which were used to return the shellfire at Avon sector, had been made before the plague. It was supposed to be impossible to get the manufactory to make guns. Nobody ever dared to find out because entering a request would have been bound to lead to a visit from border security.

After several hours of searching thousands of machines we had still found nothing. The production line was full of the amazing assortment I had seen in Cardiff sector, a batch of shoes was followed immediately by a small set of telephones, all motionless under the clear plastic cover with a film of dust on it. We tried looking through some of the doors along one of the walls. The one marked "CONTROL ROOM" looked hopeful so we went through. I glanced at rows of gleaming consoles and was about to turn around when Jemma noticed a single small cabinet at the end lying on its side. We went over to it. The circuitry inside had been wrecked; even the individual chips had been broken.

"Surely breaking one little bit like this wouldn't make the whole thing useless." Jemma asked in disbelief. "There must have been a way to fix it."

There had been but, as soon as she said it, I knew what had happened. We went through to the back-up machine and finally found its control room. The identical cabinet lay smashed on the floor. I wondered what the professor would say. With Cardiff sector obviously supplying some



items from its own manufactory why weren't they prepared to replace this one component. Perhaps they didn't want the guns to reach the end of the line. Perhaps they had broken this machine in the first place.

One thing that I did find was a small mobile hoist. I carried it out into the car park and was able to lift the flyer and move it away from the tree. It was getting dark so we left it at that.

We returned late to our camp only to be told that Henry's column had made camp in the valley. I was exhausted but I knew that this would be our best chance to swap the prisoners. Apart from any other considerations Jemma said that the four men that we planned to release would be a great help when we attacked the castle. I had grave doubts about the whole idea of the attack but decided to help with this part of the operation.

Our plan seemed good. We felt confident that we could do the job quickly and easily and get back in time for a good night's sleep before setting off for the castle. We blindfolded our prisoners and set off towards the camp.

Coming down the hillside we saw the watch fires spread out along the riverbank. The camp was clearly larger than Catherine's had been but there were no signs of any guards around the outer perimeter. In the centre we could see the repaired cart with the inert flier on it. Around this there were several tents including the one large one which was clearly Henry's. He was clearly taking no chances on the possibility of an attack because large numbers of guards were positioned around the tents.

We found a place a short distance beyond the lines of slaves. It was slightly above them on the hill but well concealed by a few bushes and seemed ideal. Jemma and Grey slipped off into the darkness while I waited with the others and our prisoners.

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I looked out across the meadow as the moon came out from behind the clouds revealing the lines of slaves stretching out from the centre. I knew what they looked like, chained neck to neck with so few links between them that almost any movement was impossible without pulling others in the line. From this distance, however, the detail could not be seen. All I could see was black tentacles reaching out from where they were fixed at the centre. They moved as if they were all part of the same organism, writhing across the landscape. They never stopped. It was a cold night and sleep must have been impossible so they kept moving. Sometimes one line would contact another or even turn in on itself but it always detached before long to move on. Sometimes the movement looked deliberate but, more often than not, it looked random and hopeless.

Grey and Jemma reappeared, having found where their friends were and we took the first of the prisoners and set off. As we approached the line the smell was intense. It seemed unique to the situation and reminded me immediately of Catherine's camp when I had been in it. The prisoner also seemed to recognise it and he started to struggle and tried to shout through the gag we had tied on him. We dragged him forwards until we found the man we were looking for. The key to the collars was a simple device with a square end and I was able to release him very quickly and we snapped the collar shut and locked it onto his replacement before he fully realised what was happening. As we ran off he managed to move the gag and shout. We watched from a safe distance as, exactly to plan, some guards wandered out to see what the commotion was. In the general noise they could not, or did not, listen to him. They simply counted up to make sure that they still had the right number and wandered back.

Twice more we were able to do this without incident until only the last prisoner remained. By this time he must have begun to work out what was happening and as soon as he was close enough to smell the slaves he started kicking out in all directions. He was a big powerful man and very difficult to control and virtually impossible to keep quiet. Finally we reached the place but the prisoner lashed out more violently than ever, throwing himself backwards. We turned to get him but suddenly we were engulfed as another line closed in from behind us. I found myself struggling

as a sea of hands closed in on me. I knew what would happen if a mass escape started – I had seen it before so at the last minute I reached out and throw my key clear away into the undergrowth.

People were grabbing at me from all directions, searching me for the key. When they didn't find it they grew angry and started to strike out. All the time I was trying to reach Jemma. She was only a few feet away but in the darkness and confusion I could only just see where she was. Behind us I could see our prisoner, fighting with Grey, who was too old to be a match for him. I couldn't help as they trampled across the line behind us and the big man fought free and ran off. That just left Jemma and me in the grip of the mass. They had her down now, pinned to the ground as they prized her copy of the key out of her hand. There was more coherence to their fight, by some form of unseen communication they worked together; all I could do was watch. The key was taken and a man was released – not Jemma's friend – he was well away from it. The man jumped up and ran as Jemma was dragged in and I saw the terror in her eyes as the collar was closed around her neck. Next they went for me but suddenly Grey was back, wrenching the key from an unsuspecting hand and throwing it clear.

I thought that back at the university the professor would have asked me over and over why I took the risk of trying to rescue Jemma, rather than using the flier to go back to help my own sister make the dangerous journey home. Since I had managed to land it safely at the manufactory I had been much more confident that I could use it to land in the lake far enough back to get out. At the time, however, these thoughts never occurred to me. The slaves were pushing and fighting to move as they tried to find one of the keys. As they did so my main concern was not to lose sight of Jemma as they dragged her away. Grey rescued me. He saw the guards coming, swords drawn and shouted at me. When this had no effect he took hold of me and hauled me out, ignoring my protests. Finally I came to my senses and ran with him. This time the guards had seen us. They only chased after us for a short distance but when they went back they kept watch for the rest of the night.

As soon as we got back to our camp we started to plan a rescue. The obvious time was going to be the following night, half a day more and they would be back at the castle.

Watching the column in motion was an impressive sight. With their very slow progress it was easy to move ahead and we had found ourselves a vantage point overlooking the valley road from the shelter of a small wood on the hillside. Six lines of slaves were fixed to the cart and a further six in front of them on the same ropes. The lines were side-by-side, just far enough apart to let them move freely. The distance between each slave was, however, so short that they almost had to keep in step. In the same way that they had at night the lines looked like a single vast animal but this time it had a purpose. The enormous cart with the flier on it slowly rolled forwards as they crawled along the road. We scanned every line but we couldn't see Jemma. If we hadn't checked their campsite for signs of graves in the soft earth I would have been sure that they had found her by checking numbers against a list. As it was Grey convinced me that, being relatively short, she was simply on one of the inner lines and hidden from us by taller people around her.

By sunset we had moved ahead of them to the next campsite and were planning our rescue. My position was simple.

"Given what they did to us," I said. "They will just have to put up with whatever the guards decide to do when somebody is found missing from the line. We simply haven't got anybody to put in her place. And while we are there we should release her friend as well."

Grey and the others looked uncertain but there was no other option.

"It won't be easy," Grey said. "Even if the guards haven't worked out what is going on the slaves certainly will have."

"They could form the line into a circle around her." One of the men we had rescued added. "She came back for me and I owe it to her to do everything that is humanly possible to get her out but they will be waiting for us and they will be desperate. Everybody in those lines is desperate."

"What happens when they get to the castle?" I asked. "Is there going to be even a remote chance of getting her out from there?"

"Not much." Grey replied. "Even if you could get over the walls you couldn't get into the pens and even if you did find her you have to get out again."

"I've got the flier to get over the walls." I reminded him. This took our new companions by surprise and we had to give them a quick explanation about where I had come from.

Finally the column came into sight, moving painfully slowly. I tried again to see if I could find Jemma but the slaves all looked almost identical in their dirty rags. I thought that Jemma had started to look different after a few days of freedom but she would be the same again by now. Her eyes were always bright but everything else would be grey again by now.

The guards were rushing up and down with their whips trying to get them to move faster.

"What's the rush?" Grey asked. "They are almost at the camp site. They normally let it slow down a bit when it's almost there."

"They should have sent guards ahead to check out the site." Jemma's friend replied. "I can't see what they are doing. It's a different routine. They always do it the same way."

It had been a hot day and the slaves looked in even worse condition than normal, dragging their feet forward, scarcely able to carry themselves let alone help pull on the ropes.

"What happens if one of them falls?" I asked.

"If they fall and break the step of the line they have to hope that the man behind can carry them." Grey replied. "Normally the guards would let this happen for a short distance to save the effort of getting them out."

The guards at the front of the line were by the campsite now. They did not stop. We all suddenly realised what was happening. They weren't going to stop. We watched in silence as they moved past the site. The distance to the castle had looked insignificant on the map but for the slaves it was going to be a very long night.

Suddenly the wagon stopped. I looked at Grey, but all he did was to point at a group of guards near the front of the line. They had pushed their way through into the centre and re-emerged with a slave who scarcely had the energy to struggle.

"What now?" I asked.

"It depends if Henry can see." Grey replied.

Henry was obviously looking the other way. Having quickly satisfied themselves that the problem was genuine they just threw the limp body into the bushes.

We watched as the rest of the column moved past us. It was easy to see why Henry had not been able to check what was happening. He was, as always, surrounded by large numbers of guards in tight formation. Being able to draw down the field and destroy whole villages or armies did not protect him from a lone assassin with a longbow, even less from one with a gun.

We found the body in the bushes. It was a woman, old and haggard. We offered her water and food and she came round enough to realise what we were doing and thank us for it before collapsing again.

"What are we going to do with her?" I asked. "We can't just leave her here but we haven't got any spare horses to carry her for any distance."

"There's a village by the road a little further on." One of the men replied. "We can take her there and they will take care of her until she is strong enough to go home."

"And then." Grey added, looking at me. "She will grow fit and strong again, all ready for when the press gangs come round again to take her back. We are relying on you. I know that you don't yet know how but you must do something for us."

He had obviously sensed that my commitment had been weakening. I wasn't so sure. I still wasn't prepared to admit to myself how important rescuing Jemma had become but I knew that I had to do it. That would take me into the castle and it was clear that that was where I would have to go to do anything that would help Grey.

Any amount of description could not have prepared me for the castle when I saw it. It was not just the size; it projected power. It was easy to rationalise that the designers had had thousands of films to look at to help them create the impression but this was real and it showed.

This was the centre from which the population was kept subjugated by terror.

As an obviously un-necessary precaution the structure had been built in a naturally defensive position. In front the ground rose steeply up to the walls and behind it was the best defence of all, the field. This was not the curved outer field that sloped down to the ground over a distance. This was the sheer vertical divider between two zones. Just a few hundred yards from the horror where I was standing there would be the calm and comfort of Cardiff zone. In my home zone it was not permitted for safety reasons so I had never seen a structure built up to the field. The effect was spectacular. Seen from the low ground around them the towers seemed to loom out of the void and dominate the world around them.

The column had moved so slowly that it only took me a few hours to ride back to the old manufactory. I programmed the flyer to come up to our camp and lifted it onto a fallen tree. I fitted the hoist neatly inside it before giving it the voice commands to take off. The time on horseback gave me some solitude to try to prepare myself to go into the castle. On the face of it, it was no more dangerous than any of the transits I had made through the field but I was secretly glad that darkness fell before I arrived back so I did not have to look at the walls.

The following morning I sent the flier up to try to see the layout. I watched anxiously as it flew off behind us, circling to gain height without using so much power as the vertical ascent that it could use near the ground. I hadn't dare send it directly over the top of the castle in case one of the magicians was watching and brought it down. Bringing it out through the field above them would have avoided this risk but the fliers systems would not have started working again until it was well past anything of interest. It flew upwards until it was quite close to the overhead field. I had known that this was not normal for a flier but even I had trouble following its movement against the white glare of the dispersed sunlight. I still held my breath as it made one last circuit directly above us before gliding back out of sight to come down.

There were several views of the castle in memory when it landed. The mechanical eyes never stopped moving so each sequence was short but the frames could be frozen to see the detail.

The castle was even larger than it seemed from ground level with many different walls with courtyards between them. Inside the outer wall there was a clear open space all the way round but inside the next wall the structure seemed to be completely random with large buildings and towers sometimes connected but often with narrow alley-ways between them. Grey had been in it several times and, as I magnified the images, he began to recognise places he had seen. He knew that the slaves were taken in through two sets of gates.

"The outer area is all for defence." He said. "Only soldiers allowed there."

He went on to point out some long low buildings, which he was quite sure were the slave pens. I started looking around for places where the flier could land, all the time picturing Jemma inside with no idea how or when she was going to be rescued.

Looking nearby I saw a large area with a strange wooden ramp in it and suddenly realised that this was their device for launching the fliers. A few days before this would have been the first thing that I would have looked for but the thought of Jemma in the slave pens had changed that.

Grey had seen it used, very simple but very effective.

"It won't help me get in." I said. "But it might be my only way out." I didn't like to think about how I was going to get out.

Next to the ramp I could just make out the shape of two fliers. They were neatly arranged against a wall, wings folded. Then, looking more carefully, I saw another one, partially concealed in the shade of a wall. It was at the bottom of the ramp and looked to be set ready to be dragged up for launching.

Grey pointed out a flat area of grass in the outer area.

"That's where one landed when it came back." He said.

"You mean they don't usually bring them down with the field like the one I was in."

"They didn't with the one I saw."

I suddenly realised that it had been pure chance that my flier had been brought down outside the castle. When they brought it down they had been expecting an incendiary one, not a reconnaissance unit with a person in it.

“What happened when the flier landed with the technician in it?” I asked.

“The guards kept everybody away from it while he got out and went to the technicians quarters. They have their own special rooms. Don’t seem to be allowed out of them very much.” he added.

Suddenly I realised that I had my route in. “They’re expecting a technician.” I said. “Just because they don’t recognise him they won’t have the authority to stop him going to his rooms will they?”

Grey agreed. The magicians very rarely went into the outer area and they were the only ones with authority. Looking in detail at the images he carefully showed me the route to take and which door to go through.

“Does it have a lock?” I asked. “Should I have a key?”

Grey shrugged his shoulders.

The flier that we had was a reconnaissance unit that had not been adapted for carrying people. It had the large hatch on its back but it was quite different from the special one that I had flown in before. The interior was just a space for general equipment or possibly small items of cargo. Although the other one had not been comfortable it had at least had some padding to protect me. It also had a latch for me to open the top to get out. We had some blankets to protect me from the sharp metal ribs in the interior and it took me several hours to make a wooden hook to catch the mechanism to let myself out. I programmed the flier to circle out behind us as it had for the previous flight and then go straight in to the castle.

The hatch closed and in the darkness I felt the bird struggle to lift straight up and then suddenly surge forwards and gain height. I had no way to control it and no way to tell where I was because it had no monitor screen for me to watch. I tried desperately to remain calm so I could look the part when I landed.

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The flight only lasted a few minutes and did not go through any fields so it was actually less uncomfortable than the last one. I felt the wings working hard to control the descent as it came down and the gentle bump as it touched the grass. Standing up from a position with my arms effectively trapped by my side was a very awkward process but I managed it as best I could and looked around to see soldiers running towards me from all directions. I carefully straightened my clothes as I stepped out and then closed the hatch to prevent them from seeing our makeshift arrangements inside. I knew that I must look terrified but hoped that everybody who had been in a flier looked shaken, especially if they had been through some fields.

I tried to look purposeful and strode off in the direction Grey had shown me, even wishing a senior looking soldier good afternoon as I walked by. It seemed to work, he replied politely and let me go on my way.

To my relief the door was open and I walked in to find myself in a good sized room with a dining table and chairs at one end and several comfortable chairs arranged around a fire place at the other. There were large windows along one side with the curtains drawn. It was an appalling mess. There were dirty glasses and plates with old food on them all over the table and more of them mixed with old clothes, bottles, tools and other mess on the floor. The smell was awful. I heard snoring coming from one of the chairs by the fire and picked my way through the debris towards it.

It was Billy, the most useless person in my class at school, with two empty wine bottles and a spilt glass. I stood looking at him in disbelief, wondering how he could have landed up there. Apart from anything else his huge belly looked far too big to even fit in a flier. There were doors opening out from the room so I decided to check them before waking him up. They were, as expected bedrooms and a primitive bathroom and they were empty. Billy was alone; I had a chance.

“Wake up useless.” I shouted at him, shaking his shoulder hard.

He opened his eyes and looked at me. "What are you doing here?" He asked. "I never even knew you were in our unit. How did you get here?"

I ignored him. "This place is foul." I shouted at him. "How did you let it get like this? Clear it up."

"When Mr Robinson didn't come back when he should have." He stuttered. "I got worried. I thought the spooks might be turning on us." He started to try to get up. At least I had a name for Charlie. "Anyway its not my job to do the cleaning." It was obvious that the mess was more than three days of accumulation but I did not want to argue the point.

"Whose job do you think it is then?" I asked, trying to make it sound rhetorical, but interested in the answer.

"The servants." He replied. "They bring the food so they should clear it up."

"Well they don't. So you're going to have to. Starting now. I'm not living in a pig sty like this." The thought of sharing any accommodation with Billy at any time was not appealing to start with.

He started to pick up some of the plates. I decided to risk some questions.

"Why didn't you report back when Mr Robinson was late?" I asked.

"What? Go back and face the Colonel without a full report?" he asked.

I wondered how he got back when he did go but couldn't ask.

After picking up his first few plates he started to walk back towards the chair. I almost shouted at him. "Get back over here and carry on clearing up. There'll be hell to pay if this place isn't cleared up when the next pilot arrives."

I had to guess that they used the word pilot for the technicians that went in the fliers. I couldn't tell if Billy found it unusual.

"You know they can't do anything to us immunes. They were screening everyone when we were born and there are still only five of us." He paused and thought for a few seconds. "Well I suppose I didn't know about you, that makes six."

"There are a lot of things you don't know Billy." I replied, trying to sound as if I had plenty of authority while trying to rapidly work out the consequences of what he had told me. Obviously the only reason I had not been screened was because I had been born in Avon zone. What else did they do with their immunes? Charlie, alias Mr Robinson, had needed a bio-suit.

We started to accumulate a good pile of plates. "How do you call the servants round here?" I asked. "Back up country in the manor houses we just went and found them".

"We just phone through, dial 107 for service or 108 for girls from the slave pens." He grinned at me looking just like he had at school.

I managed something between a grin and an expression of shock. How many other people could serve themselves from the female slaves? The thought of Jemma being sent to the guardhouse made me feel sick but, on the other hand, it did open up a route to get her out.

I asked where the phone was. He didn't answer, he was thinking about my comment. "How do you get to the manor houses?" He asked. "We're not allowed to go out at all. What did they want done out there anyway. You can't re-programme the birds from that kind of place."

I didn't reply, I don't think he was expecting me to.

The phone was new, if dirty, and was resting on top of a pile of rubbish near the window. I dialled 107 and arranged for the servants to come. Soon two young girls came to the door with a handcart and I helped them load the rubbish onto it. Billy leered at them and they kept away from him. I smiled at them and they smiled back cautiously but still kept away. I wondered if it was fear of plague or disgust at Billy and others like him.

Soon the place was reasonably tidy. I looked out of the door after the girls as they pushed the cart away. I couldn't see any guards in our courtyard but knew that there must be plenty elsewhere.

We closed the door and Billy surveyed our work with displeasure. "When did you last check the fliers?" I asked, taking another risk.

"No point." He replied. "They'll phone through if the monitors show anything. All you've got to do is to plug yours into the comm. line when they've pulled it into the yard. Unless you plan to head off again in it." He added hopefully.

“Do I have to call the guards for that? This place seems to be full of guards.”

He looked at me with just a trace of suspicion. I began to panic but then realised that he though the question stupid, not suspicious. He explained that when the flier was in place the captain of the guard would come and knock on the door. He would then walk out with me as I went to plug it in.

It seemed as if Billy’s job consisted of doing nothing at all. I decided that I would have to wait and see if he did do anything, questions were risky. Since it was now obvious that the phone system was connected through to Cardiff sector I wondered how often he was supposed to report in and, if he told them, what they would do when they found out about me. With a bit of luck they would assume that I had been sent in by one of the many parts of our government that never spoke to whatever part they were. If they linked me to any reports they had of Catherine’s death they would hopefully not do anything.

Billy dialled 107 and a meal came, served by the same two girls. The food was good, large portions of fresh meat and vegetables and, when we had finished, I reminded him to dial 107 again and they cleared the table. Then he dialled 108 and asked for a girl by name. While she was coming I asked if he had been allowed to pick her from the pens. This question pleased him enormously.

“So you want one too, he gloated. I thought that you were too good to be true. Well you’ll have to wait for a couple of days because they only fetch them out onto the grass once every three days and that’s the only time you can look at them.”

The poor wretch who arrived looked, if anything, worse than the slaves had done in the lines who had pulled the cart. The smell was appalling. None of this seemed to deter Billy at all. The best I could do in the way of a gesture was to pass her a biscuit from the table as he led her off into one of the bedrooms. She stuffed it into her mouth so fast that he never even saw it go.

While he was well occupied I took the opportunity to carry out a thorough search. In one cupboard in the main room I found maintenance equipment for bio-suits. Spare suits were obviously pointless. Anybody who came through in a suit had to remain in it until they went back. What I wanted was manuals, or any other type of information but I found nothing. When he re-emerged I was in one of the bedrooms. I heard the door close as the girl went.

“What are you looking for?” He asked as he walked over.

“Just choosing a room.” I replied.

“Well, I suggest that you take the one at the far end. That way if we are both being entertained we won’t disturb each other.” This thought amused him.

The guard captain duly arrived the following morning. I walked with him through to the courtyard where the fliers were kept. I had no idea whether I should try to make casual conversation so I kept quiet and we walked in silence.

My flier had been dragged into place and now stood in line next to the two others. As we walked towards it I had the chance to look more closely at the launch ramp. It was a massively built device and I soon saw why. The flier was connected to a rope and a series of pulleys, which were attached to an enormous stone weight, which fixed at the top of the ramp. I could see that when the stone was released it would fall vertically down the front of the ramp and the mechanism would catapult the flier well up into the air. This would be the only way to get the flight programme re-started without going into command mode and it was now very obvious that they had not discovered the command mode system that I had stumbled into. The thought of being in a flier during this type of launch process seemed even more alarming than the flights I had made. Looking at the flier resting at the bottom of the ramp I could see that it was far enough off the ground for the wings to work and I would be able to make it take off at any time.

The guard captain did not seem to be in a hurry but also did not look as if he was going to leave me alone so I had to resist the temptation to interrogate any of the fliers. The comm. line connection was simple. All I had to do was to follow the wires from the other two fliers, which lead to a junction box on the wall. Inside the box I found another cable with a plug in the end. Looking at the other fliers I could see that the socket was located to one side of the beak. It was just covered by the edge of the feathers – enough to conceal it from a casual inspection but easy to find. By this time the captain was only showing casual interest so I was sure that he never noticed

when I wrapped a small piece of polythene around the plug before inserting it and made sure that no connection was made. I was sure that I could rely on Billy to refuse to go out and look if his superiors complained about the connection to the new flier. I could also rely on his superiors not to come and look because they were, of course, not immune.

I was all finished in less than five minutes. I tried to devise a good reasons to stay outside but there was absolutely nothing I could think of. I didn't want to open my flier again in case the captain saw inside so I had to go back to the room where Billy was waiting. After the first hour it became easy to see why he passed the day by drinking. I was naturally assuming that if there was anything to do he would be doing it so I sat and watched him slowly sink into oblivion. As he progressed I actively encouraged him, it was pathetically easy to slowly empty my own glass into a convenient jug and make him feel that he was in good company and drink even more than usual.

When he passed out I was able to search the last room – his room. As I opened the door the smell was appalling and so, realising that I could not search it without him noticing, I called the maids again and we cleared it out. Loads of dirty plates were despatched back to the kitchens and loads of his clothes were similarly despatched for washing all while he snored loudly in his chair. Finally the place was cleared, the whole apartment smelled far better and I was left with what I wanted – a terminal. Billy had made no mention of it but, judging from the depth by which it had been covered in rubbish, I thought that he probably used it so rarely that its existence might have escaped his sodden brain.

The only password I needed to get onto the system was "Billy". In the circumstances computer security was probably not a priority but I still despised him all the more for his lack of care.

His emails were of no interest. Presumably his superiors knew about his security habits and never used them. The only person who seemed to contact him much was his mother and most of her messages were taken up with complaining about the time taken for him to reply. I had to assume that the system was being monitored so I didn't dare send any messages of my own.

The "standing instructions" icon proved more helpful. This area was divided into two parts, one of which made sense but the other was a complete mystery. The first part was titled flier operations and made it clear that immunes like Billy had little contact with the technicians who went in them. The instructions all related to ensuring that the ramp and the fliers kept by it were all maintained properly and to ensure that the technicians could get to them easily. The second part talked about measures to prevent members of the faction escaping past a wall. I couldn't understand this at all. They had obviously not been allowed into the zones, they had all died generations ago. But now they were supposed to be inside, and apparently trying to escape.

I was still trying to understand what I was reading when Billy appeared at the doorway. Leaning on the frame for support he studied me through blinking red eyes. I could see that he was shocked to see me in his room and was trying to gather his thoughts to make his feelings known. Looking at him I found it difficult to worry about what he was thinking.

"This place was disgusting." I said, not giving him the chance to get his brain working. "And the terminal was a complete mess. I don't plan to stay here very long but while I am here this will be my room and you go in another one. Right now I'm going to get some lunch, should I order any for you?"

This had the desired effect, he began to sag slightly and then shambled off to the bathroom as fast as he could move. I closed the door behind him and, when it came, enjoyed my lunch. The food had improved substantially since I had arrived. I had the impression that they had seen Billy living like a pig and fed him appropriately. Now they served me a meal, which made me realise that the manufactory did not necessarily make food better than the real thing from a farm.

While I was eating Billy reappeared but he said nothing and collapsed back in his chair. I finished and returned to the terminal. This time I looked under housekeeping. The telephone system was described. Several different codes were given. 108 was simply listed as "slave pens". 00 was given as a code to connect to the exchange in Cardiff sector. I was tempted by the thought of calling the professor to tell him where I was but I knew that the line must be monitored. 109 was listed as ground staff. I asked Billy what this was for.

"It's for if you want to go for a walk." He said. "There's nothing to see so I shouldn't



bother.” As far as I was concerned anything would be better than being stuck in our rooms and, suddenly feeling sorry for him, I poured Billy a glass of water and told him he was coming too.

The courtyards were all connected with steps, passages and alleyways with massive wooden gates standing ready to be closed when needed. The effect was spectacular, as vistas would suddenly open up as we turned a corner. Our escort was a gardener who took great pride in showing us the flowers and shrubs, which had been planted in every spare space. The whole place was in excellent shape and, at one point, we saw a squad of workmen carefully re-pointing some brickwork. We also encountered servants hurrying about but never saw any sign of any magicians. By the time we were back at our rooms Billy looked far better and even seemed impressed by what he saw. I realised that he had never bothered to walk round before.

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The following morning was when the slaves were taken out for exercise. Once again I was escorted out but this time we went through the gate to the outer area. To my surprise a small group of well-dressed people had gathered. I waited a short distance from them, hoping to look inconspicuous. Soon the slaves began to appear, looking not only starving and wretched, but also soaked, as they had obviously been hosed down in some way to clean them a bit. Looking carefully at them I could just see that there were females among them but they were in such a mess I doubted whether I would be able to recognise Jemma, I knew that she could never show it if she recognised me. I was staring at them intently when I began to feel as if somebody was looking at me. I looked around. The guard was smiling at me, knowing what I was there for but there was also someone in the group of spectators glaring at me. Suddenly I realised that it was the lady I had seen at the big house when I had first landed in the zone. She strode over to me and demanded to know how I had come to the castle.

“I came in a flier.” I told her. “That is how we travel, the guards will confirm it.”

“But your flier was taken away from my house in a cart.”

“I came in another flier.” I replied. “That one was damaged.” I could see that she didn’t believe me but we both knew that she had no way of knowing what condition it was in. She slowly backed away and just at that moment I saw Jemma. I walked towards her, ignoring the lady I was talking to, desperately resisting the urge to run. I stopped a few yards from her.

“That one.” I said to the guard, pointing at her. “That one this evening.” Jemma suddenly looked up and realised what was happening. For an instant our eyes met. She looked down again almost immediately but even that had been enough for the guard to make a remark about her seeming to like me.

We were walking back, there was only one route back through the gate without walking through the slaves, and the mad lady was waiting to intercept me. I could see what was coming and looked around for any way to escape. She saw me looking and fixed me with a humiliating stare. Her companions, now a short distance away, looked on with a mixture of fascination and amusement. Everybody else in the castle had treated me, coming from Cardiff sector, with a respect that bordered on fear. They knew that Cardiff sector could destroy them with little effort. This lady, however, had no such inhibitions and planned to vent her moral outrage. She started while I was still at a good range.

“You are disgusting.” She shouted. “You come here into our society and think that because you know so much about machines you can teach us morality.”

I was closer now. “I wasn’t trying to teach anybody.” I stuttered. “I never meant to cause offence.”

She was at me now. Thrusting her face just inches from mine.

She was talking again, a little quieter but straight at me. “You may be able to operate the fliers but you need us to catch them. And now you come and flout your lack of morals and display your disgusting taste in front of us all.”

I sensed the others watching me. I wanted to shout out that I wasn’t like Billy and that

Jemma was just my friend. I saw them laughing at me trying to find an escape route. She was getting explicit now, using foul language to shame me. She paused deliberately to let me reply, knowing that I had no reply to give but not, I realised, knowing why. I was so thrown by this that it took me some time to see how to defend myself. By the time she next paused for breath, however, I was ready.

“What about you?” I shouted back. “The village by your house is an offence to any civilised person. You make it so poor that the people are dying of starvation. Even if I do take that woman I shall never cause the suffering that you do.”

She smiled so much that I thought that I must have said things that would make the guards arrest, or even torture me. But the guards were not interested if the ravings of the mad woman and even her friends had started to drift away. She had smiled because she had found somebody who would argue with her. I saw that I was to be allowed to talk to her. Possibly they just wanted to get rid of her for a bit. I saw my opportunity and before she managed to reply I suggested that we continue our conversation over some refreshments in one of the courtyards. She might be eccentric and possibly offensive but she was a source of good information that I desperately needed.

She was waiting for me in the courtyard and, as I approached, I congratulated myself on having chosen such a good location. She was sitting on a simple stone bench that I had seen on my brief tour on the previous day. It was at the base of a high windowless wall and looked out across a good area of grass and trees. There were many windows in the walls opposite and I had no doubt that those that were not obscured by the trees would be used by the inquisitive to spy on our meeting. They were, however, far too far away to hear what we said. Looming over the roofs above them the field rose vertically up into the hazy sky.

The other aspect of the scene, which could not escape my attention, was the lady herself. In the medieval environment of the castle all of the magicians seemed to take to styles, which obviously came from images they had seen from pre-plague films and glamorised the situation. Her dress was therefore not particularly unusual for her position but the overall effect was nothing short of stunning.

Just as I arrived some servants appeared with some clearly much-needed cushions for the stone bench as well as the food and drink. Soon they withdrew and we were on our own. I decided to try to find out the ground rules:

“I am surprised that you are allowed to speak to me in private.” I said. “I thought that all communications with Cardiff sector people were controlled.”

“They think I’m mad.” She replied disarmingly. “And anyway I am a senior magician with a domain of my own so I do what I like.”

“Is your domain big?” I asked. “Does the wall go through it?”

She looked at me totally bewildered and then replied condescendingly. “It is quite big enough. Of course the wall doesn’t go through it. You know where it is. It’s miles away. It would have to be half as big as the zone to have the wall in it as well as my house.”

I tried to do a rapid reckoning of where this meant the wall must be but I got nowhere. At that moment a bird started singing in one of the trees. I thought it rather pleasant, a finishing touch to the garden scene. It immediately drew her attention and she stood bolt upright to try to see it.

“Is it bothering you?” I asked unnecessarily. “I could throw a stone at it to try to make it go away.”

She didn’t reply. She just stood there. I was reminded of our meeting at her house and could do nothing. Suddenly I saw a minute vortex appear in the field opposite and a tendril reached down from it. The bird stopped singing and fell to the ground below the tree. She walked over and used her beautiful soft leather shoe to crush its head. When she returned I was determined not to react but she gave me no choice.

“You think we’re savages don’t you?”

I did but thought it diplomatic not to say so, even to her. She glowered at me for not replying. She went on. “You’re like empire builders have always been.”

She looked at me expecting a question. I obliged and asked her what she meant.

“You know what I mean. We depend on you now for what you give us but you would never

let us have anything that would make us as powerful as you. Now you are trying to give us your values. Your rotten corrupt values.”

She was raising her voice now. I ignored it and replied. “We have values. We value human life and freedom.”

She jumped on this. “Freedom. You say Freedom. You don’t even know the beginning of what your government has done in the past and is doing now and yet you call yourself free. You blame me for my village because you’re not free to know who is really causing it.”

By this time she was standing up and shouting at me as I cowered on the seat. She became abusive again, trying to think of more and more insults, almost like an angry child on a playground. I knew that the guards would be bound to hear it and would be along at any minute. I had time for just one more question – the vital one. I asked what I should do.

She had not been expecting this and stopped shouting. She even stopped waving her arms at me. In the sudden silence I heard soldiers running towards us. She turned to face them and they stopped, cowering back. An order was shouted and they nervously drew up in a rank but they did not move forward.

The anger was receding, rationality was returning and with it the realisation that I was serious. I saw Henry approaching on the far side of the courtyard.

“Don’t ask me, how should I know? Why not ask him?” She said looking across at Henry. “Why not ask your commanders? Why not ask your government? Why not ask the faction? That’s a good idea, ask the faction.”

Henry arrived; he strode past the soldiers and told her to leave. She hesitated slightly but then walked away. Then Henry turned to me. I stood up, terrified, and tried to think of excuses but before I could start he was apologising to me. There was no hint of accusation, he simply apologised for her behaviour and offered to escort me back to my rooms. I realised that she had been right; they depended completely on Cardiff sector.

We were just finishing our evening meal when there was a sharp knock at the door.

“Hope you don’t mind.” Billy said with a patronising grin. “I ordered mine in good time and suggested they sent yours along at the same time. Just to make it easier for them you see.”

He opened the door and two bedraggled girls were pushed through and it closed smartly behind them. Billy grabbed his one and went straight into his bedroom leaving us alone. I looked at Jemma, standing in her tattered clothes just managing a slight smile. The fire in her eyes was still there but only just. I had needed time to get ready for this; to prepare myself for the state she would be in. I didn’t know what to say. I had to explain to her that I had been trying to come as quickly as possible. To say that I had been thinking of her all the time but I couldn’t think of words for it.

“Have some food.” I suggested.

This time she smiled a bit more as she set about the remains of our meal. There was plenty for her to have and while she was eating I talked about my ideas for her to escape. Almost any means of escape would have appealed to her at that stage so she took the idea of going in a flyer in good spirit. The guard was at the door but when we looked at the windows they opened without difficulty.

“It’s not something they are likely to guard against.” I said after thinking about it. “I’m not a prisoner here and they wouldn’t expect me to want a slave to escape – anyway they don’t know that I can launch a flyer without several men to work the launcher.”

There was a silence while we both suddenly realised what this meant. I could send her home at any time – free from the filth of the slave pens – free to go home.

“But what would happen to you? She asked.

I didn’t know what Henry would do. He might not have cared very much about the loss of just one slave but he might have complained to Billy’s boss, leaving me in great danger. We agreed that when she went I would have to go as well. This meant having a second flyer ready to go and would take a little time but we had to go as soon as possible in case somebody found out who I was or, even worse, she was sent out to haul flyers again. In the meanwhile she insisted that she should try to help me do the work that I had come for in the first place.

We went through to the terminal in the bedroom. She had never seen one used before and

now, having had a good meal, she was back to her former self asking me questions all the time and wanting to try it.

We heard Billy come out and take his slave to the door.

“No need for me to finish when he does.” I said.

We looked at each other remembering what she had been sent to me for but neither of us knowing what to say about it. The screen was now showing the standing instructions about the wall.

“Where is it?” I asked, not really expecting an answer.

“In the West.” She replied simply. “Around Central Zone. I’ve not been there myself but travellers who have come to the village have talked about it.” This left me shocked to realise that the Faction were in central zone. I could have talked to them when I was there. Now the mad lady had told me to go back and try again.

The more we discussed it the clearer it seemed. She was only mad at times, her advice was clear and I should follow it.

31

The next morning at 8am precisely the phone rang in the common room. Billy showed no signs of emerging so I got out of bed and went and picked it up. Having become used to calling the castle servants I assumed that they were calling us. I imagined that it must have been about having returned Jemma rather late, or possibly something to do with breakfast. I answered with a sleepy “hello”.

There was a pause before a very officious voice replied. “You should identify yourself when you answer. I need to know who I am talking to.” I imagined that several insults remained unsaid.

I held the receiver away from my mouth and partially covered it with my sleeve before replying: “This is Billy here.”

“Mr Sanderson, we do not use first names on official calls. You must learn to follow procedures.”

I replied with a mumbled “Yes sir.”

“This is Colonel Mitchell’s office. I wish to speak to Mr. Robinson. Is he there?”

“No sir. He has not arrived yet.”

“He is 4 days overdue. Why have you not reported it?”

“I think he must just have been delayed a bit.” I said. “I have asked the castle personnel to keep an eye out for him.”

“He only has two days of ration packets left and you never thought to do anything?” The man sounded exasperated but I could tell that he expected no better from Billy. I waited for him to continue. “We shall send another man. He will arrive with you at 7am tomorrow. You must alert the castle authorities to expect him. We shall programme the flyer on the ramp ready for him and you must arrange a gang of men to launch it at 10am. Do you understand me?”

“Yes sir.” I replied. “It will all be ready.”

I went straight to the door, found the guard and asked to be escorted to the flyers. I unplugged the communication wire from the one on the ramp and swapped it for one of the others. I had no idea whether this would fool them for long but it seemed a good start.

“I shall need a gang of slaves.” I said to the guard. “I shall be having my breakfast first, could it be arranged for 11am.”

The man looked relieved that I had not asked for them immediately and seemed quite happy to arrange it.

Billy emerged as I was finishing my breakfast. He had heard the phone and asked who it was. When I told him that they were complaining how late I had kept my slave he seemed highly amused.

I went out to the flyers after breakfast and at each one in turn I unplugged the cable and

interrogated it to see how much power it had left. The microphones seemed to be located in the beak on the opposite side from the network connector. By cupping my hands against it I could make commands understood without having to shout them out across the courtyard. However I couldn't help letting the guard see what I was doing. He looked very interested and I was sure that he would report to his superiors – I just hoped that they would not do anything about it too quickly.

Having found, as I had hoped, that the flyer on the ramp had plenty of power I programmed it to fly Jemma back to her village. This took some time and I had to display a number of maps.

"Haven't you seen us doing this before?" I asked him, trying to sound casual.

This seemed just enough to stop him going to fetch his commander while I was still working.

I found that the flyer that I had arrived in was low on charge so I decided to use a different one for my journey. This had the advantage that I would get a monitor screen that would make it slightly less claustrophobic. I had originally planned to go back to Cardiff zone and contact the professor. I could then have gone through to Central with Tania in a glider in the same way as before. I don't know what changed my mind – possibly it was just that I was so worried about showing the guard the programming for too long. The journey I programmed was very quick and simple. I would fly directly to central zone and land just inside. I knew now why they drove posts right through the flyers that went there. It wasn't just to stop them flying again. It was to kill anybody who was inside them. I just had to hope that my flyer would be able to circle round far enough away from them not to be noticed.

I was still wondering if I had made the right decision when the slaves arrived. There were about 20 of them, looking and smelling as bad as before. I was glad that Jemma was not among them; it would have been very difficult to ignore her. I explained to the guard that I needed the flyer set up on something to I could work on its underside. This was apparently easy and the slaves were despatched to collect dressed stone from a building compound to pile up to stand it on. While they were gone I had to persuade the guard captain to build the plinth well away from the wall. He wanted to keep it tidily by the edge of the courtyard so I finally had to say that I might have to get the wings extended to work on them. He must have thought this a bit strange but never worked out that if I could extend the wings I could also fly it.

The slaves came back hauling a cart full of stone and piled it up a short distance in front of the ramp. A small squad of soldiers arrived with wooden poles and the slaves pushed these under the flyer, picked it up, and placed it on the plinth. It was all done in minutes. I had to admire the efficiency with which the soldiers worked the slaves, giving instructions and just enough help to make sure nothing went wrong.

Soon I was alone with the single guard again. By giving the commands UP and STOP in the same breath I managed to get the flyer's wings out a bit. The guard was very impressed by this but never commented. I made a pretence of examining the base of one of the wings in detail before giving the DOWN command, which had the effect of moving the wing back against the body.

That evening Jemma arrived and wanted to set off right away. I had to persuade her to put up with a long wait. We were going to have to set off at first light. It needed to be almost dark for us to go to the flyers but they navigated by map recognition and so they would need the dawn light to see where to go.

"You're very unlikely to be brought down by a magician at that time." I reassured her as she helped herself to a large plate of meat. "They seem to be pretty lazy so I can't see any of them getting up that early and there aren't normally any flyers around at that time because if they are launched from outside at first light it takes them an hour or two to get here."

This did not relax her much. Her fear of going in the flyer seemed to be based on other things. She may not even have realised that there was a risk from magicians but she would never have admitted it. She was proud to be self-reliant and seemed almost resentful that I was rescuing her from slavery for the second time in succession.

I asked her where the meat would have come from. "They drive cattle in from the farms all over the zone." She replied. "They take them from the villages and then take any fodder they need from other villages they pass. They are kept in pens near the castle ready to be slaughtered

at the right time to be cooked.” Being able to tell me all about this seemed to cheer her up a bit. Eating the meat also helped a great deal.

After the meal we went through to the terminal but we knew that we shouldn’t do too much on it in case we got caught. My main memory of the rest of the evening is the painful silences. I could see that she was scared. Although I judged her flight to be relatively safe it was obvious that she would not be at all safe even when she arrived back in her village. The magicians would be looking for her and she would have to trust her neighbours not to give her away.

Then there was us. Over just a few days I thought that we had developed a strong friendship. She asked me what I would do afterwards.

“There may not be an afterwards.” I replied. “I may not be able to finish what I am trying to do.”

“But what if there is?” She asked, deliberately looking away so I couldn’t see her eyes.

“If I manage to make things better then I shall be free to come back and see you.”

“But you wouldn’t stay. Not here, would you? You don’t like it here do you?”

“We might make things better.” I said, and then a silence followed.

“Should I wait for you?” She asked suddenly.

“No.” I replied, and then regretted it but I couldn’t see how I was ever going to be able to get back.

She went out first through the window, disappearing noiselessly into the shadows as I clambered out after her. As soon as we were out we could tell that there was something wrong. Normally there would just have been one guard on duty, keeping watch but mainly there to help us if we wanted to prepare a flyer. Now we heard footsteps and voices. There were several men out there.

“They must have worked out that I might do something.” I said, crouching behind the corner of the building.

“I didn’t want to say.” She replied. “There was a rumour. But the slave pens are full or rumours.” I could see that this was just like her. She never wanted to be the one who held things up or made excuses.

“Why didn’t they just watch the windows?” I asked.

“They can’t make much of a fuss if you just climb out of a window. They need to wait and see what you do.”

I felt I could sense them now. They must have been watching the window but held back to see where we went.

Moving through to the flyers we had to pretend that we didn’t know we were being followed. Pretend to hide while knowing it was pointless.

The courtyard was long and thin and the shadows were completely dark. We knew that they came in behind us. They were expert at moving silently but we still knew they were there.

I came to the first flyer, lined up against the wall. Leaning over it I gave commands in a loud whisper. I never lit up the display, I was confident enough to work without it. Jemma moved on to the next and set it into command mode as well. I had never tried the FORWARD command with a bird on the ground before and wondered if there would be an over-ride to prevent damage to the wings.

Moving out of range of the wings and the beaks we both shouted at the same time. For the soldiers it must have been like a nightmare. Moving slowly forward with their wings beating against the ground at every stroke the birds filled the width between the walls. Dust and debris was blown around as the wings thrashed down. A soldier came out from the shadow and tried to reach out with a spear to stop one of them but this just initiated a programmed defence response and the beak scythed out towards him.

While this was happening Jemma ran to the flyer on the ramp and started to climb in. She was half way in when I saw just one soldier who must have been waiting at our end of the courtyard, running towards us with his sword drawn. I shouted and turned to see Jemma standing upright with a knife in her hand. Seconds later the soldier fell, clutching his throat. I had no time to ask her how she threw it or even thank her. By the time the soldier hit the ground she was laying

down in the cockpit.

She was shouting but I only heard one word: "Promise" as I slammed the canopy closed over her. I gave the UP command while I was still diving clear and put it into programme mode while it was still just a few feet off the ground.

I could see the soldiers starting to break through at the far end as I ran for my flyer and Jemma's climbed away above me.

Shouting commands from inside the flier was not easy because the microphone was on the outside. I had planned to give the GO command before closing the cockpit but spears were landing by me so I had to close it. Now the flier was responding to the attack, hurling me against the sides as it thrashed out. I had to shout my command five times before it registered.

Finally, above the shouts and the clash of spears, I heard the mechanism as the wings spread. At the last moment I could hear repeated bangs as the soldiers finally arrived and started beating at the flyer with their swords but it was made of materials from a far higher technology and when I felt the sudden lift I knew that it was not damaged.

From the moment it started to fly I realised that I had made a basic mistake. I should have programmed the route to go directly through the field behind the castle and then circle round. As it was I was going to fly all the way through Summer sector – exposed to attack from magicians. I hadn't see any during the fighting and I hoped that none had been woken by the noise and come down to look. Luckily I had programmed my flight in a direct line without the normal circling to gain height.

I held my breath and waited as each powerful beat of the wings took me directly towards the horizon. When I reached it I would be safe. They had no way to tell other magicians under the flight path that I was coming. The screen in front of me showed the view from the camera under the beak but there was nothing I could do to control the flight.

I was just beginning to hope that I was away free when I felt the numbing sensation of the field, my last thought was to hope that I had enough height. When I came round I could see that I was still in the air. I must have glided out of sight before the magician could bring me all the way down. All I had to do was to count to 20 and the flyer would regain power and if I had not hit the ground by then I was away. On the screen I saw fields and hedges passing fast across the screen. The flyers were good gliders and intrinsically stable and by the count of 10 I still seemed to have some height. I saw a single tree suddenly appear at the side of the screen and almost immediately I was thrown against the side of the cockpit as the wingtip hit it but I was still airborne. A few seconds later I saw water ahead, a wide river or lake. This was the luck that saved me; there were no more obstructions. When the wings started again I was sure that I could feel the tips touching the water but the bird was alive again and it turned away from trees of the opposite shore as it regained control and climbed away.

About 15 minutes later I saw the dividing field for central zone ahead and prepared to go through. I had programmed an oblique transit so we didn't go too close to the building where the faction (or what the mad woman had called the faction) lived. I wondered if their detectors would see me, or what they would do if they did. Possibly this was the first flyer ever to go in but not attack them.

32

I landed in a murky bog. As I climbed out of the cockpit it seemed almost identical to the bog where I had landed in the glider with Tania. I wondered if any part of central zone was any different.

I had programmed my flight to land near a road which would join the one that I had walked along with Tania. I could see the clear outline of a derelict lorry which had, by some fluke of nature, retained its shape and acted as an easy sign to show me where to go. Before leaving my flyer I displayed the old map again to remind me of the road layout. Remembering where the flyer was would be no use to me unless I found help because it was deep in the mud and there was

absolutely no way I could fly it again.

I decided that it was important that I went to them. If they came out to catch a flyer I would hide because I didn't want to meet a war party, my chances were better if I met the whole community. I wanted to knock on their door.

It was almost a full day later when I was finally looking for the door. It had been a very cold slow walk on the slippery road surface past the remains of villages and then the row of captured flyers. I had kept going all night; it was too cold and wet to sleep on the ground. Now the dim daylight had come again but it could scarcely be seen against the glare of the lights from the dome in front of me. I knew that in several hundred years they had probably never had a visitor so I was not expecting to find a doorbell.

I managed to get within about 50 yards of the dome before they knocked me down with their directional field. I had been hoping that they would not use it but by this time I was so familiar with the effect of a field that when I felt it coming I managed to sit down without falling. The trick is to resist the urge to fight against it so you could use your energy for other things.

They must have used a field that was powerful enough to bring a flyer down several miles away because I remained unconscious for hours, if not days, and when I came round it took me some time to remember where I was. I was in a simple room with just a bed and a chair in it. The walls were painted white and there were no windows. There was a plain door with a small glass panel near the top and a ventilation grille at the bottom. The only other feature was another grille in the ceiling, which seemed to be extracting air that flowed in through the door.

I sat up and slowly regained my balance. After a few minutes I could stand up and walk around the room. The first thing that I found was that the door was locked. Next I found that they had taken my pack with my remaining food and I was hungry. I walked over to the door and hammered on it. Soon a face appeared at the window panel, it was wearing an ancient bio-suit. Through the cloudy plastic screen I could make out the face of a man, looking at me very intently.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice muffled by the suit.

I gave my name.

"Where are you from?"

I told him I was from Cardiff sector but had been in the others. This left him totally confused.

"Why didn't you get plague?" He asked. "Can many people travel?"

"I'm immune." I replied. "There are very few of us who are immune." He seemed relieved by this reply. I wondered if he pictured a world in which the plague had died out and everybody had forgotten about his little group struggling along in their little enclave. "I can't catch it and you can't catch it from me." I added trying to sound reassuring.

He was not reassured. He went away and reappeared a short time later with a cloth with some wet blood on it.

"That is blood from one of us." He said. "Wipe it on your skin. If you really are immune it won't do you any harm. Even if you aren't immune it won't hurt you if you come from the same sector as us. Either way if you will not be made welcome here until you have shown that you can remain healthy for two days after contact with the blood. Stand right back from the door."

I moved right back and made it clear that I was leaning against the far wall. The ventilation grill swung open and the rag was pushed through. I stood in the middle of the room and rubbed the blood conspicuously on my arm.

"Can I have some food?" I asked. "If I eat some of your food it will give you another check to see if I am immune." I added hopefully.

The food arrived some time later on a battered metal plate. It was a sort of flavourless tan coloured mush that seemed to slide down my throat without having any effect on the sensation of hunger. I assumed that it had been made by grinding up some sort of vegetable crop that had been left to grow for too long. All that came with it was a mug of water.

The field had drained my energy so I slept after eating. After that by banging on the door again I managed to get them to produce some more food. It was identical to the last meal.

"Haven't you got anything else you can give me?" I asked. "When we talk I can explain that I have come here to help. Can't I have some of the type of food that you eat? I am not a



criminal.” Saying this I wondered briefly how many of the authorities in the zones where I had been would agree with it.

“It has everything in it that you need to remain healthy.” The man replied. “What we are giving you is of great value, be glad that you have it.”

I smelt the food again and guessed that it might be some sort of engineered organism that they were growing with their artificial lights.

Two days later they let me out of my cell. They took me to a large room where about a hundred of them had gathered. I soon realised that it was the whole community and was immediately reminded of the gatherers who had also had a meeting to interrogate me. The main difference was that the gatherers lived well and were healthy. These people had skin that was so pale that it was almost translucent. They stared at me with big eyes in gaunt faces while I started to tell them my story. I decided to tell them everything because this time they did not seem hostile or threatening in any way. The man who had been in the bio-suit was sitting at the front. Out of the suit I could see that he looked as bad as the rest of them.

When I told them about the gathering town they suddenly became animated.

“You mean that there are no other human beings out there?” The man asked. “That means that it is ready for phase 4. How long has it been like that?”

“I can’t quite remember but I think that they said that they finished searching about forty years ago.” I replied without a second thought. The effect was explosive. All of the lifeless people around me suddenly leapt up and started shouting at each other. Many burst into tears.

“Did they search everywhere?” The man asked. “Every island and isolated place where there might have been survivors.”

“Yes everywhere.” I replied. I remembered what John Adams had told me. “As all of the old towns and cities decayed it became easier to see where people were living and growing crops. They flew search patterns with planes, year after year. They were looking for immunes but they would certainly have found any surviving isolated communities.”

“Do the people in the zones know all this?”

“I don’t think so.” I said. “I’m not sure, but I don’t think so.”

“But how could they miss it with phase 3 in progress.”

I remembered phase 3 was the exploration phase when they would go out and look.

“It hasn’t started.” I replied.

“But how are they catching flyers if they aren’t going out?”

I explained what was happening in Summer zone. By this time the audience was sitting in shocked silence.

When I had the chance I asked a question. What was phase 4?

“Expanding the fields.” He replied simply. “Once there is no plague outside they can be spread out of course. Isn’t that what everybody is waiting for? Moving apart so we don’t need the fields.”

It was my turn to look shocked. He explained. “They spread gradually and get higher. When the tops get well up out of the atmosphere they thin out and disappear. The dividing walls get longer and longer until they go right around the globe and meet up in the Pacific. They are quite thin by that stage but they only need to work for a bit while the people move off to different continents and don’t need them any more.

He went to a small cupboard against the wall behind us and produced a booklet. The pages were frayed and discoloured at the edges and it showed signs of having been re-covered many times. It was entitled “SURVIVAL DOME FOR MULTI-STRAIN PLAGUE” with the logo of a long-forgotten company beneath it. A hundred pairs of hungry eyes watched me as I turned the pages. There were pictures of the field generators packed up, travelling along a road and then set up for use. I recognised every detail that I had seen on my visit years before. Then there were diagrams of the field first in the form that it was and later growing to cover continents and seas.

I immediately recognised the next diagram as a simple network. It showed about forty satellite systems connected into a central hub. It took me a few seconds to realise that it was the control network for the fields. By this time he was watching for my expression as I turned the pages.

“The control hub is right here in central zone.” He said, anticipating the obvious question. “That’s why they could never invade or shell us. The whole field would have gone down.”

“So now you know that there is no more plague outside you can simply go ahead with phase 4.”

I knew it wouldn’t be quite that simple. “You have a good story to tell but you might not be telling the truth, perhaps through no fault of your own.” I could tell that he wanted to believe me but after hundreds of years he was bound to be cautious.

“So if I can prove it to you then you can expand the zones?”

“No quite.” He replied. “Somebody got here before us. There are two key circuit boards missing. We either need the originals back or a manufactory to make them. We have the codes to get them made.”

“Let me get proof for you.” I replied. “The give me the codes and I shall see what I can do.”

We set out in their ancient rough terrain truck. I remembered being terrified by it as it had thundered past me before but now I was in it I could see that it was incredibly old and falling apart. We went down the road past all of the destroyed flyers and then I had to try to remember the route that I had taken. It took us fully two hours to find my flyer in the mud. Lifting it with the crane on the truck was relatively simple and, as we drove back with it, I couldn’t help thinking how much effort it was to move flyers in Summer zone when this ancient lorry could do the job so easily.

Next I had to programme it with voice commands. He was clearly annoyed that their manuals had not told them how this was done but living in such isolated conditions seemed to have given him great patience and he accepted it with nothing more than a shrug as I displayed the maps and menus. I was sure, however, that the appearance was deceptive; he was making careful mental notes of everything. I wanted to send it through Summer zone to see if I could see if Jemma had landed safely but I didn’t dare. I just had to set a route out and back through the other zones.

We simply positioned the flyer on the flat bed behind the crane and the wings could stretch out easily. Without me in it, it took off quickly and was soon into the field.

While it was gone I was given a brief tour. The bright lights that I had seen before were for hydroponics as I thought but they were nothing like as big as they should have been. Almost all they could grow was the brown tasteless mush that I had eaten. There was a tiny area of cereal crops but they were desperately short of power and the grain was less efficient for producing nutrients. The control room for the fields was just a little cabin with some flickering screens and a couple of keyboards. They opened one of the cabinets to show me where the two boards were missing.

When the flyer came back a big group of them gathered to watch as I played back the video from the beak camera. The images started with a brief glimpse of central zone, and then the blank of the field transit and the neat villages of Cardiff zone passing by and then it was outside. I had programmed it to fly around over a large area. We saw the gathering town and miles and miles of empty country and ruined towns and cities. We saw the dome over the flyer factory. I told them how I was sure that the technicians from Cardiff zone would be repairing it soon if they hadn’t already done it.

At one point, as I had hoped, it passed over what must have been the gatherer’s airfield with some old but serviceable looking planes lined up. It didn’t really prove anything but it was enough for them.

Just seeing that it was all as I had described it and, above all, seeing how I could programme the flyers, convinced them that I was genuine. I told them that the professor was the best person to try to get the boards made and described how I could take the flyer into Cardiff zone. The man asked how I planned to contact him.

“Just drive over and go to his rooms.” I said, realising that my luck was bound to run out before long.

“Why not contact him to arrange to meet somewhere else?”

“Because Border Security monitor all calls.” I said. “And he probably wouldn’t go anyway.”

This revelation shook his confidence in me. He insisted on exploring other ways of doing it.

Could I send him a coded message? Was there anybody else? I told him about Cynthia and he insisted on knowing all the detail I could give him. During all this it slowly dawned on me that he wasn't exploring other ways for me to try, he was assuming that I would fail and trying to work out other ways he could try without me. Taking in this vote of no confidence in my chances of success I prepared to start.

33

I programmed the flyer to land near Elizabeth's cottage because I knew where the trees and hedges were and I thought that it might be safer to land in a remote area rather than near the University. The flight was as uneventful and claustrophobic as always and as the bird landed I was very pleased to note that my memory of the landscape had been perfect and we came in smoothly without hitting any trees or bushes or sliding into a ditch.

Congratulating myself on my navigation and looking forward to seeing Elisabeth again I opened the hatch and pulled myself up to climb out and saw, less than 20 yards away, a border security patrol.

There were six of them and they were looking at me in absolute amazement. One of them was half way through raising his gun but the sight of me climbing out of the cockpit had obviously stunned him to the extent that he just stood there motionless. The effect of seeing a flyer at close range for the first time, seeing it land and then seeing that it contained a man rather than the incendiary they had been told it would was too much for them. I decided to take the initiative.

I shouted. "Good afternoon." as I climbed out and then turned towards them and announced myself. "Captain Adams, immune section, Border Surveillance."

Moving closer I could see that there was an officer among them. He stepped forward. "Colonel Richards, Border Security. What is your business here?"

From the way he said it I could tell that Cynthia had been right. This man hated border surveillance. He was scared of the flyer but above all he was determined to make a name for himself and show that he could take command of the situation.

"I need to make an urgent report to my unit." I replied.

He fell for it. As a much more senior officer he had the right and he couldn't resist it. "What is the nature of that report?"

He obviously expected me to try not to answer and was looking forward to ordering me to comply but I was one step ahead.

"Status report from Summer and Central zones." I replied briskly just as I stepped right up to him. The thought of touching anyone or anything that had been in Summer zone without a Bio-suit made him turn white with fear. I stood in front of him, did my best at a military salute and began to reach into my pocket as if to produce my report to pass to him.

"That won't be necessary." He said, involuntarily taking a small step backwards.

"For reasons of security may I request that you contact surveillance directly?" I asked. "This is normal procedure for landings of this type. Please could you possibly also ensure that your men maintain total secrecy about this event?"

As I had hoped, his bluster was gone. He asked one of his men to make the contact. I didn't have a report but I did have a small flask of water, which was just as effective. While we were waiting for the man to get through I took it out of my pocket. It came from Jemma's village. It was made of rough, badly fired clay. It was very obviously not from Cardiff zone and, if the flyer hadn't fully convinced him, this did. The sight of me drinking from this alien object made him take several more steps back.

As the man spoke into the communicator I could tell that there was little risk of him giving anything away. The conversation was terse and short, border surveillance were told that one of their men was in a field and needed to be collected and virtually nothing else. The reply was that they should wait with me and the transport would come in due course.

I returned to the flyer and put it in voice command mode. I looked around and judged my

chances of getting away. The ground was flat; the bird couldn't possibly take off. Starting behind it I might be able to run a few yards without being seen but there was no way I could reach the edge of the field without giving them clear shots at me.

After a considerable delay an elderly all terrain vehicle came bumping up a track into the field. I could see just a single driver in it. He took a quick look at the situation and drove directly up to me and the flyer and ignored the patrol.

He opened the door and I saw that he had a neat grey moustache and sergeant's stripes. He looked around.

"We really are glad to see you." He said. "All contact with Summer sector's been lost, some incident at the castle I gather." He looked at me closely to see my reaction.

"Can't say much." I replied. "But it has been bad, I'm glad to see you too."

He seemed please with my reply. I was sure that he wasn't officially supposed to know about the immunes but he was keen to impress me with his knowledge, and to impress the patrol with his cool reaction.

On impulse I held out my hand and he shook it heartily while looking down the field to make sure the patrol could see him.

"Better get rid of them." I suggested and we walked towards them.

"We can arrange to remove the flyer and make all necessary arrangements." I said to the colonel.

He looked slightly annoyed about being dismissed in this way but obviously decided that, on balance, he had better go. He turned and marched his men smartly off along the track. Now all I had to do was to get my man in range of the wings.

We walked back towards the flyer. "I'll just close it up if you want to order a truck with a crane to pick it up." I said hopefully.

To my relief he didn't make the call right away. He couldn't resist the temptation to look inside before I closed the hatch. He was just peering in when I gave a single command and a wing swept out and caught him on the back of the head, giving me the chance to take his gun.

He looked round dazed and saw that I had it.

"Get up." I said. "And get some rope from the car."

I was in luck. He had a good length of strong rope.

"Who the hell are you?" He asked, walking back from the car, carrying the rope with one hand and rubbing the back of his head with the other.

"I'm trying to make things better." I said. "I don't expect you to believe me, just do what I say and you should be all right."

I made him fix one end of the rope to the back of the car and the other to the small skids, which passed for legs under the flyer.

"Find me a good knife." I said, and again he was able to oblige.

I climbed into the open back of the car. "Now drive, fast down slope. When it takes off I'll cut the rope."

I tried to make it sound as if I knew what I was doing. I couldn't tell if he was convinced but he got in the cab. I pointed the gun at him and we started moving.

I gave the command and the wings started flapping, thumping against the ground but seeming to get some lift. And then all of a sudden it was up and I reached out with the knife, but I never had a chance. It shot up so powerfully that the knife was thrown out of my hand as the whole car was lifted. I grabbed the rope, pulled myself out and jumped. I landed hard and rolled over just in time to see the car swinging from the rope as the bird gained height and went over the coast towards the field.

I looked on with some satisfaction as all evidence of my landing disappeared into the field but a measure of regret as my only available transport went with it. I stopped and took stock. I had the advantage that I knew this area of the country well and also, although somewhat ragged, my clothes would not stand out too much. I considered heading for the cottage but was sure that it would be watched. In the end I decided to head for the village. I had some credit I could use to get transport to the University – even if using it would certainly trigger some alarms.

In the event my decision made no difference. I had scarcely crossed the first field when a

helicopter came over the hill ahead of me. I tried to turn and run but had no chance. Within seconds it was hovering above me and a door had opened to reveal a heavy gun pointing at me from very close range. Next to the door the fuselage showed a large insignia of border surveillance.

The machine landed a few yards away from me. The man behind the gun was looking intently down the sight to make sure that whether I moved or he moved there would not be a second when it was not pointing directly at me. Several men jumped out taking care to keep clear of his line of fire.

"He's not one of our immunes." One of them observed. "My orders are just to pick him up, they don't say who he is."

"You mean he may not be immune?" The one next to him asked, stepping back half a pace.

"Can't be sure, get the bio-suit."

The man behind the gun pointed it directly at my head to make the point and as soon as it was unloaded I put the suit on. Within minutes I was in the helicopter, sitting alone on a row of seats with the gun still pointing at me.

When we landed I stepped out of the door to see a drab military base with a line of low buildings about fifty yards in front of me. I was marched straight towards the one in the centre and in through the door. I was in a large bare room, which must have been at least a hundred feet long with just a single bench along the far wall. Nobody else came in but a man was posted at the door with a gun. This time it was just an assault rifle but he still kept it pointed at me. I went over to the bench and had only just sat down when I heard voices.

"Stand aside and let the immune come through and search him."

The soldier moved to one side and Tania walked in. It took me a second to realise who it was. She seemed taller than when I had last seen her, her hair was cut shorter and tied neatly back and she was wearing the uniform of an officer in border surveillance.

She walked the length of the room carefully off to one side to keep clear of the line of fire. Luckily there were no windows behind me so nobody could see her expression. It said everything in an instant but was gone by the time she reached the end of my bench and turned and shouted to me to stand up and remove my bio-suit.

As often happened I had trouble getting out of the suit and was struggling to get my arms free. With seeming practiced ease she reached forwards and tore it off me and threw it half way across the room. I wondered if she was overdoing it and glanced at the soldier at the door. He seemed amused.

"Keep going." She said briskly. It was strange to hear her voice again.

Soon I was standing in my underclothes. She had removed everything from my pockets and placed it in a neat pile on the bench with the exception of my identity card, which she slipped into her pocket. My clothes and shoes were in a sealed polythene sack.

"Inform the colonel that he has no weapons." She said to the soldier. "And find some overalls and boots for him." She added as an afterthought.

The overalls were produced and soon after I had dressed the colonel arrived. I was told to remain seated and by this time Tania had been entrusted with the gun, which she held firmly pointing at my neck. The colonel entered at the far side of the room and his entourage followed him in and spread along the far wall, all seeming to squeeze up against it to keep as far away from me as possible. I looked along the line of them. The colonel was an imposing man with close cropped grey hair and to either side of him two slightly younger officers stood firmly to attention. Beyond them there was an assortment of men and women, all in uniform and right at the end I suddenly recognised Cynthia, looking entirely anonymous in the group. She risked a fleeting smile of recognition to Tania and me.

"Who are you and where have you come from?" The colonel asked.

I was about to reply when I saw Cynthia almost imperceptibly shaking her head. I said nothing.

"Has he got any identity documents?" He asked Tania.

"None sir." She replied promptly.

“From his clothes he seems to have come from this zone.” One of the officers remarked. “Couldn’t we do a biometric?”

“And get the whole system infected?” He replied sharply.

He took the gun from the soldier behind him and pointed it at me. “Tell me who you are and how you got the flier. We know you had a flier.”

This time Cynthia seemed to be almost bursting out to shout at me as she shook her head. She looked relieved when I held my silence.

“Perhaps he speaks another language and can’t understand.” The officer said, looking pleased at his perception.

“Do you understand my question?” The colonel shouted at me. Cynthia shook her head again. Then she started to speak. For a moment I thought she was speaking to me and had to stop myself from looking up with too much interest.

“As liaison officer for the directorate.” She was saying.

The colonel turned sharply to her and said, “Yes Cynthia.” in a condescending voice.

“It is my duty to remind you of standard regulations regarding incursors who may be captured and disarmed and show no sign of plague as noted in clause 135b of the primary regulations.”

“Go on Cynthia, spell it out what is it.”

“He must be delivered directly to the health science directorate without delay. I believe that the purpose is to get him there before he succumbs.” She added.

“Does the health science directorate still exist? I thought it disappeared years ago.”

“No sir. It has a remaining staff of 16 with 6 ancillaries. In line with standing orders I have already informed the director of the arrival.” She replied. “He suggested that rather than get the man back into a bio-suit it would be better for his health to get our immune to drive him.”

We set off in convoy. They took no risks. With cars full of men with guns behind and in front of us we had no chance of escape. We could, however, talk provided we kept checking to make sure they could not see us doing it. Tania explained how she had moved so rapidly into Border Surveillance. She had gone back alone to the boat when I didn’t return to the flyer launching area and then she had set sail back into the zones. This went to plan but almost as soon as she started sailing up the coast she was intercepted by a patrol boat.

The patrol boat had opened fire and when she was dragged on board she had been too terrified to speak. This was, however, what saved her because, like me, they had assumed that she came from outside the zone. She had been locked in a room on her own but it was an old office with a terminal in it. Before they realised what was happening she had sent a message to Elisabeth who promptly contacted the professor who, in turn, contacted Cynthia. With exactly the right people informed Border Surveillance had to explain their new arrival or hand her over to reveal all her information to the other departments.

“You’ve seen how good she is.” Tania said. “She exploits the power struggles. She actually suggested to them that they should say that I was one of their officers and they had simply made a mistake. That way the whole incident could be forgotten with nobody else finding out about the Gathering town. She also explained it to me so I accepted their offer and from then on I have been one of their officers.”

We were driving slowly along a winding road through the countryside. With such a low limit on the distance anybody could travel in the zone roads had never been a priority.

I told her about what I had done and then asked her what she knew about where we were going.

“Nothing at all.” She replied. “I’ve never heard of the Health Sciences Directorate any more than anybody else, except Cynthia that is. It obviously does exist – they will have checked up on her about that.”

I found a notepad and wrote down the details of the circuit boards.

“I am sure the professor could get them made.” She said. “He will have authority to get things like that for his research. But if something happens to you don’t rely on me to take them into Central Zone. These people watch me every minute of the day.”

There was nothing more to say. Neither of us knew what we were going to, we had to rely

on Cynthia because we simply had no choice.

Soon we turned off the road into an unmarked driveway with tall but perfectly kept yew hedges to either side. I looked at Tania to see if she showed any recognition but now we were moving close behind the lead car she was looking carefully ahead without any visible expression. We drew up in front of a large old manor house and our car was immediately surrounded by people in bio-suits.

They opened the door on my side of the car and a sealed, gloved hand reached in to pull me out. I could see nothing through the dark visor in the helmet. They led me so quickly into the house that I almost stumbled on the steps leading up to the door. I only just had a chance to see the grand entrance hall before being pushed into a small room with a window looking out over the driveway. The men with the guns were standing in a group and looked as surprised as I was about the way in which I had been taken. A man in a white coat appeared with a clipboard, obtained a signature and carefully handed over a copy of the signed document. Now they returned to their group clearly waiting for something. Seeing me at the window they turned to stare – I stood my ground and stared back. Finally Tania appeared from the direction of the house. After some more discussion they all went back to their cars.

Almost as soon as they had gone a lady walked into my room with a tray of tea. It had a fine china teapot, a single cup and saucer and even a few small cakes. I looked at her speechless. She had no bio-suit and no guard.

She looked back at me. “We just thought you might be thirsty after your journey.” She said in a matter-of-fact voice. “You may have to wait a few minutes. He sometimes keeps arrivals waiting a bit but he shouldn’t be too long.”

“Do you get many arrivals like me? From other sectors I mean.” I said, expecting that she would take fright at this information.

“Not many.” She replied, carefully pouring me out a cup of tea. “Just a few, from time to time.”

“What happens to them?” I asked, so shocked I felt slightly distant from my own situation.

“Oh they always go back, we never harm them.” She replied, but then added. “But we never seem to see them again after that.” She stopped for a moment as if remembering the people she felt she would never see again. “But you’re different, you’ve been in this zone before haven’t you. Very different he says, very different indeed.”

She walked quietly from the room, leaving me to my tea and cakes. The door was not locked, it was not even fully closed, but I felt no reason to leave. I had no doubt who he was, the man she had talked about. I was sure that I was meant to know, he just couldn’t bring himself to tell me directly how much he had kept from me.

The professor showed a practiced lack of emotion. “So glad to see you.” He said. “I was wondering where you had got to. We must talk about it.”

The tone in his voice gave him away. He was so good at being calm and in control but just saying these simple words was a real effort for him. He didn’t even have any questions for me. He knew that I would ignore them, and he knew what I was going to say before I even started talking. He didn’t know the details and he expressed genuine interest in my story of summer and central zones but he knew where it would be leading. There was still a small part for him to play but once he had arranged to have the boards made it would all be over. His double life of intrigue and manipulation would be over and he was in it for the game. Jemma tells me just to judge him by actions not motives but she was never one of his pawns.

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\*Needs radio check from launch station control