

MINDFIGHTER



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ABSTRACT
CONCEPTS

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To Athelstan

MINDFIGHTER

(IT COULD HAVE BEEN THE YEAR OF THE BIG BANG!)

In the past, 'The Big Bang' has been used as the name of a theory relating to the creation of the universe and, therefore, the planet Earth. So, there should be no objections in it being used as an expression for the destruction of the planet Earth.

Not a lot is known about parapsychology. Hence the general public are like "dogs which bark at those they do not recognise". It is a science which is avoided and the people involved with the various experiments are considered to be 'freaks'.

Predictions and premonitions are both looked upon as being dreams. "So what?!" if the dream comes true, "It was just pure luck!"

Could parapsychology be used for the benefit of Mankind in the future? Or, like most scientific discoveries or inventions, would it be used destructively by politicians?

The following account looks at the the possible extent to which a group of talented people, who possess exceptional powers, could influence the future.

Picture the human race, marching on a straight road towards a T-junction. At that junction, it has two choices:

- 1) the door to evil, i.e. total destruction and death.
- 2) the door to good, i.e. prosperity and life.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? But is it? How easy is it to take the right

turning when one is accelerating under pressure, governed by circumstances over which one has no control?

In times of crisis, do we listen to the Leaders — Heads of State — and trust everything they tell us as being Gospel truth? Or, do we obey our consciences and resort to using civil disobedience as a legal method of making the public aware of what could happen?

As Albert Einstein wrote — “We must never relax our efforts to arouse in the peoples of the world, and especially in their governments, an awareness of the unprecedented disaster which they are absolutely certain to bring on themselves unless there is a fundamental change in their attitudes towards one another, as well as in their concept of the future.”

CHAPTER ONE STRANGE IDEAS

“ROBIN, ARE YOU RELAXED YET? TAKE YOUR TIME. YOU ARE SURE YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO? Remember! It doesn't matter if you don't succeed this time, though Professor Chauvin of Strasbourg University has shown us that it is possible to do.”

Always, Professor Fergere encouraged his students before an experiment.

“From harmony, from heavenly harmony,
The universal frame began:
When Nature underneath a heap
Of jarring atoms lay,
And could not heave her weary head,
The tuneful voice we heard from high;
Arise ye more than dead.”

Robin repeated this over and over. Then, he began, relaxing his sensitive body whilst focussing on a candle flame. Soon, his body felt like lead and he started to close his eyes very slowly.

Now he was relaxed. He began to inhale for a count of three. He held his breath for a count of twelve. Lastly, he exhaled over a count of twelve. This breathing routine was repeated three times.

Before going into a trance, Robin muttered,
“I'm ready...”

From that moment, there was a silence. The professor and his students watched Robin through the one-way mirror.

Robin sat lifelessly on a coarse wooden chair, facing an off-white wall. He was alone in the small, dimly lit room.

During the first few minutes, the still figure concentrated his thoughts on accelerating the radioactive disintegration of the uranium isotope. Then, Robin concentrated on slowing down the decay of the isotope. Finally, during the third minute, he turned off his thoughts.

Every minute, the geiger counter switched off automatically. It measured and recorded the rate of the radioactive decay.

Robin brought himself out of the trance. He began to "lighten" his body, in the way he had relaxed it. He ended with the opening of his eyes, letting them open over a count of seven. Lastly, he repeated his breathing routine.

Silently he sat, his face pale and expressionless.

When the results were checked, none of them could believe their eyes.

"He did it!"

Robin had managed to control the radioactive decay of the uranium isotope by using his psychic powers.

Alison was the first to enter the room to congratulate him. Lightly she kissed him on his forehead and patted him on his back.

"Well done, Robin. I knew you could do it!" said she, softly.

He looked up at her, gave her a smile and whispered,

"Thank-you."

She felt pity towards him. Robin was only eleven years old. His parents had died in a fire at their home in Bursildon. It was fortunate that he had managed to escape, though the cause of the fire still remained a mystery.

He lived in a children's home for four years. Then at the age of nine he was brought here, to Southampton University. The Education Authorities had informed Professor Fergere of the unique telepathic powers possessed by the youngster.

For two years now Robin had been treated like a guinea-pig. He performed experiment after experiment and in turn had had a variety of tests carried out on him. There appeared to be no boundaries to his abilities.

The older students and the professor were truly amazed.

Harry stepped forward.

"Where would you like to go?"

"I just want to go home and sleep. Maybe tonight or tomorrow?"

His big green eyes gazed up emptily — his face rarely gave away any signs of emotion. His complexion was white, often compared to that of marble stone statues.

"Of course, I understand. Go home and rest. Matthew will take you home."

As they rode in the car, Robin asked,

"What will you be doing this afternoon?"

"I'm not sure yet! I expect Harry, Alison and I shall be doing some of the usual experiments. Bye Robin, we'll see you later."

Robin got out of the car and slowly walked to the front door. He did not bother replying to Matthew or even looking back to wave goodbye.

Matthew took the long route back to the university. He was eighteen years old when he was recruited by the professor, six years ago. He was beginning to feel bored with the work he was doing.

It seemed as though more attention was being focussed on Robin. All the time, the more testing and unusual experiments were performed by Robin. All Professor Fergere ever spoke about was Robin — "Robin did this, Robin did that. Is he not marvellous? Have you seen anything else like it?"

But it was true, nobody this century possessed the same talent as Robin.

Matthew was tall and slim. His cheek bones were prominent, the cold blue eyes set deep into the sockets. He had brown, shortish, straight hair which was casually flicked back, revealing a large forehead.

As he drove however, his resentment towards Robin slowly ebbed away.

Finally, Matthew returned to the laboratory to find the professor bent over the bench checking and rechecking the results from the geiger-counter.

Professor Fergere was an oldish man, about sixty years of age. He was the head person of the Parapsychology Department at the university. He was thinning on top, although a fair amount of the white crop remained. His appearance resembled that of the general "Mad Professor" in the old horror movies of the nineteen-thirties. His bushy eyebrows stuck out over the top of his round, metal-framed spectacles.

In a mumbled, low voice he sighed, then stuttered before he stammered:

"Unbelievable, unbeliev... I never thought I should ever live long enough to see this work..."

He paused then continued —
“Unbelie...”

He did not finish his sentence, but drifted back into deep thought. He was filled with ecstasy as he pondered.

But what now? What or how would this help him? Without having to use or be dependent on Robin’s psychic powers, how could he control the disintegration of radioactive isotopes?

It was the professor’s ambition to control the disintegration of radioactive elements by using chemical or physical methods. His goal was to eventually save Mankind from its “nuclear self-destruction”, as a Third World war seemed inevitable.

“No, no it’s okay! I’ve much work to do. Go! Go! I don’t need you today,” he exclaimed with his strong German accent.

“I shall see you tomorrow. Look after Robin — after his performance today, he’s the most valuable person alive on this earth. It’s imperative that what happened today is kept a secret!”

It was rare, almost unheard of, that they should be given an afternoon off. Alison, Harry and Matthew gathered their belongings quickly. They departed from the laboratory, leaving the professor mumbling to himself.

“Well, what shall we do this afternoon?” Harry asked.

He looked at Alison for whom his question was really intended. Always, Harry had had a soft spot for Alison.

They met three years ago in June. Harry and Matthew had been introduced to a timid eighteen year old girl. It was a cloudless day. The sun shone brightly, its rays were flickering flames of fire, reaching across the sky like golden ribbons, pulling a chariot ridden by Gods.

She stood in front of them shyly and looked down at her feet as she blushed. She shook their hands and whispered,

“Hello, I’m Alison Whitley.”

She looked so innocent. It was as if she was one of the angels pulling the chariot.

Since that day he liked her. He pretended to himself and the others that his love and adoration for her was that of a brother but, deep down in his heart, he was in love with her.

Although Alison was twenty-one years old, she was still like a child — vulnerable and innocent to the big wide world. She trusted people too easily and needed their care and affections.

She had never had a relationship with a man. It still bothered her! The child psychiatrists had told the nuns at the convent that Alison was no longer frightened. Deep down, she was just as afraid now as she was then — sixteen years ago.

... that terrible, terrible night, the wind was howling. The rain and hail beating on the window-panes. The thunder clashed and banged like cymbals and drums — the monotonous beating, boding evil.

Still the roars of thunder seemed so vivid in her head.

Periodically there were flashes of lightning — illuminating the grey, black, overcast sky.

She was hitting him! Her heart pounding quickly as she begged him to leave mommy alone, but he would not. He was hurting her. She was pleading to him — but no, he did not listen.

Mommy screamed to him,

“... go away, come back when you’re sober ...”

“Him”, that was how Alison referred to her father, after that night. Her father had a terrible temper — and hence became very violent when under the influence of alcohol. That night in particular he had far more to drink than usual. He had recently lost a lot of money gambling at the Silhouette casino. For this he blamed his wife. She was so fragile and beautiful.

That night, he raped her. Then, Alison had not understood fully what had happened between her father and mother.

The next morning, Alison awoke to find her mother had committed suicide. The battered, half-naked body lay there — cold across the kitchen floor.

Alison could remember sitting next to her mother’s dead body. She then ran to the neighbour’s house, pulling the woman’s dress, tears running down her cheeks, frantically she beckoned to the lady,

“Please, please come and help me! It’s my mum ...”

That was as far as she got before again she burst into tears.

She never saw her father again. It was then that Alison was admitted to a convent. There she stayed until she was eighteen years old.

Harry, Matthew, Alison and Robin now worked together closely being experimented on because of their unique psychic powers.

As they reached a bench in the university’s grounds, Alison sat before Harry. Matthew remained standing, one foot resting on the bench. He

knocked the burnt tobacco out of his Calabash, his prize possession — a stereotype Sherlock Holmes pipe. He refilled it and began smoking it.

“I’ve some reading to do,” Alison replied. She then continued,

“Yesterday I began reading this article on whether it was just a myth that were-wolves existed, passed down from generation to generation from the Middle Ages as an old folk-lore.”

“What has sparked this sudden interest in were-wolves?” Harry asked inquisitively, his eyes sparkling with curiosity. Matthew just stood there, his elbow resting on his knee as he leaned forward, smoking his pipe, deep in thought.

“It’s thought that were-wolves were associated with people who had a peculiar form of mental disease called lycanthropy. The person under its attack believing himself to be a wolf.”

“Yeah, wow-ee, and what about it? We already knew that!” Harry replied mockingly.

“Don’t laugh! I haven’t finished yet. But today, what Robin did and what we’re capable of doing — well it’s got me thinking. If it’s true that people have changed into were-wolves in the past when under the influence of a mad fit, then — oh, can’t you see what I’m getting at? What about us? We’re not mad, but we have control over our minds. We can make it do what we want it to do, when we want.”

Harry and Matthew stared, bemused at her.

“You don’t understand, do you?”

Alison had become quite excited, slightly out of breath, she continued —

“What if we could do that? Imagine being able to transform ourselves into any animal, when we wanted and not when under the influence of some mad, mental state, this way having complete control over our actions!”

Now her heart was racing. There was a mischievous glint in her deep brown eyes.

There was silence as Harry and Matthew tried digesting and understanding exactly what she was getting at. They were stunned.

Was she serious? More to the point — could it be done? These were but a few of the questions running through their minds.

“Well what do you think?” asked she, glancing anxiously at each of their amazed faces.

“Yeah, um, sure ... it’s, well, it’s different I suppose.”

Harry stuttered as he replied. He hoped that a sudden inspiration would have come. But Alison’s idea had taken him aback, he was

flabbergasted. He did not know quite what to say.

“Yes, we’re going to try that! It’s a fantastic idea Alison. Anyway, I was getting bored with the usual experiments. Well, what are we waiting for?” Matthew said defiantly. He was just as excited and enthusiastic as Alison about her idea and its implications. He took his foot off the bench and repeated,

“Well what are we waiting for? Get up! Let’s go to the library now.”

“No need. I’ve been to the library and done a lot of research on the subject,” she replied whilst standing up.

For once, Harry was speechless. It was usually him who came up with the ideas and plans for what they were going to do. He looked up at Alison and Matthew, bewildered and shocked.

“You’re both serious about this, aren’t you? I don’t think that either of you realise what exactly you’re expecting of yourselves. Anyway, I think that it’s too dangerous and maybe we should leave it well alone.”

He paused, then submitted to them finally.

“All right then, you don’t have to look so disheartened and disappointed. I’ve always supported the both of you in the past with your other projects ... so, well you can count me in. Come on then, as Matthew said twice, what are we waiting for? Shall we go and get started? Mad, I must be — supporting you in this scheme!”

Harry sighed, got up, brushed his jacket down and started walking towards Matthew’s red Sierra. It was parked about ten minutes away from the entrance of the university.

Matthew and Alison ran quickly to Harry’s side. Alison was content. Finally, her idea might work and she would be able to prove herself. Until now everybody had spoilt her and never expected any constructive or imaginative ideas. She was part of the furniture — the “agony aunt” — a person to whom either Harry, Matthew and particularly Robin would go if they had any problems. Always she gave them sympathetic, sensitive advice.

When they returned to Alison’s house, she made them a cup of tea. Then she read the *rasuma* about the were-wolves.

“Firstly: closely related to the vampire is the figure of the were-wolf. It spanned from all over the “Old World” — from Portugal to the shores of the Pacific and from the interior of Africa to the North Cape.

Where wolves have been absent, we have were-tigers and were-leopards.

In ancient Scandinavian folk-lore, a person whose eyebrows were grown together over his nose was regarded as being uncanny; in Continental Europe he would have been suspected of being a were-wolf.

Something I found, which I think may be useful, is that a witch is rendered helpless if one manages to draw a drop of blood from her body. A metamorphosed person, for example a were-wolf, will regain his or her former shape by the same radical means.

Those are the main points and guidelines of which I think we should take notice and follow if we are going to be successful. Well, are you going to comment?"

By now, Matthew had started smoking his pipe again. He flicked his hair back and frowned, contemplating the facts that had just been presented to him.

Suddenly Harry stood up and exclaimed:

"Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant! You're a genius Alison. If we can succeed in doing this, then there's no stopping us."

There was a look of pure pleasure and delight on Alison's glowing face as she blushed, then asked,

"When should we start? Do we inform the professor of our new project?"

She paused, then added:

"I think it's best that it's kept a secret."

Harry gave a nod of approval and asked,

"What about Robin, does he get to be included in this new adventure with us?"

"No, I think he's too young and too inexperienced. As you said, we don't know enough about this ourselves," Alison replied confidently. It was all finally coming together.

"Okay, I agree. By the way, I promised him that we would pop round sometime this evening, just for a short while," Matthew added.

"All right then," came Alison's reply.

She cleared her notes away, while Harry took the cups into the kitchen before they prepared to leave.

CHAPTER TWO

THROUGH THE DARK

IT WAS A GLORIOUS SPRING DAY. THE SUN WAS SHINING. THERE WERE NO CLOUDS TO BE seen. The daffodils in the park swayed slightly in the breeze like waves of a yellow sea — their bright, yellow ochre heads bowing to the sun, as if in worship. The smell of freshly cut grass wafted in the wind.

Harry awoke with his head throbbing. After leaving the others, he chanced to meet an old friend at the cinema. Until the early hours of the morning they drank and joked merrily as they reminisced about their old college days. Between them, they managed to consume a bottle of wine, brandy and the remains of the scotch left over from Christmas.

He stood at his window taking deep breaths of fresh air. From the seemingly bright light he shielded his eyes.

Once more he swore he would never drink so much, but this was the usual ritual undertaken the morning after a drinking binge. Though he could hold his drink, his downfall came when he began mixing the spirits.

Harry looked as dreadful as he felt, unshaven, his eyes slightly blood-shot. He found himself squinting as he looked around his untidy room.

Following his departure from the others, he could not recollect the exact sequence of events.

Matthew and Robin shared a house in Devonshire Road, Bedford Place. Alison lived with Harry in Oxford Street at the other end of City Centre.

"Harry, are you ready? Remember you said you would take Robin to the university this morning. Harry, are you sure you're okay? Say something!" Alison shouted as she knocked on his bedroom door.

"It's all right for you to come in, Ali."

As she walked in, she saw the untidy room and the "unfortunate" appearance of poor Harry. She spoke.

"And yes, I did hear you come in at the ungodly hour of three o'clock this morning. What the hell happened to you? You look a very unimpressive specimen of a human being today. In fact, I should go so far as to say that you look worse than death warmed up."

"I know, I know, you don't have to carry on. I met an old friend from my college days. You must know how things are apt to progress... it's just that we had a few too many, that's all."

"Look Alison, could you be a darling and pick Robin up for me? There's no way I could even contemplate facing the professor this morning."

He stopped, looked at her in a distressed manner, like a child who knows he has committed an offence and is too scared to pay the penalty. Then, he said sweetly,

"Please?"

She nodded, and left a relieved Harry hunting for the paracetamol in the bathroom.

As Alison approached Robin's house, she saw him peering through the upstairs window.

"Morning Robin, ready? Have you had any breakfast yet?"

Robin returned to his bedroom, whilst replying to Alison's question.

"No I haven't. Come on up, I'll be ready in about five minutes."

He sat on the floor and continued reading. He was revising for his examinations that summer.

"Do you need any help? What are you looking at?" asked Alison, peering over his shoulder.

"It's okay. I'll just put these books in my bag, then we can go."

"What's the matter Robin? You've been acting very strangely for the past few days..."

She paused then continued,

"Last night you hardly uttered a word. Come on Robin, you know you can tell me."

He looked down at the floor, twisting his wiry, thin hands in frustration. Then he spoke, but not in his usual quiet-toned self — no, there was a burning fire of vengeance in his cold, green eyes.

"There is nothing wrong. I just, I just, well ... feel ... oh, I don't know. Anyway, what's it to you? Can't I ever be left alone? All the time one of you is interfering with whatever I may be doing at that moment! I can't even sneeze or go to the loo without an inquisition following!"

"I didn't mean to ..."

"Yes! That's it, that's exactly what I mean. Everyone just wants to be kind and care for me — so they make out. Ahh, poor Robin, he's an orphan you know, isn't he sweet and cute? Pat him on the head. None of you ever take me seriously. For God's sake, I'm in the last year of my degree!"

Now he was shouting. A tear came to his eyes.

"All right, I'll wait downstairs for you while you prepare your bag for your studies," replied Alison calmly, though she did retire from the room shocked. Never had she been shouted at like that before. Having it come from Robin? Well, she was surprised more by that than by anything else. She could not understand what had brought this sudden outburst on.

Not a word was exchanged between Robin and Alison as they drove up to the university. On arriving, Alison was the first to break the icy silence.

"Will you be eating with us at lunchtime? If so, we'll meet you in the refectory at about one o'clock."

She started the car to drive away.

"Yes, thank you."

Still there was a sharp edge to the tone of his reply.

Driving whilst listening to some classical music by Wagner on the radio, Alison shuddered suddenly. She could not shrug it off. She turned completely cold, it was an indescribable sensation. Never had she felt this way and it frightened her. It was as if she could feel something bad was going to happen to her — perhaps it was a bad omen. For no reason at all, her eyes became glazed as tears started to stream down her cheeks. For the first time in years she felt vulnerable and insecure. She wanted nothing better than to get out of her car and run ...

But where? And from what was she trying to escape?

By the time she had returned home she was shaking from fear. Harry opened the door to her.

"Alison, what happened? Ali, come and sit down."

He took hold of her hand and led her to the settee.

"Why are you shivering? Look at me and tell me what's wrong. Have you been in an accident? Just calm down, take a few deep breaths."

Harry was worried, unsure of what to do. Still he held her tightly. He paused for a few seconds, making a few careful observations — hoping he

would find some clue to why his beloved "friend" was in such a state. He continued questioning her.

"Are you feeling sick? You look as though you've seen a ghost."

"Oh Harry, please hold me tightly and tell me I'm dreaming. I was so scared, please don't leave me alone. Not now, not ever."

She sat next to Harry on the settee, his arms held tightly around her as she had requested. Still as white as a sheet, now Alison was almost hysterical.

"Don't worry, I won't leave you here on your own. Come on, stop crying and calm down. You're quite safe now."

He kissed her lightly on the top of her head as he spoke, trying to comfort her. He carried on reassuring her that whatever had upset her so much could not touch her here.

"It's okay. Now tell me what happened. Who has upset you like this? I want to know, Alison!" Harry said sternly.

"It's nothing. I mean, there is nobody to blame. I just... well, oh... I don't know where to begin."

She was so confused, trying to make sense was difficult, but she continued —

"I'm not sure what it was. I was driving back, when all of a sudden the temperature in the car fell drastically. I started shivering all over. Then there were the black shadowy images, floating about in the car — several times they almost caused me to crash... oh Harry, it was awful. An overwhelming unhappiness came over me — like a grey-black cloud. It was as though I could see the black gathering for one almighty storm which was going to bring nothing but unhappiness to me. I was absolutely terrified.

It's a bad omen, I know it is. One thing of which I'm certain is that something bad is going to happen very soon."

"Ali, nothing is going to happen. There is nobody that would ever want to hurt you. Tell you what, I won't go out this evening, that way I can stay with you all day and all night. Safe now?"

He did not know what to make of Alison's weird encounter that morning or whether to take it seriously, so the only thing he thought he could do was just to give her support and comfort. One thing of which he was certain was that he could not leave her alone whilst she was in such an unstable, even volatile, mood. She seemed abnormally depressed and Harry was not sure about Alison's intentions on coping with this supposed disaster.

"Thank you, Harry. I feel so much better now. I expect you think me mad. I know what I said sounded unbelievable but —"

Harry interrupted.

"No, I believe you. I've never seen anyone look as terrified as you did twenty minutes ago."

"Thank you again."

As she snuggled up closer to Harry, she rested her head on his arms and fell asleep. He held her tightly and did not move until the doorbell rang. Alison awoke.

"Sorry Harry, I didn't mean to fall asleep. How long was I like that?" asked Alison whilst she rubbed her eyes and then stretched her arms.

"Just an hour, so don't worry!"

"I'll answer the door," replied she, standing up,

"It's probably Matthew. Gosh, it's late! We were meant to meet Robin at the refectory at one o'clock. I don't know what's wrong with him but whatever it was he snapped my head off for no real reason this morning when I collected him. Something is bothering him, he wouldn't tell me what. He put up a barrier so that I couldn't even get any information from the thoughts running through his mind. It must be something pretty serious. It's best that we keep a close eye on him, okay?"

She stopped speaking before opening the door.

"Yes, can I help you?"

A man, about forty years of age, stood there; motionless, his hands in his pockets.

The stranger did not reply. His gaze looked straight through her, like a hot knife cutting through cold butter with ease.

"Are you one of Harry's friends?" Alison enquired.

"Alison, is it you?" the unknown man asked optimistically. He took his hands out of his pockets and beckoned her towards him.

"Alison Whitley isn't it? Don't you remember me? Won't you even ask me in?"

He had already entered and was looking around the hall whilst he headed for the lounge. Alison appeared perplexed. Who was the man who had literally barged in without so much as an introduction? Quickly she followed him. Harry glanced at his bemused flat-mate, as if to ask who this man was. Alison shrugged her shoulders in reply. Then, suddenly, she became pale.

It was him! It was him coming here that had caused her to feel so frightened previously. He was the evil!

"Who are you? What do you want with me...?"

She broke off for a moment, then,

"I don't care, please just go."

She felt weaker as though he was drawing the life out of her, his sharp eyes piercing her as he began to speak to her. His voice was as smooth as black velvet, the words just flowed out like water slipping idly over rounded boulders in a stream.

"Don't you remember or recognise me at all after these years? I'm your father! It's about sixteen years since I saw you last. It's taken me that long to track you down. Aren't you going to greet me?"

He held out his creepy, long arms out assuming he was going to receive a hug from his long lost daughter.

"You! You are my father? How could you even consider coming here after what you did to momma? Haven't you any sense of decency? Get out! Get out and don't bother returning. I shan't see you!" she said vindictively without raising her voice.

Tears came to her eyes as memories of that night came flooding back. She was overwhelmed with unhappiness. Inside she felt sore and hurt, somehow betrayed by the so-called force from above. What had she done to have this "thing" back in her life. He could be nothing but trouble to her.

This evil man, this so-called human being returning after sixteen years — and for what? What could he prove by just appearing out of the blue like this? He had not once shown the slightest bit of interest in her well-being.

Alison left the room and ran upstairs. Harry stopped Mr Whitley from following her.

"You heard her! Get out!"

Harry stood firm, his arm obstructing the stairways, his other arm pointing towards the front door.

"But I only wanted to..."

"Look just leave. You've caused enough anxiety for today."

The unwelcomed stranger departed, unexcited and showing no signs of regret at the unhappiness he had so effortlessly caused.

Harry ran to Alison's bedroom.

"Alison, open this door, please. He's gone now. Don't worry, I won't allow him back in."

He paused. There was no reply. The silence was deafening. Harry could not bear it any longer. He tried opening the door again. It was locked.

"Ali, please? I can't help you while you insist on keeping yourself locked up in there like a prisoner. Anyway, don't you have some explaining to do? You haven't told me the truth about your past, have you? Staying in there won't resolve things or make him disappear."

He had abandoned using the soft approach in trying to persuade

Alison to come out of her bedroom. Instead, he spoke to her with a fair amount of severity in his voice. He made it clear who was in charge and that eventually she would have to take notice of him — she had no other choice. He said no more, but waited and listened for some sort of response.

Slowly the door opened. Cautiously, a timid face peered around the corner of the door, checking that Harry had been telling the truth. Yes, the "evil one" had left.

Alison threw herself into Harry's arms — a secure embrace. She burst into tears, but she was crying more for joy and relief than because she was afraid. Harry caressed her neck as he tried calming her down.

"Ali darling, there is nothing he can do to hurt you."

Pushing him back and holding him at arm's length, she retaliated.

"You don't know anything about him, so how can you stand there so cock-sure of yourself and say that? You can't even begin to contemplate what he's capable of doing. You weren't there, the last time I saw him! You haven't got the slightest idea about what tortures he made my mother and I go through. So don't tell me he can't hurt me! By him just coming here, the awful nightmares and memories which I thought were finally buried, they all came flooding back in a flash as soon as I recognised him!"

"I'm sorry, truly I am. I was under the impression that both your parents had died in a car crash. Why did you lie to us? What did happen, Alison? I can't help or attempt to advise you if you if I don't know the truth."

"You're right I suppose. Maybe I should have told you the truth about my parents when I first came here. I think I told you all that guff about my parents dying in a car crash because... well, it seemed an easy way out. I told that story to so many people, I expect I was beginning to believe it — probably wishful thinking on my part. I tried forgetting as much of my past as possible. You must try and understand that I was a young girl; I was about five or six years of age at the time."

She paused, then continued.

"It was pouring down outside, in fact there was a storm. I remember screaming, actually pleading, with... with that monster to leave momma alone. He had come back from work, drunk again. He was slapping and thumping her. Pushing her to the floor, he ripped off her blouse and tried kissing her. You can guess what followed, I'm sure I don't have to go through the sordid details of the way he raped her. It was awful — disgusting! To cut a long story short... he left afterwards and momma committed suicide. I found the body, half-naked and battered, lying cold and lifeless across the kitchen floor.

God, my head is spinning, I'm so confused! Hold me, hold me tightly,

please. I beg you, don't leave me alone, that's until I'm sure he's gone away for good. I swore then that I'd take my revenge out on him for momma's sake."

She stopped and wiped her eyes, the tears that had brimmed unbidden in her eyes cut Harry deeply. She looked up at him, then rested her head on his shoulder. He kissed her lightly on her soft locks.

He took her to the kitchen downstairs, sat her down and made them both a cup of steaming hot coffee.

"Alison, do you want Matthew and Robin to know what happened today? I just thought that it would be for the best, if they knew the truth."

"I'm not sure, quite honestly I don't know what to do. As I said I'm so confused, to think that in a few minutes, just as I was sure that my life was finally fitting together perfectly — this happens; my father, turns up here after so many years. What could he possibly want from me now? Okay, if you think it's for the best, tell them. Please, just don't go into any details."

"Ali, you won't be offended by my next question, you don't have to answer it. Had your father..."

Harry cleared his throat before continuing:

"Well, you know? Umm... well, sort of... touched you in any way? You know what I mean."

Once more, her face turned pale as the haunting memories became more vivid. She nodded but did not say a word about it. He left the sensitive subject alone and began introducing other topics of conversation, totally unrelated to her present problem.

A deep silence fell as they just stared at each other, both thinking, neither knowing how to approach the delicate subject.

"Have you had a boyfriend?"

"No I've never been out with anyone," replied she rather reluctantly.

"Is that because of what happened before? If you don't want to talk about it now, just say so. I don't mind, but I don't like seeing you so upset. Alison, you do know that I love you very much and that I can wait. I do understand what it must have done to you emotionally. Obviously it must have made some deep impression upon you."

Alison was stunned. She blushed and looked down at her hands as she twisted them on the table. Her heart was racing, she was unable to look Harry straight in his glistening eyes. It was like a dream come true. Always she thought Harry had cared for her as a brother, not as a boyfriend.

"Harry do you really mean that?"

She looked up at him gazing into his greyish, blue eyes.

"It's just that I never thought that you would ever fall for anyone like me — not after seeing some of the women with whom you've had flings."

Harry stood up and walked over to Alison and took hold of her hands.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked, looking carefully into her eyes to see her reaction; he did not want to rush her.

She appeared insecure and apprehensive.

"It's okay Alison. It was inconsiderate of me asking. I should have had more sense. Please don't take any notice of that, forget I asked. I know I haven't chosen the best of times to tell you how I feel about you — I do realise you've got more important things on your mind."

"Thank you for being so understanding. Don't think that I'm trying to put you off, but... well, with my father's reappearance after countless years, it certainly did surprise me. All those bad memories came flooding back — just as I thought they had all been well and truly buried.

Gosh, I've just remembered, we were meant to meet Robin and Matthew for lunch at the university. What's the time? We're already late. You better drive."

By the time Alison and Harry arrived at the university's refectory, Matthew and Robin had finished their lunch and were looking impatiently at their watches.

"What kept you both? We've been waiting ages." Matthew asked as he glared at Harry. Robin sat silently, staring coldly at the others. Harry turned around and quietly asked Alison,

"Do we tell them about your omen and the unexpected visitor?"

"Might as well. They'll probably find out sooner or later. But you can tell them."

Harry recounted the strange sequence of events that morning and the unfortunate episodes of Alison's past. There were no interruptions. They just sat silently, listening sympathetically to Harry's every word. Periodically Alison wiped a tear from her glazed eyes.

Robin appeared indifferent to Alison's plight, but really he wanted nothing less than to give her a big hug and apologise for the way he had acted and spoken to her that morning.

"Oh, by the way, the professor doesn't want us to go to the laboratory this afternoon," said Matthew, trying to uplift the conversation because he felt uncomfortable. He wanted to tell her how sorry he was but he knew that Alison did not like people feeling sorry and sympathetic.

"Goodbye, I'll see you later Matthew. If you could, collect me from the front entrance at about five o'clock. Bye!"

Gathering his books, Robin left.

Soon after Robin's departure, the others decided to return to Matthew's home where they discussed their new venture.

It had been a disastrous session. Harry and Matthew could not agree on how they ought to set about metamorphosing into another creature. Alison suggested then that it would be better that they brought a list of their ideas of what they should do.

Alison and Harry returned to their house after completing a bit of shopping, whilst Matthew collected Robin from the university.

The evening seemed to be passing pleasantly enough until Alison began feeling that strange omen that she had experienced that morning.

The lounge went cold, not over a long period of time but almost instantaneously. It was like being in an ice-box. Then there was an awful stench, a nauseating smell, it filled the whole room. It was as if there were half-rotting corpses that had been stored there for a few weeks...

Alison was screaming, she held her head in her hands whilst tremouring all over. She could see the black shadows dancing about the room. They were mocking her. Then there came child-like laughter, echoing around the room, teasing her. As she stared more and more at the shadows it was as if she could make out pairs of hands beckoning her to join them. No! Not beckoning her, because that would have meant she was being given a choice. No, it was more like they were threatening her. Yes, that's right, threatening her. They were telling her that if she did not surrender to them, she would be more unhappy and regret not having done otherwise.

Harry tried calming Alison down and encouraged her to fight the spirits that had entered the house unwelcomed.

It was the ringing of the telephone that finally distracted from her light entrancement. She picked it up.

"Alison Whitley, can I help you?"

There was no reply, just a deadly silence. It was the "evil" — she could feel the evil through the handset. There was an indescribable buzzing, calling her, begging her to go out and meet the evil.

She dropped the telephone and pointed to the handset. There it was, the monotonous, confused, humming noise. It was still there.

"It's him, it has to be him. Harry it's just pure evil as though it's Satan himself calling. I'm scared, that buzzing, a sort of humming, it seems to be ringing inside my head. Put the handset back on the phone, please hurry!" said Alison dryly. Her voice was hoarse, her complexion whiter than white. She looked like a statue of ice — cold and lifeless. Her strength had been

drawn out of her, the evil being the vampire sucking the blood out of its victim.

Without questioning her, Harry followed her instructions. Then, taking her hands, he squeezed them tightly as he looked intensely into her eyes. For a full minute they sat there, oblivious to their surroundings, only aware of the strength passing between them. Slowly, the confusion faded, and Alison felt herself being drawn into a place of security as she continued to stare into Harry's gaze.

Time passed slowly until Harry finally looked away and asked,

"Do you think it was your father on the other end of the 'phone? Did he say anything to you? Look, sit down, I'll get you a brandy. That should warm you up."

She did as she was told.

Harry poured the brandy for her. She sat silently, rocking backwards and forwards whilst staring blankly at the telephone.

It began ringing. Alison jumped, startled. She looked anxiously at Harry for assistance, her eyes begging him not to expect her to answer the telephone. Then there was a ring at the front door. Who could it be? They were not expecting anyone.

Harry answered the telephone.

"It's me. Matt. Just wondering whether you would mind us coming round, or if you want, you can both come here?"

Matthew paused then asked,

"Are you still there? It's not like you to be so quiet. Is there anything the matter, are you both okay?"

"No, we're both okay. Do you mind if we don't see you this evening? Alison is rather tired and I thought it best if she had an early night. Sorry about earlier on, come to think about it, you were correct — when we try metamorphosing tomorrow we'll use the method of auto-suggestion as a starting point. Well, bye! After you've taken Robin to the university, come round and we can make an early start. Okay? See you tomorrow."

Before Matthew could reply Harry had replaced the handset.

Still the doorbell rang. Alison sat warily in the corner of the sofa. She pointed to the door and quietly spoke.

"It's him, I'm sure. The forces of malice are well and truly set in his black soul, marshalling, perhaps hand in hand with those of Satan himself."

"Alison, you can't hide forever. He knows you are in. If he realises you're scared then he's going to continue to harass you in this way. Please let me ask him in. I promise I won't allow him to harm you in any way!"

Biting her bottom lip, she nodded, resigned.

Harry went to the door. Apprehensively, he opened it and peeped around the corner slightly to see the cold, calm figure of Mr Whitley standing motionless.

“Come in.”

He opened the door wide and directed the unwelcomed visitor to the lounge. Harry followed him and quickly walked over to Alison. He sat on the arm-rest and placed his arm around her.

Nick remained standing in his domineering pose, his face expressionless — as though butter would not melt in his mouth. His piercing gaze appeared to penetrate straight through them. A shudder ran up Alison’s spine and, once again, she said a small prayer requesting help from God to give her strength through the duration of this ‘social call’. She could feel that dreadful sensation of her mind being drained away. The buzzing recommenced.

“Stop it, stop it! What do you want with me after so long? Tell me truthfully, though I doubt whether you know the meaning of the word, tell me why you’re doing this to me! What you thought you could achieve by calling on me like this... it’s... it’s totally beyond me!”

She paused, composing herself, then continued.

“Sorry to disappoint you but you are not scaring me, just annoying me. I find your behaviour rather tedious.”

He walked over towards her but Alison retaliated almost instantly —

“Don’t come any closer! Go sit on that chair there! I don’t trust you. Sit there with your hands on the table where I can keep a close eye on you.”

She was angry now. She had sworn that nobody, but nobody was going to succeed in hurting her as he had done previously.

“How can you speak to your father like that? You’re treating me as though I’m some kind of low down tramp. I came here in order to make up with you. I’m presently going through the process of purchasing a house in Milton road. I was hoping you would come and live with me. I do so want to make it up to you.”

He sounded so convincing, even a tear came to his eyes as he swallowed, trying to clear his throat.

“You what?! You have the audacity to even contemplate that I should ever live under the same roof as you! You expect me to forgive you after what you did to mamma?”

She halted for a moment, then spoke more calmly.

“Before you leave now, one thing that made me very curious — what was the true motive for your sudden interest in parental care? If you did

really want to find me so much, why haven’t you turned up before? It must be at least fifteen years now.”

She stared him straight in the eye. She felt strong and confident. He had angered her and she wanted to prove to him that she was not intimidated or to be treated in the same unrespectful way with which he had forced himself upon her mother so many years ago... before she ended it all.

“Well you are my only daughter. You know you are just like your mother. I did love her, I know you don’t believe me, but I did love her. I need your love now. I’ve had such a bad time of life since she... well, you know, committed suicide. I’ve felt so guilty about it. Please, I beg you to try and forgive me — just give me a chance. That’s all I ask, I am your father after all. Can’t your friend leave us alone for just, say, half an hour?”

He paused and said nothing. It was Alison who was defeated as she spoke first. She had lost the war of silence.

“Well, maybe Harry could go next door for just half an hour. Mind you, no longer than half an hour!”

“Are you sure Alison?” Harry asked looking at her carefully.

She nodded approvingly.

Harry did not believe Mr Whitley’s ‘sob story’. He thought it was an elaborate act, the objective of which was to get Alison alone with him.

No sooner had Harry departed, Mr Whitley got up and walked over to Alison.

“Don’t come near me! Sit back there,” she said adamantly.

He did not listen but continued to walk towards her. A rough, sly smile spread over his face and he laughed gruffly.

“You stupid bitch. You’re just as gullible as your mother. Your mum thought that she would be able to escape from me by committing suicide — now you’ll have to take her place.”

He was sitting next to her, gripping her wrists tightly, twisting her arms back.

“Go away, you’re sick, mad, demented. Get away from me!” Alison hissed.

His eyes were strange, no longer did he listen to her complaints, he was in a world of his own. It was as if another spirit possessed him now. She jilted her head back and screeched at him.

“I’ll scream! Get away from here — you’re disgusting!”

He ignored her whimpering and pushed her down.

Get off me! I find you repulsive — you make me want to throw up...”

She started to cry.

He struck her across the face with the back of his hand. Then he put his forearm across her mouth.

"Shut your mouth! Your mother did that, I hate women crying!"

He hit her again.

Alison pushed him away and ran to the door, her assailant running quickly after her.

She picked up a vase and hurled it at him. She missed and watched it smash against the beige wall. It had been a desperate last hope of escape, now shattered like the vase. He grabbed her by the hair and forced her to the ground.

Suddenly, the door opened and Harry came in to find Alison crying in anguish. Her father jumped up and, violently pushing Harry aside, ran out of the door to disappear into the darkness.

"Alison, what the hell...?"

He stopped speaking and ran towards her, taking her into his arms. He inspected the bruises on her face and body. Then he lifted her up, carried her into the lounge and placed her gently onto the settee.

"I heard something smash so I returned as quickly as possible. He didn't, well he didn't... you know...?"

"No, thank God you came back when you did, he didn't have enough time. As soon as you left, he changed. His eyes, well his eyes, they weren't his. Also his voice, it was as if another person was speaking and had taken over his body for that period of time. The laugh was haunting, it was so horrible.

God, I feel dirty — he touched me. I have to take a shower and scrub myself clean of him. You will come upstairs with me and wait in the bathroom? I'm too scared to stay there on my own."

She was breathless, huddled in a tight ball, her hands extending out gripping to Harry's jacket. She shivered as she spoke.

"Yes, certainly," replied Harry, helping her up.

When she had washed and dressed, they went downstairs. Harry telephoned Matthew and Robin and told them to come round immediately. He explained to them what had happened that evening.

They had come to the agreement that, since Alison's father knew where she lived, it would be for the best if Harry and Alison swapped houses with Matthew and Robin as a temporary solution to the problem.

It was not until about two o'clock the next morning that Alison eventually managed to get to sleep.

She awoke screaming. Harry calmed her down, reassuring her that she was only dreaming.

"It's okay, my sweet babe, I'm here. There is no one else here. 'He' doesn't know that we're here. Just go back to sleep," he whispered, stroking her silky hair. She was like a toddler having a nightmare, needing its mother's love and comfort. Harry felt guilty for what had happened earlier on. If only he hadn't listened to Alison, who had believed her father had totally repented. No, he should have listened to his own conscience. It was as though Harry had betrayed the faith and trust that Alison had bestowed in him, especially after their conversation that afternoon.

"Don't worry, Ali. I'll make him pay for this — as long as God is my witness, he'll pay dearly," swore Harry before he himself dozed off to sleep. It was approaching four o'clock...

Mr Whitley was about thirty-nine years of age, give or take a year. He was about six foot in height and well built. His first name was Terence, but he used his middle name, Nick.

He was very handsome, resembling a typical male model — dark skin, fair hair and very blue eyes — two jewels, deep as the deepest sea. When he was younger he had had all the women in hot pursuit. But he was never satisfied with that, what he had — always he had to have more. He had to have what seemed to be impossible — married women. What he liked was to put people in fear. He got great satisfaction out of scaring women.

The majority of women he was able to charm, whether they were married or not, it was no problem. If they were married, then to him it was an added bonus. The easy catch offered no real pleasure.

No! What he really enjoyed was the thrill, the satisfaction, the power — he was put on a high when he stalked, closed on his next victim. Getting her into a predicament, where she was frightened. Then, and only then, would he feel any satisfaction, when he knew they were afraid and disgusted.

Many a time he had been found out by angry husbands, but always he had been lucky, too fortunate, having just enough time to escape and leave the trouble behind.

He had no steady occupation. He travelled around the country, getting temporary jobs — ranging from bar-work in public houses to heavy goods vehicle driving. He moved on as soon as there was any sign of trouble with a married woman's husband.

Nick had never been to Southampton before now. It took only a week to find out where his daughter lived.

A week had passed and Alison had not seen her father. They were still staying at Matthew's house. Twice, Nick had broken into Alison's house to find that Robin and Matthew were living there. When asked where Alison and Harry were, Matthew replied,

"Oh, the last couple who were here have moved to London. Sorry I haven't got a forwarding address."

After that, Mr Whitley no longer disturbed Robin or Matthew, although he stayed in Milton road.

Robin was revising hard for his examinations. This was fortunate for others as they were able to make great progress with their new project. The professor had given them all a month's holiday.

The auto-suggestion had proved very successful. All three of them had managed to metamorphose into other animals and even imitate other people. They found great amusement when changing themselves into their tutor, mimicking his continental accent and strange mannerisms. With this new found gift, Alison no longer felt threatened by her father.

The only problem they encountered at the moment was the length of time during which they had metamorphosed. Their transformation into another animal lasting only a quarter of an hour at most. Hence, when in the figure of a bird, they did not endeavour flying.

The strange sensation felt by the students was that of a positive frenzy. In their initial enthusiasm for this most exciting and most promising venture, none of them had thought, either in the wrong hands or during the wrong circumstances, how dangerous this knowledge could be.

The feeling experienced by the students in their new found freedom of control over their appearance had become quite addictive. It was thrilling to them, and they spent ninety-nine percent of their free time devoted to their new fascination. Still, they did not inform Robin of their achievement.

It was the anniversary of the day Nick had raped Alison's mother. The night was dark — there was a storm raging. There were clashes of thunder as though the Gods above were angered with the mere mortals below. Quickly following the outrage were deadly bolts of lightning, being thrown mercilessly from the heavens above. The rain lashed against the window. It was too wet to venture out that evening. The streets were deserted, like those of old Western ghost towns.

Nick was driving home from Lyndhurst to Southampton. The noise of the rain, beating against the windscreen, drowned out the music playing

from the car stereo. His windscreen wipers appeared to be moving in time with the flashes of lightning illuminating the overcast sky.

It was impossible to see into the distance — the bright lights of any vehicles coming from the opposite direction were not visible until they were quite close. Consequently, due to the bad weather, Nick returned to his abode, his lair, at about eleven-thirty that evening. This had been a great disappointment — it displeased him that he was unable to seduce anyone that night.

The storm had affected Nick. Whether it was guilt or not, he was having flashbacks of when he had subjected his fragile wife to that night of torture. That fragile object, like a piece of fire porcelain figurine, which, so easily, he succeeded in shattering into a thousand minute fragments...

Mr Whitley was not the only person who was being affected by the storm. It was frightening — the hot, sweaty, troubled figure rolled over and over in the untidy bed.

The strange voice screamed out, cursing and swearing that 'He' was going to die and that 'He' had lived long enough. Then, there was a silence for a few seconds. Exactly what happened next was hard to describe.

After the voice had ceased to cry out with so much agony, the body calmed down and lay in the corpse position and commenced breathing deeply. The face was pale and the eyes opened suddenly, staring blankly into the darkness. Then! Then, there were a few mutterings, mumbled and incomprehensible. The body began levitating and became suspended in mid-air. Its arms were stretched out, beating up and down. Then, it happened — the body metamorphosed into a bird of prey. Its eyes were strange, emerald green, almost fluorescent and like torches. It guided itself out through the open window and into the sea of the raging tempest, which had waged war against the world that night...

By the following morning, the storm had subsided and there was a freshness in the air, as though all the tension and anxiety had been cleared.

Harry had woken up early and had prepared some breakfast for Alison.

"Ali? Ali! Wake up it's ten o'clock."

Whilst gently shaking her, he spoke softly, his voice as smooth as velvet. Slowly, she stirred, rubbing her eyes.

"God, I'm tired. I had a terrible night's sleep and — oh, my arms are so stiff," she replied, sluggishly.

After she had eaten and dressed, Alison began reading the local paper.

Suddenly, she dropped it and, turning white as a sheet, she screamed, "Harry! Harry! Have you read this?! Do you know anything about this?!"

Harry came running into the lounge.

"What? What do you mean? No, I haven't read the paper yet. Slow down and explain, what is it I should read?"

She pointed to the article.

"That's it!" she said, shaking.

He read the article —

During the early hours of this morning, a Mr Terence Nicholas Whitley, 45, was killed. He was found by neighbours who had been alerted when they heard screaming coming from an upstairs room in his house in Milton Road, Bedford Place.

The victim's face was badly scratched and his throat torn. Overall, the body was severely mutilated with deep slashes. Police are treating this case as a brutal murder but are baffled to what the motive could be. There was no forced entry and nothing was stolen...

Harry sat down, stunned.

"What are you going to do? Will you be going to the Police station to get a few more details, or what?"

That question was typical of Harry. He looked at things logically and realistically.

"I suppose I'll have to go down and explain that he was my father. I know I hated him, but never did I wish him dead. To think that he died the same night that mother committed suicide — maybe his conscience had finally caught up with him and he also committed suicide... No, maybe not. From the brief description in the paper, he died a gruesome death. I wonder who did it..."

Harry moved over to Alison and put his arm around her.

"Ali, I know it's an awful thing to say, but it's for the best. At least he can no longer harass you. He has got what he deserves, finally. It's probably someone from the underground to whom he owed money. You, of all people, must admit that he was no saint."

"You're right! I don't know why I'm feeling so sad or shocked. With his past there are probably lots of people who've a grudge against him... Right! Shall we go and see the police and maybe they'll tell us more about what happened?"

They had spent several hours at the Police station. The only conclusion to which the inspectors and forensics had come, was that the slashes

on the body of the deceased were made by the claws of some very large bird of prey.

Alison had been bombarded with questions about his life history, and why had she not lived with him when she was younger. At one stage, Alison felt that she was in the prosecution box — the perfect candidate with the perfect motive for murdering her father.

She departed pale and withdrawn. For most of the journey back in the car, Alison remained quiet. Harry hummed along with the songs playing on the radio. Alison was the first to break the deafening silence.

"Maybe it was me. I loathed him enough. What if it was me? What if, during the night, I had changed into a bird of prey without knowing, and attacked him? That way, my attendance would have remained untraced..."

She paused, then continued.

"Oh Harry! What if it was me? What now — you don't think that in the future, if anyone was ever to upset me, that I'd ever kill them without knowing it? God, I wish I'd never mentioned were-wolves and metamorphosis a few weeks ago. It's a good thing Robin never got involved with this confounded project!"

"Don't blame yourself, Ali. There's no way you would have done it — you're too soft-hearted and forgiving! But, come to think about it, it could have been either Matthew or myself!"

Instead of returning home, they visited Matthew and told him of Mr Whitley's death. Now, their minds were preoccupied with figuring out who had committed the unexpected murder.

CHAPTER THREE

REALISATIONS

"ROBIN, ROBIN!" MATTHEW SHOUTED FROM OUTSIDE THE BEDROOM DOOR. THERE WAS no reply. He knocked again and tried opening the door, but to his astonishment it was locked.

"Come on, open up Robin. You have to get up now — you're late. I've been up for absolutely ages."

Matthew put his ear against the door and strained as he tried listening for any movement. Then he heard a low, muffled voice,

"Go away. You're kidding, it's far too early yet!"

"What do you mean, too early? For your information, it's eleven-thirty. I've got you a cup of coffee — open your door please."

Matthew waited a few minutes while the lifeless creature crawled slowly out of his lair and unlocked the door, rubbing his eyes. He took the cup and closed the door.

The unusual lethargic behaviour exhibited by Robin continued for several weeks. It was getting worse. There was a definite deterioration in his work, as he did not appear to be producing any results of importance for Professor Fergere. Consequently, the professor gave Robin and his colleagues a one week holiday. The unusual tiredness was put down to mounting pressure from his forth-coming examinations that summer.

No-one thought anything of it when, during that week, they did not see or hear from Robin. They did not check up on him lest they disturbed him whilst he was busy studying.

It was late Sunday afternoon when Alison enquired about Robin. It

was only then that it occurred to them that Robin's solitude was very strange for him.

Following this observation, the students returned to Matthew's house to investigate the well-being of the youngster.

They banged and shouted at the door, but there was no reply. This continued for approximately half an hour. After not hearing a word or any other form of response from the locked room, they resorted to breaking down the door.

They were to find a frightened boy crouched, wrapped in a fouled blanket, in the furthest corner of the room. Although conscious, he did not appear aware of their entry, but was staring wildly in a most alarming fashion. This pale, haunted face, looking into oblivion, noticed nothing of the unorthodox intrusion into his room.

Alison ran to the huddled bundle and carried him out of the room.

It was disgusting. The students were almost sick at the vile stench from the half-rotten food, itself almost completely overtaken by a colony of mould. Assailed by the repugnant odour, it was evident to them that Robin had not, for any reason, vacated his room for at least several days.

Harry called a doctor.

After a thorough examination, it was clear, or rather decided, that all Robin required was a good rest and careful looking after. Apparently his mind was over-exhausted with too much revision for his examinations and in conjunction he had not paid sufficient attention to his dietary habits.

"I was foolish enough to assume that Robin was looking after himself adequately and that everything was fine. How stupid can you get? To think that someone as young as Robin would have enough sense to look after himself, with his sort of circumstances — he's under a lot of stress."

Matthew felt very guilty for Robin's poor state of health.

Days passed and, despite the special care and attention he was receiving, Robin was becoming more ill. He was considerably weaker and was not able to converse coherently. He was petrified. What of, no-one knew.

Robin would not, or rather could not, sleep. It had got to the stage now that as soon as he closed his eyes, he screamed and immediately awoke.

Night after night Matthew would be awakened by the high pitched shrills from Robin, who would be found sitting bolt upright in bed, staring blankly into the darkness, beads of cold sweat streaming down his forehead whilst he tremored all over. It had got to the extreme point now, that Robin could sleep only with the aid of sedatives.

The unexpected deterioration of the fading figure had been reported to the professor. He was determined to discover the root of Robin's problems. Turning to last resort techniques, he could think of only one way. In front of the students, Professor Fergere put Robin under hypnosis. Then, at last, the truth and answers came out.

All the students were relieved, but also dumb-founded, that the finger no longer pointed at them but at Robin solely. Never would they have thought of questioning him about it...

The professor managed to put Robin in a trance without using a "pin-point" on which the frail boy could concentrate, but instead exercising his smooth, monotone voice to entrap the youngster's powerful mind.

However, this was by no means an easy task. For a long time Robin succeeded in putting up a mental barrier, fighting the persuasive voice that was inviting his subconscious to relieve the heavy burden which had troubled it for so long.

"It was I, it was I who killed them. I don't know why, but I did it!" Robin suddenly exclaimed.

"Who did you kill Robin?" the professor asked, noting the boy's every word.

The rather grizzled professor did not seem concerned that one of his students, especially Robin, may have been a murderer. He looked on this as being another experiment. Robin continued to recount his life-history and, more importantly, his detailed and descriptive account of the strange visions that were the cause of his present ill health. He was paranoid of the slightest movement or unfamiliar sound.

"Them! They called themselves parents? They couldn't have loved me — not... not the way they treated me. She tortured me, burnt me with lit cigarettes. So why shouldn't they go through the same sort of pain and anguish as myself? You see, it was I who started the fire. They died knowing the fear I had of fire and hot objects. They deserved it!"

Then Robin appeared to be distracted by something. He mumbled to himself.

Again the professor had to be firm. It was like trying to deal with a child who was being bullied but was too terrified to report the culprits. The young boy's mind felt as though it was being hemmed in — the accused in the prosecution dock, being cornered in such a skilful manner, being reassured continually and encouraged that confessing, 'coming clean', would be the only sensible method of resolving the verdict.

He was told that they, his friends, would be in a better position to assess the problem and hence, hopefully, solve it.

"We're on your side, Robin. Now don't be afraid, we can help you if you

tell us. What's the problem? What's so awful that you can't sleep?" repeated the tired professor. Robin laughed, then whispered,

"I've a secret. Poor Alison didn't know that I had used her mind when she was asleep to find out about the metamorphosis. I know she felt so guilty about her father's death, but she needn't be..."

He stopped and laughed in an almost hysterical manner.

"Yes, sorry Alison, but it was me, me who killed him — your father! I thought it would be for the best and that it was what you wanted. To get rid of him? Wasn't it what you wanted?"

His mood changed suddenly, from laughing he was near crying, upset. He swallowed as he tried desperately to clear his throat, his voice trembling.

"Come on Robin, what are you scared of? The murders are in the past, it hadn't bothered you before, so it must be something that is going to happen in the future. What is it? Come on, you know you can tell us, they can't harm you."

The professor had to be stern and realistic if he was to gain results of any importance.

"Do I have to tell you? I can't! It means I'll have to remember it all again. I don't want to do that — it's too horrifying, it's far worse than you can ever imagine..."

"No Robin, you're wrong. I can't help you fight this if you don't open up to me."

The young boy twisted his hands frantically, trying to pluck up the courage to depict the recurring dream that had been so successful in haunting his sleep.

"I'm so frightened here. Can't you come and get me away from this squalid place? I'll die if you don't get here soon!"

He was trembling all over. He curled himself into a tight ball and began vigorously rubbing his hands.

"There's no reason to be so nervous, stop shaking so," the professor said soothingly.

"I'm not shaking because I'm nervous, no, I'm so cold," replied Robin, stuttering as his teeth chattered involuntarily. The professor touched his hands and was very shocked. The doctors who were meant to be closely observing this unique boy had not kept careful checks on the fluctuations of his temperature. Professor Fergere covered the boy with his tweed jacket.

"Where are you now? Where should we meet you?"

"I don't know where I could be. I'm lost. It's as though I know the place... what I mean is that it's so familiar, but on the other hand, it can't be. It's Southampton, maybe in an age long since gone."

"What are you looking at Robin? Come on, don't leave us now. If you want to be helped then you're going to have to concentrate on giving us, your friends, directions. Don't allow anyone or anything to distract you. Are you listening still?"

"There's pestilence and disease here. I can hear groans, aching groans coming from strange, weird creatures. They're people like us... well, almost like us. Most of them wander about half-starved. As I look around me I can see two groups of crazed beings fighting over a dog. It must have died a short while ago as it has only just been found. I've seen other animals being killed. It's so barbaric, they die usually through a severe battering with wooden planks. They don't keep any form of food stores here — whatever has been found that day, by whatever means, is eaten as soon as possible, lest it's stolen. There's that bitter wind again. It howls and screams, distorting the moans of the many homeless, destitute people. Oh no! What am I going to do now? They're here — the System. I've got to find somewhere to hide..."

There followed a long silence. The professor had tried getting Robin's attention but failed. He was worried about the well-being of his project. This had to be all his fault. The killing of Alison's father, Robin's 'disappearance' or rather absence, from the real world — none of this would have been possible if he, the leading professor in his field of work, had not put so much pressure on Robin. He had specially cultured Robin from the very first day he had been put into his care. Training him to use his mind, so that he could use the full potential of his subconscious when he was fully conscious and in authority. Also he had taken great pride in educating him in a wide variety of subjects and taught him several different languages. Robin was unique. He had natural psychic powers but with the additional fine tuning of Professor Fergere, it was doubtful that anyone living mastered the same amount of power, singularly.

The silence was broken as Robin screamed — a horror welled up from the dark caverns of his mind, a shrill screech of disgust and fear echoed in the deep, winding path of his inner ear.

He went through the motions of being sick, but only saliva was brought up.

"What is it Robin?" asked the professor with a hint of urgency in his voice. There was a definite sign of relief on the aged face of the professor as Robin's mouth opened and began to reply once more.

"Why I scream, I don't know. It's a common enough occurrence

here, to see people punished in that way. An old, frail man has just had his left hand sawn off with a blunt knife; it still had the blood-stains on from the last amputation. The System are so good at exerting their sinister influence, using that incident as another example to the masses..."

Again Robin's stammering voice trailed off.

"Okay Robin, when you wake up you won't remember ever being scared of these strange dreams. You're going to have a long sleep and a good rest, wherever you may be now. Bye for now Robin, don't forget to call us once you wake up. Remember, no-one there can help you, only us, your friends. You can only trust us!"

As the professor finished speaking, Robin fell asleep. It was the first time in weeks that on closing his eyes he did not immediately awake screaming. Although the professor and the students were dumb-founded as to what Robin had been referring, at least they had succeeded in getting him to sleep.

They left the room leaving a nurse in their place. She had been instructed to notify them as soon as their Sleeping Beauty began to stir.

Robin slept for eighteen hours. Not once did he scream out in terror or start whimpering as he witnessed some sordid event happening in his other world.

Meanwhile Professor Fergere read through his detailed notes of Robin's descriptions. He discussed the possible meanings with the other students. What had confused them was the comment to the date during which Robin claimed this was all happening. None of them could recollect any point in the history of Great Britain where something called the System ruled.

The conclusions varied. Firstly, it may have been during the unsuccessful reign of Oliver Cromwell. Or, secondly, during the period of the Black Plague. But it was all pure supposition, there was no concrete evidence or any historical records in the Local History department of the City Library. Maybe Robin was wrong, maybe it was a historical era of some other country?

Before Robin awoke completely, once more Professor Fergere put him under hypnosis. It was an easier task this time. This was probably due to the fact that the boy was no longer afraid of this mysterious place and also because this had been the first time in a long time that he had managed to actually have a good, uninterrupted sleep. Hence he was far more relaxed and willing to co-operate.

"Robin, are you there still? Where is your mind at the moment? We

want to help you as much as possible. Don't worry, the System won't know that you are currently talking to us."

"I know, I'm at the other place and I don't know how to return to your world. I'll tell you what I can see in my immediate surroundings, then I'll describe what I thought as being notable sites. Ready?"

The professor was astonished at Robin's calmness. It was as if, finally, he had within himself acknowledged his situation and was quite intent to do his damnest to get his life back to where he truly belonged.

"I'm sure it's Southampton. But if only you were all here now, none of you would believe me. There are no longer any tall buildings — those dreadful sky-rising flats, they are just crumbled remains, marking the spot of their previous existence. I hate going past there at night, it's so eerie, I can feel a heavy sadness. I heard the screams of people, crying out for help. It must be lost souls wandering about trying to find peace... The vegetation is sparse. For some reason or other, I don't know why, but plants and other things no longer grow easily. The tall trees in the parks are dead — burnt." He stopped, paused and thought.

"I'm not doing a good job of describing my location, it's so difficult. I'll have to think of another method of doing it."

"What are you thinking Robin?"

There was no answer. Just that cold, icy silence.

"Shh, I'm trying to concentrate. I can't explain what I'm trying to do in a lot of detail now, but please watch my eyes very carefully. If it works then I'll be able to get guidance and advice from you."

Professor Fergere was bemused. What was Robin rambling on about the flats being virtually demolished? What was he trying to do now that he required complete silence from them all? The only time they were ever silent was when the young boy put himself into a deep trance, just before a major experiment. The professor himself was extremely worried. It was a hazardous place, and Robin had no time to spare trying out new experiments when he had to pay his undivided attention to what was happening in his immediate vicinity...

The long silence was shattering their nerves. An hour had passed and still they heard nothing. They dared not speak, just in case they disturbed Robin. But what if, on the other hand, he had got himself into serious trouble and was unable to communicate with them for the moment?

They waited patiently as another hour passed. Very quietly, Alison sneaked out of the bedroom and made them all a cup of tea which was gratefully received by the others. They sat on hard-back chairs around

Robin's single bed. They waited patiently as the time, very slowly, dragged on.

"It's no use, he's probably fallen asleep. Let's go. Nothing is going to happen now," Harry whispered to the professor.

Quietly, they got up, stretching their arms, and waited a few seconds for their legs to awaken. They crept towards the door. Suddenly Matthew spoke in a low voice:

"Look! What's that? Something strange is happening to Robin!"

Quickly the others turned their heads and stared blankly at Robin. Never had they seen anything as spectacular, if that is how it could be described. What he was doing now, defied all set scientific theories as to how the body worked. They must be hallucinating, it could not be true. How did he do it? Again, Robin had astounded the bemused group of spectators. Just as they thought that he had achieved his ultimate capability in utilising the psychic powers from his mind, he proved them totally wrong.

The on-lookers felt admiration for this unique feat. They stared deeply into his green eyes. It was like watching a film being projected onto a fluorescent green background. They could see Robin in his strange surroundings. Somehow he had managed to project where he was in relation to his surroundings onto the pupils of his eyes. They pondered at the marvel. The group were overwhelmed with extreme pain of their body and mind due to the anxiety they experienced, the more they saw of the world through Robin's eyes. Never had they imagined the vivacity of Robin's depiction of his surroundings.

The professor took detailed notes of where he saw Robin going and what he was doing. He wondered how long the boy could sustain his present state, projecting, through his mind, his every move. How long before he would need to sleep in some deteriorated, barren place where he would hope to be safe?

"Robin, walk to that charred tree stump. Is that an old newspaper of sorts?"

Robin followed Professor Fergere's command. It was an old newspaper. He began to scan it, but instead of having to peruse the print the professor was able to read it through Robin's eyes. Finally they were able to understand where Robin was. It was a national paper, but it was dated April 5th 1989 — that was the future. An extract of the front page read as follows —

...tensions between the Western and Eastern blocks escalated last

night as the Russian representative walked out of the emergency meeting at the United Nations.

Threats have been exchanged between the Superpowers as the Russians still refuse to remove their warships from the Straits of Hormuz. For three weeks, the warships have been obstructing the passage of Western oil super-tankers from entering or leaving the Middle Eastern area. It has been estimated that within two days all Western industries will have to close if the important oil supplies do not reach the countries.

Disturbing reports have come in, detailing massive deployments of the navies and armies of the U.S.A. and of the U.S.S.R. The latest news concerns Nome in Alaska and Anadyt in the U.S.S.R., both on the coast of the Bering Sea. The U.S.A. have a heavy reinforcement of large warships and aircraft carriers based at port on the island of Saint Lawrence in the Bering Strait...

...last night the British Prime Minister made a radio broadcast to the nation...

"It seems that war is imminent and that we must prepare ourselves for the worst as the negotiations between the Superpowers have ceased..."

As soon as the professor had finished reading the articles, Robin discarded the newspaper and wiped his grimy hands on his grubby coat. What he then said showed his complete understanding of his vocation and circumstances —

"Scarcely noting the passage of time, until the gathering dusk has made it impossible for me to explore any further, I now enter the debris of the original door to find this rather grim interior surprisingly sound and dry. Here I shall sleep tonight, in this desolate, haunting place. But this I must say — in quiet moments I still feel the stirring of fear that I felt during my earlier days in this world, but my resolution dismisses them easily and I'm content to accept the duty I'm charged with. I know that I'm embarked on this difficult project which might be the salvation of Mankind and may bestow him the freedom of the world if I'm careful. Goodnight. Don't worry, I'll keep you informed."

Robin curled up into a tight ball and slept. The small, fatigued figure shivered occasionally as the cold, still air pierced through his worn coat like sharp daggers. He awoke the next day and warily ventured out of the shelter to see the sun rising as the rays tried to penetrate the overcast sky.

The exceptionally cold night had made his limbs very stiff, but the discomfort was over-ridden by the pain he experienced from his stomach. He had not eaten for at least three days and he was reminded of this fact constantly as his stomach grumbled and growled fiercely at him.

“Professor Fergere, are you there?” asked Robin. His deep, green eyes opened and once more they showed Robin’s surroundings and the grave discomfort felt by the unfortunate boy. A tear rolled down his cheek as he reflected back, thinking of his far easier life in his real world and more importantly, the love and support shown by his fellow students. If only he could be back there now, he could then apologise to Alison for shouting at her and tell her how much he did love her...

These thoughts were quickly expelled from his mind as the professor spoke. Robin, remembering that he now had a more important duty in trying to save the world from disaster, understood that his sorrows were, for the moment, secondary.

“Robin, we’re ready, can you open your eyes again? I wasn’t ready when you had your eyes opened previously.”

Robin did as he was bidden. In search of food, he had travelled quite a distance that morning from where he had slept the previous evening.

“Is there any way that you can get food to me here? I’m afraid that I won’t be much help soon, I’m growing weaker and weaker as each moment passes. For two hours now I’ve been looking for something, anything, that can be classed as edible, but unfortunately I’ve found nothing.”

“Don’t worry Robin, we’ll think of something. Where are you now?”

“I’m approaching what used to be the old ports. I’ve heard rumours that the System collect supplies from here, but when, I don’t know.”

There was silence. The spectators just stared through Robin’s eyes — the emeralds — but these jewels held more secrets than the history of any other prize stones.

Matthew was the first to break the icy silence.

“Going back to getting food to Robin, the main problem we have is that he’s technically unconscious, so we can’t feed him conventionally through his mouth. But what if we were to feed him by having him put on a drip? At least that way we can ensure he’s getting the right balance of vitamins, etc. And also I’m not too happy at the thought of Robin eating anything out there, as, if we are correct and there has been a nuclear holocaust, then isn’t he in danger of eating food that has been contaminated by radiation? The last thing we want is Robin to die of radiation sickness.”

What Matthew had said was correct, none of them had thought of how

dangerous it would be for anyone to eat out there. Also the idea of feeding Robin using a drip was a sensible and easy solution to their problem.

“Matthew, well done. That’s a brilliant idea. Alison, go and make the necessary arrangements. We want the drip connected to Robin as soon as possible.”

Alison did as the professor asked and left the room, taking her coat. She had not been out of Matthew’s house for days and her eyes felt sore as they tried readjusting to the sunlight. Now that she was actually out in the streets of the real world, it was only now that the full impact of what was going on in that ordinary house dawned on her. She had mixed feelings about what they were attempting to do. Was it right? That they were going to try and change the future by preventing a nuclear war? Or should they just concentrate on getting Robin back here, to his home, where once more she could act as a mother to him, while they knew he had not been injured or killed?

To think of these unfortunate, ignorant people — they just lived day by day, working hard so that they could secure a happy retirement and also keep up appearances to the other middle-class snobs. If only they knew what the future, in a year’s time, held! Then it would be a different image they would portray — no more Mr Niceguy! From then on, it would be a fight for survival. But on the other hand, they would probably take the easy route out by burying their empty, thoughtless heads in the sand. They didn’t deserve to be saved. This sick society could maybe benefit from something like the System, to keep a proper order over them...

It did not take long to get the necessary authorisation to have Robin put on a drip at home, and not in a hospital, though it would have been interesting to see the faces of the doctors and nurses when they saw Robin’s eyes.

Before going back to the house, Alison went and did some shopping. Like Robin that morning, she was also feeling her stomach cry out for food. Again it had started to rain. As she drove up the High Street, returning to Matthew’s house, she watched the pedestrians scurry quickly into the closest shop.

After they had eaten, they continued their adventure with Robin, in the realms of the future.

“Something important must be afoot, there is too much activity going on at the port today — it can’t just be supplies that the System is expecting. As you can see, there are a lot of armed guards patrolling the place. I wonder what they have got planned for these unsuspecting souls now. For the

last few days they were trying desperately to clean up the city and also to get some order. For the very desperate people, they were even supplying old clothes, which, however shabby, were a lot better than the old threads the people had beforehand. You must remember that these people would have lost all their clothing at the same time that they lost their homes. What do you think could be the reasoning behind all this? You've been able to see the same things as me."

"Robin, have the System ever mentioned anything about a Leader? Have they ever done mass seminars, the dictating of any form of doctrine? Do you know anything about what sort of political ideals they have and wish the inhabitants to follow?"

The professor's tone of voice changed, it was no longer just inquisitive or finding this an interesting experiment of the capabilities of the mind — no, to the contrary, this had become a deadly serious reality of what was to come. As it had been almost certainly a nuclear war that had left this city in such a deteriorated state, then, by finding out what politics the governing power — the System — held, it could be deduced who, if anyone, had won this bloodbath.

In the distance they could see a large vessel approaching, silhouetted, a black image against the skyline. A yellow-grey fog covered the sea like a thin wash of paint in a picture, glazing slightly the view of anyone on land. It would be just a few hours now before the ship would arrive.

Robin's attention was drawn away from the ship, as he heard cries of protest. A long line of chained people were being forced to come to the dock. It looked as though the captors must have spent a fair amount of time seeking out these people who did not look like the usual starving, destitute crowd that roamed about the streets, moaning. No, these were the stronger of the people who, by using force and a certain amount of organisation, had managed to survive quite adequately by stealing food from others, with the smallest amount of effort. How the System had found their hide-away was a mystery. What the System wanted with this rabble was also baffling. Surely, they did not just want them as a welcoming party, to cheer and wave at some unknown figure — there would not be any need for the chains. Maybe the System thought these people to be a threat of some sort and were going to execute them. It could have been that the captives, who were getting stronger each day as more people joined them, had somehow, by whatever means, found out about what was going to happen today and had planned some sort of assassination. Knowing how the System worked, Robin surmised that it would not be long before the System would make it known what these selected few were going to have done to them.

Always, if any punishments or executions were to take place, the event would be heavily advertised, so that the rest of the public could take note, and hopefully, by inducing fear into the masses, a better form of order could be upheld.

"Robin, this sort of spectacle, does it occur often?"

"No, I've never seen this kind of mass persecution happen before. I can make a few discrete enquiries, that's if you want, but the only problem with doing anything like that is that one can't ever be sure that who you are talking to isn't an informant of the System. It would also mean giving myself away, by getting out of this hiding place. I may be spotted by a guard from the System — I don't know what they would do to me if they knew that I've been hiding here all morning, witnessing this sudden deployment of most of their stronghold. Hey, I've just had an idea, tell me what you think of this — if, as it seems, most of the System are assembled here, then what if I was to go to their main base and see what I can find. They must have some form of written documentation. It's not far away from here — say, quarter of an hour's walk, that's if I get up a fast pace. Anyway I can't see the ship getting into dock for a while yet."

"You're sure that's not going to be too dangerous? Once there, how do you propose getting into the place? They'll still have some guards, and there must be an extensive network of security."

"Well, I've nothing to lose by going there, I've never tried breaking into that place before and I don't know of anyone else attempting to either."

Carefully Robin got out of his hiding place, crept behind the other stacked boxes and, once the guard had moved and started to patrol in another area, managed to run away.

Robin kept to walking through the debris of buildings, as opposed to walking on the roads. More of the System were heading in the direction of the docks along the roads, and there was nothing worse for tempting fate than passing them *en route*.

It was tiring for the rest, just watching Robin and not being out there to help him. They felt helpless, it was hard trying to advise him when they, themselves, did not know enough about the place and how the System worked. But maybe in time there would be something, more of use to the boy, that they could do. There were mixed emotions about what Robin was doing. On the one hand they were proud of the way he was handling his situation and the mature manner in which he had grasped the way of surviving in such a run-down place that was run by brute force and violence. This caused them to feel awe; they stared into his eyes and watched all the

perils the youngster had to avoid wherever he walked. On the other hand they felt like crying as they thought more and more about the suffering and poverty he saw. No-one who felt responsible for their children would allow them to witness, or be a part of something as disturbing as that world. There were several times that the on-lookers were almost sick, watching people dying painfully from typhoid, yellow fever and other such diseases that were caused by unrefined water and lack of sanitation.

As he approached the Regional Headquarters of the System, Robin's heart-rate began racing. Though he was terrified by the thought of what he was about to attempt, he was also very excited. Never had anyone here even contemplated breaking into this large, well-guarded complex, let alone put thoughts into action.

It had not changed since the last time he had seen it — there it was, in all its glory. Unlike the other buildings, it was not an unstable concrete structure, liable to collapse if leaned against — this building was different. A lot of people had died building it.

When the System had first set itself up in the area, they had used the population to build this eye-sore. Women and children had been used to carry heavy loads of imported materials from the port. They had worked at least eighteen hours a day, every day, until it was finished.

There were no windows, just a rows of slits in the walls, glazed on the inside with thick sheets of glass.

"The interior must be in total darkness most of the time, unless they have some sort of power source — a way of generating electricity — which they'd need if they were to have lights in there," Robin commented, pondering whether the very tall fence surrounding the perimeter was safe to touch. The mesh of the fence was too close a network for Robin to be able to scale it.

"Have you any suggestions as to how I can get over the fence? I can't very well go to the front gate and ask whether they'll mind me going in so that I can snoop around."

About five minutes passed before anyone uttered a word.

"I don't know whether this is going to be possible to do, but as it did work before; why not try metamorphosing into a bird, so that you can fly over the fence, then depending on what spaces there are in the structure, change into another animal."

Again, Matthew came up with an idea, but whether Robin had enough energy to do that at the moment could only be answered by Robin

himself. The boy did not reply, instead he looked around for some form of shelter in which he could hide.

Once he had found a suitable place, he lay flat on his back in the corpse position and closed his eyes, cutting off the professor and students temporarily. Though they could not see Robin, they could hear him. He commenced breathing deeply, as he usually did before a major experiment, in order to put himself into a deep trance. It was not long before again he started levitating and as he started flapping his arms up and down, they began to change from having a coating of skin, to having a layer of feathers. As well as having the usual features of a bird, Robin had also managed to decrease his size to that of an owl. The final touch came when he opened his eyes and they fluoresced like kryptonite — the emerald green glowing brightly. The professor had never witnessed such a transformation, to him it was just as beautiful as watching an animal giving birth to a new-born.

Robin soared high into the sky and circled the building. He had a good view of it from above, stalking his prey, trying to find a weakness, maybe some cavity that he could get through in order to penetrate the usual security areas. He was lucky; on circling the building for a second time, he noticed a small crevice. When giving it a closer inspection it was clearly visible that it was a ventilation shaft, approximately seventy centimetres square. It was the only one, and was situated at the top of the west wall, just underneath the roof. By using his talons, Robin pulled off the grid from the ventilation shaft through which he swiftly flew, gliding gracefully around each corner. From travelling through the ventilation shaft it appeared that all the internal shafts led to this one central exit. Robin spent a fair amount of time getting to know what each room was used for by viewing the System at work on his side of the ventilation grilles.

Robin was afraid to speak whilst in the shaft, lest his voice was to echo through all the shafts and hence his presence become known to the System. He left it to his friends to see for themselves and to draw their own conclusions. If they had any important point to make, then he was sure they would advise him. Eventually, Robin lost count of the number of rooms this 'prison' held, though a number of them were empty chambers, rather like a stack of cages used to keep the imprisoned. Robin removed the grille which led to one these chambers and flew in.

The owl was just about to lie down on the floor of the barren cell, when Alison warned him of the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Robin, quickly, someone is coming. I don't know what you are thinking of doing, but, whatever, do it later."

"This won't take a minute Ali," Robin whispered.

It happened, what he was afraid of — one of the guards had heard his mumbles. Immediately they started shouting,

"Who's there? Come out now!"

Robin ignored their threats and continued with what he had in mind. He was right, it didn't take long — he metamorphosed straight into a mouse, without having to go through a middle stage of transforming into a human being. Again, it was a spectacular exhibition of his talent, showing how he could utilise his psychic powers to do exactly what he wanted. He had managed to change his being just in time, before the guards had reached the chamber. He crawled into a dark corner and curled his tail in towards his white, furry body. At last the guards left, they blamed each other for what they heard previously and continued patrolling their patch. For that instant the mouse had to keep his eyes closed, as it feared its torch-like gaze would attract attention and result in the guards trying to capture him — it would be a novelty to possess a white mouse which also had green eyes that shone so bright.

Robin had been right earlier on, there were some form of lights that were run on electricity. There must have been a generator built somewhere near by.

The professor was busy going over the plans of the shafts he had made when the owl had flown through them. At the same time he had recorded what each room appeared to be used for. There was one particular area which did not have a shaft but, if his plans had been sketched correctly, contained a large space which was unaccounted for. The professor checked and rechecked his calculations and when he was convinced that he was right, he gave Robin directions to where this place should be.

It was what they were hoping to find. There were numerous filing cabinets and shelves, upon which stacks of files sat collecting dust. In a corner, between the shelves and the largest of the filing cabinets, several cardboard tubes stood upright. Harry was the first to spot them.

"Robin, don't you think it would be a better idea that you changed back to yourself — there's no way you can read any of those papers if you're that size. Anyway, I think that those tubes in that corner, to the right of you, hold some sort of plans. There's not much time left, you'll have to leave soon if you're to get back to the port."

Harry spoke calmly, but there was a hint of severity in his voice. It was as if he was slightly jealous of Robin having this sort of adventure, of which he would have given anything to be a part — all that excitement and terror, where time was the most important and most limiting factor. It beat

just watching something similar in a film, living in a boring life that was monotonous and just dragged on.

On the other hand, maybe it was best that it was Robin who was out there — none of the other students had as much power as their rival. If they were going to be able to save the world from total destruction and, what seemed to be an extreme fascist system of rule, then only one person could be safe, and only one person meant there would be less risk of getting caught by the System. After reasoning out the bad and good points for having Robin out there, an overwhelming feeling of guilt rushed through Harry. He had no right to feel jealous. That was one of his bad traits, time and time again he tried overcoming it, but it was in-bred into his character. He craved anything that offered excitement and danger. He was the sort of person who was not happy unless he was doing something that, if he did not get it right first time, could very well cost him his life as the penalty.

Alison and Matthew were the opposite to Harry. They also enjoyed a bit of excitement, but never did they get jealous if someone else appeared to be doing something extraordinary.

Robin had regained his former shape and was busily scanning through the plans. As yet he had not found anything that could be of immediate use to them. The professor noted the more important of the facts, just in case they would be needed later. Within one of the older of the scrolls of plans, a piece of paper dropped out. As Robin read through it he turned completely pale. Stunned, the reaction of the students and the professor was similar to that of the young boy.

It all made a lot more sense now. How stupid could they have been? All this time they had been convinced that they knew what had been the outcome of the war — that it was probably one of the Superpowers that had been the victor. At the time of the nuclear war, this sort of inside information about the country which had emerged victorious, would have made a tremendous difference, allowing more of the world's population to survive the horrors and devastation created by the explosion of a nuclear weapon...

Again, they heard the footsteps of the guards, their voices being rather muffled due to the sound echoing along the narrow corridors. Once more Robin went through the same routine of preparing himself before metamorphosing, this time changing into an eagle. Swiftly he flew, along the winding shafts to the air vent through which he had entered, and out into the cold air.

It was early afternoon now, and the sun's rays were stronger. They had

managed to penetrate the initial blanket of cloud, radiating its warmth below. The bird wept for a short while as it soared high above — Robin felt sad as he looked down below and witnessed the mournful sight.

It was not long until Robin reached the port. He was just in time. The ship was a lot bigger than they were expecting — it was rather like the ones seen in history books depicting the seaworthy vessels of the Romans. Its oars moved in unison, flowing like the waves of the sea.

Robin shocked his friends by flying onto the ship and gliding into the hull. There he remained undetected, perched on one of the beams. He saw lots of slaves being whipped as they were ordered to row faster. It was so barbaric, seeing people chained up like animals, although these unfortunate creatures were treated in a far worse way than anyone would ever contemplate abusing their own animals.

He flew out of the ship just before it reached the dock, making sure that where he landed he was not seen, but was able to see all that was going on.

Suddenly everything went silent. Terror swept across the faces of the members of the System as a short, well-built figure disembarked the heavily armed vessel. His face was half hidden by the unusual hat he wore. Robin caught a glimpse of the stranger's eyes, cold and merciless, showing no compassion.

The crowd's attention was diverted as a very worried man ran to the stranger and spoke apprehensively in a low voice. Whatever the man had to say displeased his leader and resulted in the very cold killing of the man, who was obviously a member of the System. The stranger drew his sword and with one, clean blow, cut the man's head off. Then, he turned to the crowd, cleaning the blood off his sword by pulling the blade slowly between his lips. Blood dripped down from one side of his smile.

Dread dispersed through the entire force of the System as the stranger spoke —

"Someone has broken into the Regional Headquarters and read through System documents. The person or persons who committed this atrocity must be found."

"Yes Yabushi," replied the crowd. The majority of the guards split themselves into groups and departed in different directions.

Despair hit Robin and his friends. The eagle flew towards the streets at the centre of the demolished city. He watched as the paupers were told of the break-in.

The System waited a few minutes for someone to come forward and admit to the crime.

No one did so.

Immediately, the System resorted to violence. Beating the men firstly, until they either died or just fell unconscious from the sheer pain.

There was a shrieking wind of despair, people running in all directions, trying to find some place to hide. Few could escape before a guard would cut them down, using a sword or a thrown knife. No longer were there puddles of water in the streets, but pools filled with blood from the innocent. Unsuspecting people, too weak to retaliate, or even have thoughts of breaking into any complex, especially one that the System kept well guarded.

They burned down the half-made shelters of the inhabitants, and stripped a lot of them of their clothes, degrading them even more.

The guards were in a positive frenzy — a hysteria flowed through them like a current of electricity, resulting in them turning to more violent means of terrorising the people.

Women were abused in front of their husbands and children. Where that did not produce a result, children were being tied up in groups and threats were made to set light to them.

It was not just Alison who felt physically sick at this hideous spectacle — the others sitting next to her had also turned a deathly white.

It was difficult for anyone to run through the streets, as dead bodies littered the way. Tears and cries of anguish filled the air, the wind carrying the sounds for miles around. Smoke from smouldering ground spiralled high up.

"I can't let this go on... I'll have to give myself up," Robin said to the others, tears streaming from his glazed eyes. He gulped as he tried to swallow. Never had he imagined that anything so horrific would happen. These couldn't be human beings carrying out such extreme atrocities — no one could be so inhuman!

Could they?

How much more could they do before they realised that what they were doing was useless?

The professor felt compassion for the youngster. He could feel the pain Robin was experiencing but, no, it would not be the right thing to do, for Robin to turn himself over to them.

"Robin, don't give yourself up. If you do, then all this will have been a

waste. Think of it Robin, this is all happening in the future. If you don't come back from that world, then that is what is going to happen. I know it's very easy for me to sit here and say that but, believe me, I can appreciate how you must feel. Just think, we can prevent this from happening. It was inevitable that, at some point or other, the System would have been angered and resorted to similar means. Don't give yourself up, you're the only hope for Mankind, only you can help us prevent a Third World War from occurring. Please understand."

A tear came to the professor's eye, his heart went out to Robin. He knew how difficult this must be for a boy of that young and tender age, especially as he was so impressionable.

"My humanity is behind me and I'm prepared for battle," Robin said coldly. He then disappeared into the oblivion. The vision of such a dreadful act kept impinging on his vision and strange sounds filled his chamber.

CHAPTER FOUR

JIMMY

THE DAY WAS DRAWING TO A CLOSE. THE SUN SANK OVER THE HORIZON, UNTIL ALL that could be seen was a thin line of red fire on the distant skyline. Its reflection rippled across the calm sea, like the blood that had been spilt on the streets earlier that day.

There was a great sadness as people roamed about, looking desperately around them, hoping they would find a relative or a friend still alive. Sobbing could be heard as someone found a loved one, a half-naked figure, badly bruised and covered with blood, obviously cut down trying to escape.

Still, the memories of that sordid day were fixed firmly in Robin's mind. Anger welled up within him, as he thought more and more about the massacre. He wanted so much to take vengeance on the leader of the System, the person they called Yabushi.

The professor and the students attempted to comfort the boy, trying hard to stop him slipping into a deep depression and hence cutting himself off from them completely.

After seeing the atrocities that human beings were capable of committing, Robin was thoroughly disgusted — seeing them as being totally barbaric and heartless. How anyone could treat others as if they were rubbish, or some machine that is there as a convenience, at their disposal. It had been a sickening spectacle to watch so-called 'people', slaughtering innocent, defenceless paupers.

"Look Robin, what happened today was not your fault. It is terrible to think that humans, who have progressed so much with the way they are able to think and invent machines or even discover cures for diseases, that

still they have to resort to violence as the ultimate means to an end. It's in the human's genetic make-up to use primitive methods as a way of exerting their power."

"Robin, don't close your eyes. Shutting yourself off from us isn't going to help you feel any better. Yes, I do agree with you. People like Yabushi have abused their right to having life, they have no right to live. But we are not God and cannot pass judgement on others. All we can do is make sure that we, ourselves, don't act beneath our dignity and lower ourselves to their level of ignorance."

The professor paused, waiting to see whether what he had said had had the desired effect of reassuring Robin.

There was silence. Robin was contemplating what the professor had said. The words churned over and over in his mind, but at intervals he could hear the screams of the women and children whose lives were brought to such a cruel end.

He was in two minds, still... the memory of the guards smiling, gloating at their good work — it was haunting.

"Robin, don't think about it. It has not really happened, remember you're in the future. If you help us, then hopefully this holocaust won't ever happen."

"Okay, you're right. It's just that I never ever thought that anyone could be so callous. Those images are fixed quite strongly in my mind. But don't worry, I shall not cut myself off from you, I'll help as best I can."

Relief spread across the face of the professor as Robin uttered those words of recognition.

There was silence as everybody sat deep in thought, thinking to see if they had overlooked anything vital. They went back over what they had read in those documents and also the build up of events before Yabushi arrived.

Matthew was the first to break the silence.

"What about those men and women who had been taken down to the port in chains? We never did find out for what purpose they were going to be used. Do we know where they were taken when the bloodbath started? I think we should find them and see if we can get any more information. They must be pretty important, they were not touched at all by the System when it went on its rampage."

"Professor? Matthew has got a valid point there, that is something we overlooked during all the excitement. I'll try the ship first — after the break in at their stronghold this morning, they will be guarding that well. Yabushi has probably reprimanded his men severely. I wonder what

position Yabushi holds in the System... we'll probably find out soon enough."

Robin stopped speaking and flew to the ship and found it heavily guarded. That morning's incident must have had a great impact on them. They were not taking any chances with security — probably the guards were too scared, worried in case they ended up being executed.

Once he had reached the hull of the ship, he metamorphosed into a brown mouse and scurried across the floor as silently as possible — he did not want to end up becoming someone's delicacy.

The stench of the slaves, who had been used to row the vessel, was overwhelming, almost enough to knock someone out. The grime and dirt that coated the planks of wood made it hard for the mouse to move swiftly. Nearby, an almost starving man concentrated his vision on a cockroach. Then, like lightning, his hand shot out and grabbed his target. After briefly inspecting his prize, the man popped it into his mouth and crunched on it hard. A look of satisfaction spread across his face as he swallowed.

There were scars on the bare backs of most of the men. Some had open wounds and their skin looked very raw. There were moans and coughs. The diseases and infections that these men had contracted, in such an unhygienic place, must have been numerous. One would have thought that such working conditions would have been abolished during the Middle Ages.

It was not just the smell of the crew that filled the hull. As Robin breathed in he detected the strong smell of a very badly fouled area. There were no receptacles of any description in which the men could urinate. It was doubtful that they were ever freed from the heavy, iron chains that bound them so tightly. Most of them were slumped over their oars, trying to sleep in the most comfortable position that would suit the small space available to them.

Two guards came down and removed one of the crew. He was dead. The poor soul had either died from over exhaustion or some disease — the former seemed the likeliest.

Robin left this squalid place of hiding and went to explore the rest of the ship. He did not find what he was looking for.

Before leaving, Robin set fire to the Captain's cabin, the navigational charts burning easily. Guards released the crew from the hull — manpower did not come easily — and the vessel had to be abandoned. It was a spectacular sight, the flames enveloping the whole structure, beautiful against the rapidly sunseting sky, black smoke spiralling up to a certain height

before it met a gust of wind, which carried it off.

Whispers of delight came from the crew. Most of them had not seen daylight for at least a month, nor had they breathed in fresh air.

There was an almighty bang, a crack spread through out the wooden ship and it quickly sunk into the Solent. There, stuck at the bottom in the mud, the vessel would rest in peace eternally.

Between the guards there was a great deal of confusion as to how the fire had started, and what anyone was doing in Yabushi's cabin. Terror spread throughout the System — it dawned on them that someone would have to break the news to Yabushi. It was quite a comical sight to see them drawing lots, to see who would be the unlucky person to have to face Yabushi.

The bemused crew were all made to file up and were marched in the direction of the stronghold.

This could be Robin's chance to get into their base through the front entrance. He transformed himself back into an eagle and flew there, reaching the destination before the System. There he metamorphosed into a mouse — it would be less noticeable if he was to enter by crawling in, rather than flying just above the heads of the guards.

He waited some time before the System arrived, studying the building carefully. It was very cold and bland looking — a shudder ran down his spine as he stared at it — so awesome, square in shape, its layout conveying strictness and methodical idealism. One could imagine it being some sort of factory in which people were brainwashed, having their minds removed and replaced by a robotic, computerised mechanism — lots of zombies being turned out at the end of the production line, preaching the strange doctrine of the System...

The sun had now set and dusk had fallen. In the distance, Robin could see the guards escorting their prisoners, ambling along at a very slow pace. The crew were in no condition for walking — they were very under-nourished, their legs were riddled with sores and their feet were bare.

It was not long after this first sighting that Robin found himself, once more, within the large complex. Inside the front entrance, the hall was empty. Looks of confusion greeted the guards, as they were not expected to turn up with the crew.

One man, who had been very unfortunate to have drawn the short straw, stepped apprehensively forward and spoke.

"Can I see Yabushi, if he's free that is. I have to explain to him about what has happened."

White as a sheet, the guard was directed to Yabushi's staying quarters. He had, imprinted on his mind, what had happened to his colleague earlier. He was scared that he was going to suffer the same fate, seeing Yabushi take his sword from under his robe and with one clean cut, slice his head from his cowardly shoulders...

The booming voice of Yabushi echoed round the building, then the screaming came from the guard as he begged for mercy, Yabushi producing his sword. There was one last high pitched screech, then a thud as the guard's head hit the ground.

"Poor man," thought Robin,

"There is no justice. That guard was not responsible for the fire."

The burning down of the ship seemed to have disturbed Yabushi. The leader was afraid now. He was in a temper, shouting in his outrage, threatening to execute his advisers if they did not come up with a suitable suggestion, so that he could meet his deadline.

"We need to get back as soon as possible with those men. Mao Tse Chaik will be most displeased if we do not return with them as he requested. Also, it is vital that those plans are dealt with immediately."

"Robin, I think I know what he is referring to. I can't explain now, but it's important that we find the group and free them as soon as possible."

The professor was very adamant, so Robin asked no questions but left the quarters of Yabushi and went in search of the 'elite' of the masses.

It did not take him long. With the guidance of the professor, a lot of the building was left unsearched. The professor used a process of elimination and, having a general idea for what some of the areas were used, it was not too hard to guess where the captives were being held.

It was unusual to see the System actually giving food to anyone but, there they were, handing out bowls of fresh vegetables, with what appeared to be meat. These prisoners must be of great importance to them, if the System was going to so much trouble to look after them. The scene reminded Robin of chickens in a battery farm, being fed well, before being slaughtered.

He gazed around the confinement. It was going to be extremely difficult to get these prisoners free and to safety. As far as he could see, there was only one place that one could get in and out — the door. It would not be the best of tactics to leave by the door when it was guarded.

"Professor, what am I going to do about getting them out, it's well nigh impossible."

"Robin, what about finding the generator? If you can put that out of action, then hopefully for a while the guards will be preoccupied. That will at least give you some time to get past them."

"Have you any idea where the generator is? Also... I was wondering, there must be another air vent that leads to the outside on the ground floor. Maybe it'll be better if I can get them out that way. After they are out in the open air, it's basically up to them to get over the fence. Then I'll take them to that old, derelict building, where I sleep each night."

"We can only try Robin," replied the professor.

"I think that if there is an air vent leading to the outside on the ground floor," said Matthew,

"It should be situated at the wall directly opposite the front entrance."

He spoke hesitantly. He did not like to comment, unless he was sure that he was right.

Robin scurried away, leaving the captives eating. He made his way to where the air vent hopefully would be situated. After a careful search of all the rooms that were against the north wall, he found the air vent to be under a table. Now that Robin knew where the air vent was, he was able to proceed in trying to locate the generator.

"Robin, wait a minute, if we think about this logically, then we maybe able to prevent you having to waste a lot of energy needlessly, trying to find the generator. Now, the ground air vent is situated on the north wall. The front entrance is on the south wall. The prisoners, that we want to set free, are being kept on the east side. Now, the air vent which was situated high up, just under the roof — that, if I'm right, is on the west wall. The generator will be in the basement on the west wall because, if you remember, there was one big tube leading directly down from the air vent. I'm just trying to think where Yabushi and the guards' quarters are situated, in proportion to the rest of the main sites... Ah, I remember, they are near the room in which all the documents and plans are kept — that's all on the west side."

"If you are right about where the generator is situated, then that makes it easier for me to get them out with the minimum amount of fuss."

Robin made his way towards the west wall. He had to be very cautious, as the professor had been right about where Yabushi and the guards were. He kept his small mouse face looking down so that the green, fluorescent eyes would not be noticed.

There were numerous rooms, the corridors and the outside of each room looked alike. All the rooms were exactly the same size, lots of square

boxes, like children's building bricks placed neatly in rows and columns. At the end of the row there was a door which was shut. After making sure there was no one in the corridor, the mouse regained his former being. He opened the creaking, heavy door and crept in. There it was, the noisy machine. It sat there in the middle of the room, vibrating as it produced electricity.

"What do I do with it?"

"Robin, walk round it so that I can get a good look at its structure."

The boy followed the professor's instructions. Slowly he walked around the generator, standing longer at the areas more decorated with wires and tubes.

"Now, Robin, you see the two tubes that run parallel to each other, the one that allows the water to go into the generator? Well, the valve along that tube, that's what you'll have to close. Basically, what will happen is that this will cause the generator to overheat. That way the power should stop and if the error is not rectified quickly, it will start a fire and eventually explode. Now, what you'll have to do is go back to the captives, get them to start going through the vent and then, using your mind, turn off the valve — jamming it shut completely. Give it three minutes, then short circuit the electrics. A spark should set the whole thing ablaze. Good luck Robin, I'm sure you'll do just fine."

Robin made his way back to the imprisoned people. Just before entering their confinement, he waited for the guards to walk in the opposite direction. Then, he changed himself into a human being and sneaked into the cell.

"Don't say a word! I'm to get you out of here before they make other arrangements for shipping you away."

The rabble stood there dumbfounded, their mouths gaping wide open. How did this small, young boy get in here and how did he know they were being kept here? These were the sort of questions whirling around in their minds. For all they knew he could have been working for the System. To them it seemed ridiculous that anyone would risk his life to come and save them.

"Anyway, it would be impossible to escape from this place. I wonder how this little mite proposes to do it," thought one of the captives. He was a tall, broad man — stocky built, probably the leader.

Robin turned to the man and spoke. The man was quite bemused that Robin had answered the query that had been milling about in his head.

"Yes sir, I can understand you being rather suspicious of me, but you needn't be. I can get you all out of here, just listen to what I have got to say

and follow my instructions carefully. After I've got you all out of here, I'll take you to a place for safe-keeping."

"But that's what I mean, there are guards outside the door — we can't just walk out of here."

"I told you just to listen and to follow my instructions."

The leader nodded in recognition and bowed his head, somewhat taken aback.

"Now, don't mind what I'm about to do next, just follow me and above all, keep silent. I don't want to hear a word until we are well clear from here. Understand?"

Robin stood still and did not utter a word. He started breathing deeply, there it was again, what had now become his trademark — he metamorphosed into an eagle. His talons ripped the thick sheet of metal gauze away from the entrance of the air vent. He jumped onto the floor of the shaft and walked along it, the others following quickly. Robin would have liked to have flown through the shafts, but he had to guide the prisoners through the complex maze of tunnels. The prisoners were still in shock — never had they seen anything like that before!

Whilst strutting along, Robin concentrated his mind on firstly replacing the gauze on the entrance of the air vent, then on switching the water valve off. He made sure the electricians would cause a short circuit five minutes after the water had been cut off.

It was not long until the escapees had reached the north wall. Again, Robin used his talons for tearing the gauze away. As soon as he had got out of the shaft, the eagle transformed himself back into his true self. The rebels scrambled out of the rather cramped shaft, shocked again to see that their saviour had now turned back into a young, scruffy boy. Still they did not say a word. Robin led them away to the fence.

Suddenly, it happened. There was a mighty explosion and tongues of fire scaled the walls of the Eastern side. Smoke towered above the building and reached out across the overcast sky. The red flames looked strangely beautiful against the pitch black sky. Screams of chaos could be heard.

They reached the fence. Once again, Robin used his mind to give him the strength to roll enough of the fence up, so that his followers could pass underneath.

"Well done Robin," the professor commended,

"That was done very nicely. I think the System should be kept quite busy for the time being."

He was very pleased with Robin, though he was not sure whether the

boy had done the right thing in showing the other people what he was capable of. That could have been a bad move. It could have one of two effects; firstly, they might feel threatened by Robin and try killing him when he was asleep, or, secondly, they might become very good allies and hence be of some use.

They followed Robin religiously to the old ruin, where he had slept the previous night.

He led them down the creaky, dry stairs to the cellar. It was very dusty, and the place reeked of dampness, with moss and some fungi growing on the cracks between the bricks.

As soon as they had sat down on the floor, Robin spoke to the group of men and women.

"It is safe for us to speak now," said Robin. He turned to address the leader.

"You see? It was not impossible to get out of there. I know you doubted me back there, but you did have good reason. I expect you have a few questions that you would like answered by me. After you've finished, I've got a few questions of my own that I would like answered. By the way, what's your name?"

"My name is James but people call me Jimmy. I used to be a journalist... before. Now, I don't know what you did back there, but was it you that we saw change into an eagle?"

"Yes, you weren't dreaming, it was I who changed into an eagle. Before you ask, I'm not a witch of any sort. You've nothing to be afraid of. I'm here to help you fight the System. I need you to cooperate with me, to fight with me not against me."

"How did you get to us without the guards noticing you?"

"That wasn't too difficult once I had planned out a strategy. What I did was to create a diversion. The System, as you probably know, have a generator to produce electricity. Well, all I did was make sure that the tubes, which allowed the water to flow around the engine, could not perform that vital function. I switched off the valve, therefore causing the engine within to overheat and hence cut off the electricity. The explosion you heard was due to me timing the electricians to short circuit, and thus cause a fire, five minutes after having turned off the valves. That gave me enough time to get you all clear of the building."

"Have you any parents here?"

"No I haven't. They died in a fire."

"Well, it's a wonder that you've survived so long by yourself! Now, you wanted some questions answered, fire away. After saving us today, we are indebted to you. If we can help you in any way, feel free to ask."

"Now what I need is, firstly, to know what was the exact date on which they started to drop the bombs? What I don't understand is this. I presume the war was initially between Russia and America, so how come China is now ruling Great Britain?"

"The date that the first bomb was dropped was on the seventh of April, nineteen eighty-nine. From what I can understand, as soon as it was apparent that a nuclear war was inevitable, there were a lot of reports about the disappearance of people from the most populated cities in China. This had stunned the other nations of the world. The Chinese leader told the leaders of the main Superpower countries to surrender their rule to him, before any nuclear exchange commenced. You can imagine, I think, the general response was a laugh in Mao Tse Chaiks' face. It was then made known to the world that China had a number of underground cities already built, in preparation for a nuclear holocaust. There were also rumours that they had been pouring millions, over the last decade and a half, into scientific research, for the growing of fungi, mosses and other smaller plants, without light, and without soil. The conditions which would be available to any plant in a subterranean environment. Well of course the Superpowers took this all with a pinch of salt. To them it seemed impossible, their scientists hadn't had any major breakthroughs on that front, therefore it was highly inconceivable that the Chinese, of all people, would have achieved it."

"You mean to say that they had succeeded in finding an alternative way of producing vegetation. I can see why now, it certainly does make sense. Why risk contaminating your nation with radiation from food exposed to radioactive fallout?"

"Do you need to know any more? I should think that the rest was quite apparent"

"Where were you getting food supplies? Obviously it was not just what you were able to find in the streets."

"No, we got the majority of our supplies from the System. They didn't give them to us, we stole bits and pieces off them when their supply ship came in. There's one nearly every two weeks. In fact the next supply of food should be coming in tomorrow."

"Right, I think the best thing we can do is get a good night's sleep. We are going to have a very busy day tomorrow. I'll explain what I propose we do as soon as I have it all planned out in my mind."

"Thank you again for what you did for us today. You can count on our support in future," Jimmy replied. He then proceeded to order the rest of his people and then told them where they were to sleep. He had instructed them to take good care of this strange young boy. They didn't even know

his name, but they were quite happy to trust him and help him in the best way they could.

Robin did not get to sleep until the very early hours of the next morning. He went outside the shelter to speak to the professor.

"It all makes sense now! I bet you anything that those people were going to be shipped back to China. They would have been needed to build more underground cities. The odds are that they have had a population explosion and are running out of living space."

"Yes, and what better than to use slave labour. Once finished, they could proceed to kill them off, like a pair of worn gloves being discarded after the winter is over," replied Robin.

"It would be interesting if we could discover how the Chinese managed to grow vegetation in such adverse conditions," the professor said, trying hard to think of a way in which he could find out. However, considering that the food was transported from China to here, it was evident that there would have been no record of that needed here.

"To think that the Superpowers, for so long now, have been so concerned and wrapped up in spending billions on weapons, that they didn't think that they would all become useless after a war, if some nation, such as China, prepared for a world after such an event. It's ironic to think that what everybody thought of as being a very poor country could have so much going for it. The leaders had actually considered the fate of their people in such an event and had succeeded in finding some way of protecting them."

Robin had found this quite impressive. He hated the System though, for their cold blooded massacre of the innocent people today.

In one section of the documents which they had read, they found written evidence of killings in China. It appeared that the Chinese had slowly killed off the terminally ill and old people. They had told the families that there had been nothing they could do for the unfortunate sufferers, that the state had tried its best. They had blamed the other nations for not cooperating and giving information about necessary cures for diseases and other ailments. Really, what had happened was that the people had been 'put down', like unwanted animals. The Chinese had viewed these people as being an unnecessary burden. All they would do was eat food, breathe in valuable air and take up space. To think that doctors and nurses were meant to be there as people one could trust — one hoped that they would try their best to save the life of a loved one, not take matters into their own hands, to choose when someone should die, playing God.

They continued to discuss the information they had gathered that day. The professor had been pleased with what Robin had achieved and the skilful way in which he got Jimmy and his followers to trust him. There was no doubt that Robin could count on their support.

They had not even questioned him about how he had these exceptional powers. It was useful that, with them, Robin would become a much bigger threat to the System. Tomorrow was going to be a day that the System would certainly remember and regret.

Before Robin went to sleep, he metamorphosed into an eagle once more and flew to the headquarters of the System.

There, he gloated at the disarray and disorder he had caused. He was disappointed to see that Yabushi lived still. He had hoped that his enemy would have died in the explosion. However, a lot of damage had been done, many System people had died in the fire, and the complex had been damaged quite seriously. The whole of the west wing had been blown off.

Yabushi was extremely worried. A lot of what had happened remained unexplained. Firstly, there had been the break-in that morning, the start of a fire on his ship, and finally the blowing up of the generator and the escape of their slaves. All of this in one day!

Yabushi was extremely superstitious. It seemed to him that one of his Gods was most displeased and had determined that he was going to fail at everything he tried.

Robin would have killed Yabushi then and there, in the same manner as he had ended Alison's father but, instead, he decided to let Yabushi sweat it out a bit more. If he thought that what had happened today was bad, then tomorrow was going to be an absolute nightmare for him.

Robin returned to the ruins. He changed back to human form and slept until daybreak.

He awoke to find Billy, one of the men from Jimmy's gang, seated beside him. In his hand he held some bread and what seemed to be lettuce.

"Here," he said, offering the food to Robin,

"Eat it. We've got plenty of the stuff. Stolen from the System when we last raided them."

Robin ate what he had been given. Then he stood up and went to seek out Jimmy. They discussed what Robin had planned for the day.

"Now tell me, what time does the ship usually come in?"

"About midday."

"Good. That gives us ample-time to get things sorted out."

After it was arranged what everybody was going to do, the gang left their stronghold and proceeded towards the dock area where they expected the ship to arrive shortly.

Not a word was exchanged whilst they sat silently in their various hiding places. The plans were being churned over and over in Robin's mind, checked and rechecked, ensuring that there were no flaws in them. He did not want anything to go wrong. Already a lot of people had died because he had left his entrance into the System's stronghold noticeable. He did not want to be responsible for the deaths of further innocent people. These people were depending on him, to give them what could become freedom from this authoritarian rule.

"Professor, do you think this is going to work? Is there anything that I've overlooked?" Robin whispered.

"Don't worry, Robin. It's a good plan. Just hope that the others know exactly what they've got to do," replied the professor.

Robin had been able to think of a plan that could hit the System hard and, at the same time, gain the freedom of these people in the south of England. It would be a long time before the System in other areas would realise what had happened here, by which time it would be too late. The people here would be stronger and in a better position to retaliate against any incoming force.

"It must be approaching midday, the sun is almost vertically above me," thought Robin to himself. He was nervous, never had he felt so apprehensive before. It was the thought of being responsible for so many people, they were all depending on him. They saw him as some sort of God after having witnessed him perform his special 'party trick' of changing into an eagle.

He was right. There it was, the ship. It was not as magnificent looking as the vessel in which Yabushi had arrived the previous day. Again, it was a ship that used manpower to drive it. It reminded Robin of the other poor souls that he saw, chained to the oars, half starved and bearing the marks on their backs, scars showing the cruelty and harshness of the whip. Hopefully, this would be the last voyage that they would have to make.

As Robin looked around him he saw Yabushi approaching the docks with a heavy reinforcement of guards. The man's face was pale and withdrawn. He was afraid and confused, trying to convince himself

that nothing else could go wrong. Not another crisis. No, he would not be able to take another mishap. A fourth tragedy, he could not explain that to his superiors. It was too much of a coincidence that all this had started to happen when he was here. Never had he had as much trouble in such a brief visit to any place. It was like a nightmare from which he hoped he could awake.

Robin started his part of the plan.

He began by playing tricks on Yabushi's mind, whispering to him that he was going to die.

"You don't know when or how you're going to die but, believe me, you are. It won't be long before you are relieved of your duty here," whispered Robin to Yabushi's mind.

Terror spread across the man's face. He shouted to his body guards to stay around him closely, and also to keep a careful watch. He was terrified — he could not understand from whom the voice was coming. He put it down to his imagination playing tricks on him. He was so nervous that something was going to go wrong that he was too much on edge. A perfect opportunity for the mind to explode his situation out of proportion. Robin was delighted at Yabushi's response.

Soon after that, once the ship had got into dock and the supplies had been unloaded, the rest of the plan was put into effect.

Robin metamorphosed into an eagle and flew aboard the ship. There he set fire to the vessel and, once again, the slaves were freed. The System was in disarray. This time Yabushi was a witness to the starting of the fire and he saw that no one had been allowed to board the ship. It was too late for them to try and extinguish the flames roaring across the deck and so, like the other vessel, it suffered the fate of burning, then sinking in the Solent.

As Robin had hoped, the System started arguing between themselves. They quarrelled amongst themselves so much, blaming each other for the disaster, that they did not notice Jimmy and his followers making off with the food supplies and the reinforcement of arms.

That was what they needed, something with which they could fight the System, weapons!

Once they had hidden the food in their stronghold, the men took the arms and made their way to a road which was suitable for staging an ambush against their prey. It was not long before the guards and Yabushi could be heard, returning from the port, coming along the road towards them.

This, Robin thought, was beautiful. He had chosen the perfect spot, perfect to cause the guards to run in bemusement. This was Robin's idea of fun. He concentrated his mind on a horribly mutilated corpse that lay in the middle of the road. Just as the guards walked by, he willed it to stand up, move about, screaming out in pain. This was all too much for the System. The guards, in their fear, began to disperse in different directions while Yabushi stood there, shouting at them to come back to him. During their chaos, Jimmy's men were able to cut the System down, in the same, coarse manner which the System had used on the poor, innocent people of the masses the previous day.

Yabushi himself was not killed. Instead the gang gave him the pleasure of seeing his men die. They chained him and took him to the streets, so that the paupers could take their revenge out on him, in any way they thought best. It was so satisfying to see Yabushi begging for forgiveness.

"Don't allow them to hurt me, I'll do anything you ask of me. Please, I don't want to die," he pleaded.

"Oh, don't worry," Robin reassured him,

"You won't die immediately. I expect they will think of some slow way of torturing you, that way you can experience the joys of never-ending pain."

Yabushi stared at him in horror.

"No death is good enough for you," laughed Robin in his face.

After having left Yabushi in the streets to explain himself to the masses, Robin and the others returned to their hideaway.

Robin was relieved that everything had worked and that no one from his side had died. He was given lots of praise and thanks.

Instantly he had become a hero, never had Robin been shown so much appreciation as now. There was plenty of food that could be distributed to the rest of the people, then they could take the next lot of supplies that would arrive in just under two weeks. All that remained now was to exterminate the few remaining guards from the System, then the people could use the building as a shelter.

Jimmy and Robin became good friends. They worked together closely, ensuring that everybody was being looked after well and that nobody ever went hungry. Many people thought all this good living was just a dream and, when they awoke, they would find that the System was ruling still. This was the first time in a long while that there was happiness among the people. The masses were able to walk the streets without having to be afraid. Generally, there was a happy atmosphere,

the overwhelming sadness that had once filled the air had disappeared.

There were plans being made for mass building and reorganisation of the streets. There were no slaves being selected to carry out the hard work, everybody participated in doing their bit, making this a more comfortable place for people to live.

Robin was happy. At last he had found that his powers could be used for the good of people. He felt responsible for making sure that they were never in need of anything. He had given them all hope when they needed it most, just in time, before they had lost all hope of living, what could be classified as a decent life after a nuclear holocaust.

Sadness fell one day. Though the people were content, the sudden realisation of the side effects of a nuclear bomb exploding dawned on them.

A woman gave birth to a baby. It was dead, but it was also clear that it was very badly deformed and that, had it lived, it would not have been able to survive in this sort of a world for very long. It would have needed the specialised care and treatment of a modern day, fully equipped hospital.

Tears rolled down Robin's cheek as he tried desperately to console the distressed woman. If only his powers extended to healing and giving life to the dead. But that was not up to him. If God did love his 'subjects', then why this? These people had gone through enough emotional pain and hardship, they had lost a lot of loved ones. They did not deserve this, to be in constant fear that they would not be able to rebuild some sort of family.

Robin was angry with himself. This was something for which he had not accounted. If he had, then he would have been able to at least warn people of the strong possibility of children being stillborn or being gravely deformed.

"Don't blame yourself Robin," the professor consoled him,

"I hadn't even thought of that as being an outcome. Like everyone there, we were all excited at the prospect of seeing the birth of a child into the happier world that was created by you. You aren't at fault for that. No one was, except for the governments that had allowed a war to start."

"Professor Fergere, I can't help it, but it was the face of the poor woman. She had so much wanted that child, that's all she talked about for weeks. Did you know that her husband and her last child had been burnt with some of the other children, that awful day that Yabushi

arrived? Now can you see why that baby was so important to her? I feel guilty for not having prepared her for what was most probably going to be the worst. The people have become dependent on me to help them, to ensure their happiness. I feel as though I've let her down."

Robin swallowed as he tried clearing his throat. His voice trembled as he spoke.

The distressed woman was clinging onto Robin.

"Sorry Robin, but it was the only thing that I would have had as a reminder of my husband and my child. I should have been prepared for this, there were enough documentaries and films about the effects on Hiroshima."

The woman stopped speaking and burst out into tears again.

Robin continued to caress her hair, holding her tightly, making her feel as though she was wanted and loved.

"Hush, it wasn't your fault. I know you loved your husband and your child a lot. Now, they wouldn't have liked to see you blaming yourself and looking so upset. For them at least, you must look after yourself — they would want that."

After about five minutes, the woman wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Thank you for helping me. Sorry for the tears, I don't mean to be a burden to you. I know you must have more important things to consider than me."

"No, no, your happiness is important to me. Don't you understand, all that I've done here is for the sole purpose of making people happy and comfortable. I don't want anyone to be sad, everyone is important."

"You're so kind. God only knows what we would have been able to do if you hadn't been here. You can go now... Thank you, I'm feeling a lot better."

Robin kissed her on her forehead and left her.

He walked alone for hours, thinking about what he had actually created. The people had installed some fixed vision, that he was some saviour that had been sent to rescue them from the perils of the System. It couldn't be right. People worshipped the ground on which he walked, he had no faults as far as they could see. He knew he wasn't God, nor a saint, by a long chalk.

He metamorphosed into an eagle and soared high into the sky, flying over the main body of the city. He was keeping a careful check that everyone was happy. He had become the law and order, he had the final word about the punishment which should be passed, if any crimes had been committed.

It was Jimmy's birthday that day. He was thirty-two years old. Due to the worries and responsibilities, inflicted upon him after the holocaust, he appeared to be at least fifty-five. His face was wrinkled and his hair grey.

This life made Jimmy see how unappreciative he was of the comfortable facilities he had, being a well-paid journalist before the war broke out. He lost his wife and both his children soon after the first nuclear bomb was dropped. If he had had the chance of putting time back to before the holocaust, he would have spent his savings on preparing some sort of nuclear bunker and would have made sure he knew as much as possible about survival in the aftermath. He had taken the same attitude as the people during the nineteen thirties, burying their heads in the sand, not allowing themselves to believe that a war was imminent.

As a birthday present, Robin was going to announce that Jimmy should become the new leader.

"No, Robin, I don't want that. I'm sure that everybody else here would agree with me. Anyway I haven't got that long to live now... haven't you noticed my skin? I'm sure that it's a form of skin cancer. No, please, stay as the leader here. Why pass it over to me, you aren't thinking of leaving us are you?"

Silence fell as Robin did not reply. Jimmy repeated his last question:

"You aren't leaving us, are you? You can't, we need you! What do we do when the System turn up here with a strong force? We need your powers to survive. We need your knowledge on how to build generators and the best way to build our buildings. There's still a lot of work that needs doing, we need you for that."

Robin was lost for words, touched by that. He gulped and tried swallowing so that he could attempt to say something. But what could he say? All these anxious people, who were so dependent on him. He knew that what they wanted to hear was no, that he was not planning to leave them. Maybe he should have told them the truth about himself before. Then, they would have known that, sooner or later, he was going to have to leave them. He did not have the heart to tell them to the contrary, this was meant to be a joyous occasion and instead they were sad.

"No, of course I won't leave you, always you will be in my mind."

Everybody cheered at Robin's few carefully chosen words. He put a smile on face, he could not show them that he was unhappy. He laughed and joked with everyone, putting on an act which succeeded in fooling everybody.

"Professor Fergere, I don't want to come back. You saw these people are so dependent on me. I know, I'm to blame for that, I shouldn't have made myself so important to them. But what will happen to them if I leave them? You heard them, they are afraid of what will happen to them when the System realise what has gone on in Southampton. That shouldn't be long now, the System will be wondering what has happened to the last nine supply ships that haven't returned."

"Robin," soothed the professor,

"They don't need you. All they want you for is protection. They've become lazy. You created their new world almost completely on your own. They take you for granted. You supply them with all their materialistic needs."

"No, you're wrong. They don't just see me as someone who they can depend upon to supply them with whatever they want. They do love me as a person, they do! The woman yesterday, she was very grateful because I spent some of my time trying to comfort her. Now don't tell me that they don't see me as some sort of emotional support."

"You are forgetting what the main object of you being there is. Remember, what we want to do is to prevent the nuclear war actually happening in the first place. If we do prevent it, all the pain and hardship that these people have gone through won't actually happen. They won't end up losing their husbands or children. Those people that were cut down by the System, they'll live still."

"As you said, IF we manage to stop the nuclear war from arising. You see? You're not sure that we'll be able to succeed. What if we don't succeed? Then I'll be abandoning these people, who will suffer without me here to help and guide them. No, it's too much of a risk leaving here. I've no security or guarantees that it's the wisest move to take."

"Without your extra powers here, we've got no chance in succeeding. You'll be defeating the task before we've tried. I remember there was a time that you always wanted to have a bash at what seemed to be the impossible. Now tell me, what has happened to the Robin we once knew?"

"That was different then, I had no responsibilities. I can't find it in myself to abandon these helpless people. There's no real justification for me to turn my back on them."

"What about us, and what about the other billions of innocent people on this earth? Aren't you turning your back on us? I thought you loved us Robin. Please come back."

"That's not fair! You're using emotional blackmail. You know I love you all... you shouldn't use that to get me to return. You are abusing the love and trust I have in you all."

"Just come back here," urged the professor,
"At least give us the chance to survive the holocaust. Haven't you realised that we aren't in the future Southampton with you? We obviously didn't survive the holocaust. Maybe if you come back, then we shall continue to live and have the chance to die of old age."

"Oh, I don't know what to do!"

"Consider this, Robin. We agree that what you are a part of is all in the future. Well then, if you think all this through logically, you can view this all as a dream. You have to wake up from the dream and make the appropriate people aware of the knowledge that you've got. So that the dream can be prevented from occurring at all! You owe it to us to at least help us try if nothing else. Will you do it for me? I won't say any more, I'll leave you to think about what we've said. Tell me when you've made your decision"

CHAPTER FIVE

COMING HOME

THE PROFESSOR AND THE STUDENTS WERE BECOMING WORRIED BECAUSE THEY HAD not heard from Robin. All they could see Robin doing was flying about, with no particular intention or destination.

A strong gust of wind had started to blow. It was sucking up the dust and litter in its path and, as the wind encountered some obstruction, its load could be heard to hit the walls of nearby buildings.

The people had left the streets. There was silence below Robin, he could no longer hear the jovial laughter of his people.

The eagle landed and changed back into its true form. He walked into his abode, his house, the only place in which he could ensure any privacy. Unless in a dire emergency, no one would disturb him once he had retired there.

He burst into tears, he was in such a turmoil as to what to do. Deep down, in the depths of his heart, he knew that the professor had been right in his reasoning. But he felt as though he belonged here, in this world. This was his world, he had created this, these were his subjects. Robin had modelled the new form of government into what he would interpret as being a complete democratic body. Everyone had a vote in what should be done about everything, whether it was erecting new buildings, or whose turn it was to clear up litter. All policies, however trivial, were discussed extensively before-hand. Yes, this was what he had managed to create. His dream would crumble if he was to leave.

He had a lot of fond and happy memories tied up in this place. It was such a close-knit community — if one person was happy, the happiness was shared with everyone else.

"Professor, I know you're right. I shall come back to you. It's a shame

that a community such as this will never exist. I'm going to find it hard to readjust to the real world when I return. Leaving here is going to be like leaving part of myself behind."

"I'm pleased you've come to a decision. I can appreciate how hard it has been for you, but believe me, I wouldn't have asked you to leave if I felt that I was wrong."

"Shall I go and say goodbye to them?"

"No," replied the professor after a moment's thought,

"If you say nothing, they may think that you were killed while flying. In case you hadn't noticed, correct me if I'm wrong, but that wind looks as though a storm is going to follow it shortly."

"Okay, I suppose you're right. That way they won't feel as though I've abandoned them. Maybe then they can remember me with fond memories."

Now that it had been decided that Robin was going to return to the real world, it came down to basics, the big question being how? He had travelled through time to this world, in the future, from his bedroom in Devonshire Road. It could be a logical idea that he should try getting back to the time zone, from which he came, by returning to Devonshire Road and finding the exact location of his house. It was only an idea, as none of them knew anything about time travelling. However, it was the only thing they had to work on.

Robin wandered around his make shift shelter, giving it a last look over before departing from it forever. He took his coat and left, a tear coming to his eye. The wind was blowing with a vengeance, howling with anger as the black storm clouds were whisked along hurriedly. There was thunder, clashing as it waged war against the rain, and lightning which illuminated the night sky brilliantly. Robin used the lightning as a natural torch, to guide him through the desolate streets. The storm reminded him of the night he had murdered Alison's father, Mr Whitley.

This memory was his saving. By picturing himself that night, Robin metamorphosed into an eagle and depended on the flashback of returning from Nick's house to guide himself back to Devonshire Road and his home.

It was like sleep walking, the way in which Robin found his way back to the exact spot, as though there was some kind of magnetic force, drawing him to his destination. Once there, Robin spoke to Professor Fergere.

"I'm here. What do I do now? How am I to get back to you?"

"I can't say... I don't know. We'll just have to make sure that you keep us informed as to what you see and feel. We can only advise you."

Robin sat down in the Lotus position, his legs crossed. He traced his

thoughts back to what his room looked like, then he put himself into a very deep trance.

"I'm going to return to my bedroom and wake up in my bed," Robin said repeatedly. He could feel himself being levitated upwards.

"Robin come to me. My hands are held out to you, hold them so I can lead you back to me."

"I can't, I can't see anything."

"What do you mean, you can't see anything? What's stopping you?"

"Can't you see it? Straight ahead of me, there's just a bright white light. Its brilliance forces me to partially shield my eyes, I can't look at it directly."

"Is that white light all around you, or is it only straight ahead of you?"

Robin looked around him and replied to the professor.

"Behind me, where I've been moving from, the light is still there. To the left and right of me, there appears to be numerous dark paths. Which of the paths should I take?"

"Robin! Whatever you do, do not leave the path with the bright light. I can't explain why, but instinct tells me that you must follow the bright light, otherwise you'll be lost from us forever. Your mind will just wander about for the rest of eternity, lost."

"But I don't like it on this path. It's too hot and the light is hurting my eyes. If I'm to stay on this path, then I'll have to keep my eyes open."

"Robin, only keep your eyes partially open and listen to my voice. Imagine my voice as being a piece of rope tied around your waist, pulling you towards me. Just keep hold of the rope."

Professor Fergere continued to call Robin, using his monotone voice.

"Robin, come to me."

As Robin travelled along the illuminated path, he could hear other voices, beckoning him to go to them. Their hands reached out to him from the darker paths. They hummed and, in the distance, he heard the sweet singing of an Angel — like harmonies. They were so inviting, he so much wanted to meet the person who possessed the perfect singing voice. It was a pleasure to listen to it, so relaxing and soothing. It made Robin feel as though he was floating about with the notion that there were no cares in the world, that he had entered paradise itself.

He started drifting towards the voice. It was as pure as water trickling down the mountain side, flowing from the melting ice-cap at the peak. Other voices were telling him to come closer:

"Come on... you are almost there. Once you get here you can listen to the beauty of this sweet, innocent singing for eternity."

He followed the swaying hands that appeared to waft him closer to

the singing. The voice, like that of the Siren, seemed to be hypnotising him, drawing him closer. His eyes were wide open but no longer did they hurt from the bright light. He had left that far behind.

"Robin! Where are you? What's happened to the bright light?"

"Don't speak, Professor Fergere... just listen to that song, it's so pure. The person singing must be so beautiful. I have to see her!" replied Robin. The professor's voice had become fainter.

"Robin? Robin!" shouted Professor Fergere anxiously,

"Don't let that singing, that chanting, deceive you. There's nobody at the end of that path you're presently following. It's a trick, just a sound echoing, produced by other lost souls. They are evil, it's the forces of darkness that have got a grip on you at the moment."

"It can't be evil behind this singing, it's too beautiful."

"Robin... now don't make me lose my patience with you. Just listen to me. Follow my voice back to the bright light. Ignore the singing, you don't want to get lost from us forever. It doesn't care about you, it has other motives for keeping you there."

The professor's voice had caused the singing to cease, it had shied away. There was only child-like laughter, mocking Robin's foolishness.

"You're lost! There's no way you'll find the path you want. No use you turning around, you've been walking round in circles for ages now. Which direction are you going to go...? See?! You don't know!"

"Robin," the professor cried out,

"Follow my voice, just follow it! You'll know if you're going in the right direction because my voice will seem louder. I'll continue to talk to you — just listen and let me guide you in the right direction."

The lost souls started to speak again.

"We'd give up if we were you. There's no use you even trying. It's impossible to leave once you've got here."

"I don't care what you say, I'll listen to the professor! He's my friend, not you."

Robin blanked out the voices of the lost souls and concentrated on the professor's monologue. He was almost at the path when he took the wrong turning — once more Professor Fergere's voice was starting to become more distant. Robin retraced his steps until the professor's words became louder. He was almost there, through the dark mist he caught a small glimpse of light. As he got closer, he could see a beam of light shining down, like a shaft of morning sunlight shining through a dusty, hazy window in some old derelict mansion...

Robin jumped. The hair on the back of his head stood on end as he

heard a piercing screech from behind him. He glanced back, but saw nothing. He could hear thuds, rather like footsteps, following the same pace as himself.

"Don't be distracted by that," urged the professor,

"They can't harm you. Concentrate on me, on my voice."

Robin continued walking at the same steady pace as before. Through the fog he could see the bright light, like that at the end of a tunnel. It was so close now, he thought he could almost reach out and touch it.

"Look, professor, I'm almost there! Just a few steps more. I'll soon be back safely with you all, where I belong."

"That's right Robin. Now, carry on until you reach the path. Don't distract yourself with other thoughts. Concentrate on my voice."

Finally he was there, on the path. The bright light made him squint for a moment, as his eyes reajusted to its brilliance. Robin looked down at his feet — and viewed the strangest scene ever. There was a fine white mist swirling about. As gaps were appearing between the mists, he noticed that there was no solid path below him. He was walking in space, a deep blue and purple sea that seemed to be never ending, going on to infinity.

"How much further do I have to go? Am I close?" Robin asked, his voice conveying great tiredness.

The last few weeks had been an immense taxation of his psychic powers. He was mentally, as well as physically, fatigued. A great deal of energy had been expended, using these resources to the utmost, to ensure his survival. His pace got slower, his feet dragged, the journey home seemed neverending.

"I can't keep on walking for very much longer, I'm too tired. I want to sleep, to lie on a soft bed, putting my head down to rest and sleeping for centuries."

"You don't want to sleep yet. Change to an eagle, then you can fly swiftly to your journey's end."

Again, Robin followed the professor's advice. He metamorphosed into an eagle and allowed his wings to carry him, his feet being given a rest.

The professor's voice was getting very loud, surely he was approaching the junction between infinite time and his real world, nineteen eighty-seven. He was accelerating now, out of control, he was being drawn towards the professor.

"I'm almost there now, I'm going to metamorphose back into my human self."

Suddenly, there was a great flash of white light and a mighty clash in Robin's bedroom, as the travelling being crashed through from one time

zone into another. He landed on his bed with an enormous force, and passed out.

The professor brought the doctors in, to give Robin a thorough examination.

The boy was all right. The drip was removed and they were given a special diet sheet for Robin. He slept all that day and night, and woke up at lunchtime the next day. He had a bath, the first one for at least a month, something which he was in desperate need of. Then he had a light meal — boiled, white fish and a couple of boiled potatoes.

Everyone was spoiling him, giving him plenty of love and affection, making sure that he had everything he asked for. He was waiting to see when the professor would bring up, in the various topics of conversation, more questions regarding his life in the other world. It was not until the evening that the professor decided they should start discussing what Robin had been subjected to in the future world. They talked for hours, going into fine detail about the System, their role in ruling the British people, and how the world was before Robin destroyed the existence of the governing body, by what was nothing short of a revolution.

Professor Fergere produced the dossier of notes that he had made. They detailed Robin's movements and also contained abridged statements of any documents and newspaper articles that they had happened upon. His writing was undecipherable. Most of the strokes appeared to be the same and the fact that he wrote his personal notes in German did not help the matter. It just made it harder for the students to read them.

"Should we start with when Robin first told us of his surroundings?" said professor Fergere,

"I think, by starting from the beginning, we can add any additional details that had been over-looked at the time."

"That's not a bad idea," replied Robin,

"But, must we get through everything this evening? I'm still very tired and feeling weak. I should appreciate having an early night. In my mind I don't see the point of rushing anything. If we are going to do this, we might as well take a bit of time over it, to ensure that it is done well. Otherwise it will all be wasted."

"Okay, we'll just discuss the area where you first started to inform us of where you were," agreed the professor.

"I think the first thing area, on which we should start, is to get a more detailed account of Post-War Southampton."

"There's not a lot more I can add to what you've already seen yourselves. When I first went there, I associated the place with death. It was a

squalid place, to which I wouldn't even send my worst enemy. The majority of the high-rise, concrete flats were just seen as crumbled remains. I didn't go there, to the ruins after dark, it gave me the creeps. That particular place was haunted, there was a great sadness of lost souls, wandering about with no place to go."

"The city was desolate and barren. Nothing would grow there, only small plants... for example, mosses could grow. When I was first there, it hadn't occurred to me that the reason why no plants grew was, in fact, due to the soil being contaminated with radioactive fallout. What was so nice there was the sunsets and sunrises. Never have I seen anything as spectacular, the sky being ablaze with such a brilliant red, merging in with all the other colours of the spectrum. The reflections of the sky on the sea, slowly rippling and disappearing with the white froth of the waves breaking on the shore. That is true beauty. The sea itself, during the day, appeared to be covered slightly by a thin mantle of yellow-grey fog. I don't know why that is."

"The worst thing was the nights, they were so cold. I found it difficult to sleep — every morning I would wake up, my joints aching and my body stiff all over. During the day, the sun was almost permanently obscured by the heavily overcast sky..."

Tomorrow, or when we have some spare time, I shall give you a more detailed description of the main locations that I encountered and where they were situated."

"Right. That may be quite useful, Robin," replied Professor Fergere. He scribbled down his notes hurriedly, in his usual illegible manner.

Robin yawned. He was hoping the professor would take his subtle hint and suggest that they stopped for now and continue tomorrow. To Robin's despair, the professor did no such thing. The grandmother clock chimed eleven times, then carried on ticking loudly in its monotonous manner. Before, Robin had not noticed how loudly it ticked. His mind was diverted to wishful thoughts of sleeping in his comfortable bed, to rest his weary head on his pillow. This had a great appeal to him at that particular moment. The more he thought about it, the heavier his eyelids felt. Slowly but surely they started to close, the voices becoming more distant, until he heard them no more...

The next thing Robin remembered was being shaken lightly.

"Wake up Robin, it's time you went to bed," Alison whispered softly in his ear.

"I don't want to wake up. Let me sleep here."

Robin closed his eyes and tried to fall back to sleep, but it was no use. Alison continued to speak to him.

"Come on, Robin. I'm not going to leave you to sleep here, so if you want to go to sleep, then you better go to bed. There you won't be disturbed by anyone. You'll be able to sleep comfortably until tomorrow."

Slowly the 'Sleeping Beauty' stirred, stretching his arms and cautiously opening his weary eyes.

"Oh, I'm so tired. I don't want to have to move but it seems as though I have no choice. Goodnight Alison."

Robin put his arms around Alison, giving her a tight hug, and kissed her on her cheek tenderly.

Harry, Alison and Matthew sat in the lounge drinking their tea, waiting for Robin to wake up. It was almost eleven o'clock.

"So... How long have you been trying to cover up the fact that you're going out with Alison?" Matthew asked in a sarcastic manner.

Harry choked slightly as he spluttered his tea everywhere. Alison glanced at Harry, completely mystified at Matthew's unexpected question.

"What do you mean, Matthew? What makes you think there's anything going on between Alison and myself?"

"Don't play the innocent with me, Harry. I'm not stupid! Remember, I've known you a lot longer than Alison has. Now, do you want me to tell her about our conversation we had not so long ago?"

"Look, Matthew, you're just jealous because I'm going out with her and you're not."

Alison had had enough of Matthew and Harry squabbling over her and she left them arguing.

"No, don't come with me Harry. You sort out your differences with Matthew."

As soon as Alison had departed Harry started shouting at Matthew.

"What did you think you could achieve by that outburst in front of Alison?! You know how sensitive she is and that she can't stand seeing people arguing. God knows what she thought when you mentioned about our conversation."

"Harry, listen carefully to what I say and don't do your usual and interrupt, trying to twist my words. Now, we both know that you're not capable of sticking with one person for any long periods of time. And, I suspect that you and Alison have had no physical contact. That's basically what you enjoy most out of a relationship. You won't get that for a long while yet. Wouldn't it would be for the best if you were to be straight with her and call it off. Just be honest with her, that way she won't be hurt as much."

"All right, Matthew, you've said enough. How do you know that you're

right? For all you know, I might not view her in the same way as the other women I've had relationships with. Your assumptions are totally ungrounded."

"Don't try covering it up. You know I'm right, you just don't want to admit it."

"What do you mean, I don't want to admit it? It seems perfectly clear to me what you're up to. You are jealous, you just can't face up to the fact that I'm going out with her and you're not. God! How childish can you get?"

"Harry, you're doing it, I knew it would be impossible to reason with you in a civilised manner. Who was it then, who betted me that they would manage to go out with Alison before the end of term? Sorry I had to resort to that, but you wouldn't listen to me otherwise. So believe me! At least if you were to be honest with Alison now, she wouldn't be hurt as much as if the relationship was to progress any further than it has done already."

"What's all the shouting about?" asked Robin. He looked around the living room, surprised.

"Where is Alison? I was under the impression that she was going to be here today."

"No," said Matthew quickly,

"She was here a little while ago, but she left. She'll be back soon. She said that if you got up before she returned, we were to make you breakfast. What would you like?"

He didn't want to have to tell Robin of the real reason why Alison had left.

"No, I know that you're not telling me the truth," countered Robin,

"It's written all over both your faces. What's happened? You've upset her, haven't you?"

Harry and Matthew were taciturn. Why hadn't Robin believed them? Maybe they had been stupid in assuming that Robin could be fooled. It made them very uneasy, to think they were unable to hide anything from him without the youngster being able to call their bluff.

"I'm not stupid you know. Just because I've been away, don't think that I don't know what was going on between Alison and Harry. I knew about them going out with each other before I visited the future world."

Robin paused briefly.

"I don't approve of you going out with Alison, Harry. Your relationship is going to end with her being very hurt. I should have thought that you would have had better sense..."

Again Robin paused. Both Harry and Matthew were stunned at his statement. Harry looked worried — it was not fair. He was being judged,

very unfairly, by his past record. What did they know about how he really felt towards Alison?

"I just don't believe it! Why is it that both of you disapprove of me, me of all people, dating Alison. You can't know how highly I regard her. I've never felt so strongly for anyone before. I love her, please believe me, I do love her. I don't want to hurt her."

"You're infatuated by her," replied Robin,

"You don't love her in the true sense of the word."

Matthew nodded in agreement with him. The young boy stared deeply into Harry's eyes and spoke slowly.

"Tell me truthfully... you do know, deep down inside your heart, that you are not really in love with Alison. What you really want to do is to be the first to make love to her, because you know that she's still a virgin. Most men are like yourself, though consciously they don't know it. They find something particularly attractive about going out with a virgin. I'm right Harry, it's totally useless you trying to deny it. I'm not going to stand by and watch Alison, who I love very much, get hurt by you. Or, come to think of it, anyone. Nobody is ever going to hurt her as long as I'm about to protect and watch over her."

"You're both being fastidious. See? Even Robin is jealous of my fortunate position."

"That's enough Harry. You are completely mixed up between what it means to be in love with someone and to love someone because you care about them as a friend."

Robin retaliated very strongly to Harry's accusations regarding his true motives about why he did not want to see Harry going out with Alison. Matthew had remained mute — Robin was doing a good job of making Harry see reason the hard way. Robin's tactless manner certainly did pay off this time. It was amazing that a boy of his age had such a great understanding of human nature. His argument was not unfounded — what he had said contained a lot of truth and Harry realised it. However, he was stubborn and did not want to admit it. They were right, he was not the right sort of person for her. She deserved someone who was much more sensitive and caring. He broke down and started crying.

"I, I..."

His voice trailed off as he sobbed. His face was placed firmly in his hands, too ashamed to look up. Harry viewed crying as a weakness, an effective way of gaining people's sympathy.

Matthew stood up and was ready to go to Harry, but Robin spoke to him.

"Matthew leave him alone. We'll go to the kitchen until he's recovered."

The youngster stood up and directed Matthew out of the lounge, leaving Harry to sob.

"We can't just leave him to cry like that, on his own. We all sometimes need someone to be there when we are upset. Don't you think you may have been too hard on him?" commented Matthew whilst toasting a few crumpets for Robin. He opened the fridge and looked for the cheese and the butter.

"I don't think I was too hard on him. It's for his own good and, more importantly, we'll be saving Alison from being hurt again. She's already afraid of men, what do you think the effects would be if she burnt her fingers with Harry? It would break her completely."

"I suppose you're right. Now, do you want a slice of cheese on one of your crumpets?"

Robin nodded. Carefully, Matthew sliced the cheese. He buttered the other crumpets and put the one with the cheese back under the grill until it had melted. Matthew gave Robin his breakfast with a cup of strong black coffee.

"I'll be back in moment, I'm just going to go to the loo."

"Matthew, make sure you are only going to the loo, that it's not an excuse to see Harry. Leave him be for the time being, he needs time to think about what we've said."

Whilst Matthew went to the toilet, the doorbell rang. Robin put his plate down, wiped his mouth and fingers and answered the door.

"Hello Alison, I thought you had a set of keys."

"I forgot them here this morning."

"Come into the kitchen and speak to me while I finish eating my breakfast."

Robin took hold of her hand and clutched it tightly. He gave her a hug and kissed her cheek. They went into the kitchen and sat down.

"Alison, what's wrong? Come on, tell me. Remember, I care about you and I don't like to see you upset. Don't mind me while I finish eating this..."

"Oh, I don't know what to do. The reason why I wasn't here this morning when you awoke was because Matthew and Harry were arguing over me. Matthew said that Harry would only end up hurting me. It's strange but, over the past week or so, I've had a gut feeling, saying that I should stop this relationship before it went any further. I just don't have the heart to tell Harry, he would be hurt if I told him. Robin, what's your opinion?"

Robin put his plate in the sink and washed his hands, drying them off with a tea cloth. He paused and thought of the best way in which he could

tell her what he felt. Alison's eyes were glazed over. She was obviously upset and he did not want to make the situation worse for her or, come to think of it, make it worse for Harry.

"Alison, I had a word with Harry this morning about this. He does love you, don't get him wrong, but I think that he realises that he's not the right sort of person for you. When you came just now, I brought you in here so that you wouldn't go in the lounge. You see, Harry burst into tears. Matthew and I left him in there so that he wouldn't be embarrassed."

"Should I go and see him now?"

"No, leave him. Let him go and clean himself up and wait for him to say something first."

I wonder where Matthew has got to, he said he was just going to the loo..."

Robin paused.

"He's tidying up upstairs, an excuse. He probably heard your voice and was too embarrassed to see you after this morning. Wait and I'll just go to call him down."

Robin left the kitchen. Alison stood up and went towards the sink to wash up the plates and cups which had clearly been left from the night before. It would be a miracle if they were to clear up the dishes the previous night. She was sad about how this had all resulted, though, on the other hand, she felt relieved, as though a great burden had been lifted off her shoulders. All that was left to do was to clear the whole unfortunate matter up with Harry.

She could not help but feel that Robin and Matthew had been too hard on Harry. Still, all they had done was to make a reality of what she, herself was eventually going to do. In her own good time, of course. But it had happened now, and she had to prepare herself for this meeting with Harry.

She had never heard of him actually crying. It was odd, always he appeared so strong. That was what she was so afraid of — she prayed that he would not break down in front of her in a flood of tears. She would not be able cope with that, she would feel so guilty.

Robin found Matthew in his bedroom, as he had thought, making his bed.

"Alison is here. Aren't you going to come down? I thought you said you were only going to go to the loo."

"Oh... I hadn't realised Alison was here. I'll come down in a minute."

"What's wrong, Matthew? Why don't you look at me? Are you angry with me? I didn't mean to be too rough with him this morning, honestly I didn't."

"No, it isn't what you did. I've just realised why I shouted at him like I did. It's because I was jealous. I hated the thought of Harry being so lucky as to be going out with Alison. It wasn't Alison I was thinking about, but me. I feel so ashamed. Maybe we were wrong, how do we know that Alison and Harry aren't suitably matched, Harry could have been sincere about his feelings and motives towards Alison."

"Don't say that, Matthew. Okay, so your motives were wrong but, at the same time, it is for the best, believe me."

Matthew finished tucking the blankets into the bed and followed Robin downstairs. When they got to the kitchen, Alison was no longer there. The room had been cleared up nicely.

"We'll wait here, they must be talking. They'll come out when they are ready," Matthew said, filling up the automatic kettle. He got out the teapot and cups, in preparation for making them all a cup of tea. They sat there silently, neither of them uttering a word. The ticking of the wall clock could be heard distinctly. The kettle hissed as the water came to the boil.

"What can be taking them so long?" asked Robin. Matthew shrugged his shoulders. He finished making the tea and put the cups on a tray.

"Come on, they would have finished discussing breaking off the relationship, let's take the tea in."

Robin stood up off the stool and followed Matthew into the lounge. Matthew knocked on the door, carefully balancing the tray on his other hand.

"Can we come in, I've made some tea."

"Yeah, come in Matthew," replied Harry.

Alison smiled at Robin, as if to say that he was right, that she was happier now that matter had been cleared up. Matthew put the tray down on the small, pine coffee table and handed out the cups.

"Don't you think it's time we called the professor?" suggested Harry,

"He did say to contact him when Robin was up and ready to continue going through the notes."

He sipped his tea, blowing it gently lest he burnt his tongue.

Alison got up and went towards the telephone.

"I'll phone him and ask him whether he wants us to go to the university or whether he's going to come down here."

"Robin, how did you get there, the post holocaust era, in the first place?" enquired Harry,

"What was your reaction when you found your mind there?"

He had asked himself that question so many times when watching

Robin through his eyes. People travelling in time, this he had found mind boggling. One only read of this occurring in fiction books, never had he thought it could actually happen.

"I don't exactly know how that had happened. What I had initially hoped to do was just put myself in a light trance to find out whether I was going to pass my examinations. I didn't for one moment think I was ever going to end up travelling forward in time. I was so scared when I first found myself there. I didn't know where the hell I was. I thought I was having a nightmare, but I never woke up. It was weird, knowing that my mind was somewhere, apart from my body. Though my body was there, it wasn't, if you see what I mean. I wasn't sure where I had travelled to, or even whether I had, in fact, travelled backwards or forwards in time. My main concern was to make sure I survived. All the time, I had to keep my wits about me. I had to watch that I wasn't about to be ambushed by a gang of thugs or, even worse, get caught by the System. The tales I heard, of the more unfortunate, weaker people being tortured by the System... Anyone who had been captured was never seen again."

Robin paused and sat pondering. He shuddered as a tingling sensation ran up his spine. A tear trickled slowly down his cheek. He got a white handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped the tear away and blew his nose. It was only now that he realised, how lucky he actually was, to have been able to travel back to his real home. To think that, at one point, he had seriously considered staying there for good.

Alison returned and, putting her arm around her little boy, asked sympathetically,

"What's wrong, Robin? Are you not feeling very well?"

"No, I'm all right, truly I am. I was just thinking how lucky I am to be back here, among people who love and care for me."

"What did the professor have to say?" asked Matthew, trying to change the subject quickly, as it was clear that it had upset Robin.

"He'll be down in about half an hour, he was in the middle of a lecture when I phoned. One of the other lecturers is off sick today, and he wasn't too pleased about taking somebody else's class this morning."

"I'm just going to go out and get some tobacco and cigarettes," said Matthew,

"I'll be back soon. Does anyone want anything while I'm out?"

He picked up his jacket and put it on, fumbling about in his pockets, trying to find his car keys.

"What are you looking for?" asked Harry.

"Oh, drat! I can't remember where I put my car keys."

"What do you need your car keys for, surely you don't intend driving to the corner shop. It's only about five hundred metres away," commented Alison. Matthew left the room and slammed the front door shut behind him.

"I wonder how the professor proposes we stop the nuclear war happening? I think he has his hopes too high, it will be a miracle if he does pull it off. I can't see anyone taking us seriously. We'll be branded as a bunch of crack-pots, especially with an election coming up, people will say we should set ourselves up as part of the loony party."

"Yes Harry, I wonder how he is going to make the people aware that we are not a bunch of loonies out to get publicity, or a group of people who are scare mongers," replied Alison. Robin sat silently, thinking about the people he had left behind. He felt guilty because he knew that, sooner or later, the System would be more than suspicious about what was happening to their food ships. It would be then that he would be needed to help them, to combat the warriors of the System. But as the professor had pointed out to him, if they were to stop the war from occurring then the System would not have this sinister government over the people. He shut that disturbing feeling of guilt out of his mind.

"If it's okay with you all, I should like very much for us to go to the cinema and see a film. What do you recommend we see, I don't even know what's currently being shown at the Odeon or A.B.C."

"I agree. I think it would be nice if we had a break and went to see *A Room With A View*," replied Alison. She had already seen that particular film once and had enjoyed it thoroughly.

"After we've seen the film we can go to Burger King. That's if you want, of course," she added. It had been a long time since they had been out as a group and had any fun.

"Thank you Alison, that will be very nice. We'll wait for Matthew to return and check that it's okay with him. He may have already made alternative plans for this evening."

CHAPTER SIX

FIRESIDE HORRORS

“GOOD MORNING ROBIN!” SAID PROFESSOR FERGERE,

“How are you? You look a lot better than you did last night. Did you sleep well?”

He walked through the front door and Robin closed it behind him.

Robin studied the way the professor walked, finding the sight quite comical. Professor Fergere was, as one might politely put it, quite ‘well built’. Less politely, but more accurately, their German friend enjoyed eating a lot. He had a very sweet tooth — one could get whatever one desired once the professor had been plied with a variety of fresh cream cakes. His figure could only be described as being ‘rangy’. It suited him though. His comfortable, well looked-after stature matched his homely smile very well. Robin chuckled to himself as he thought of how the professor must have difficulties in doing up the laces on his shoes. More to the point, he wondered how long it must have been since the professor had actually seen his feet. Maybe Professor Fergere did not take off his socks and shoes before going to sleep at night...

Robin did not follow the professor into the lounge where the others were sitting. Instead, he went into the kitchen, poured a glass of black-currant drink, and opened an entire packet of chocolate digestive biscuits out onto the plate.

He took these offerings through to the professor. A Cheshire cat grin spread across the professor’s face.

“Thank you Robin. What with having to cover for the other class this morning, I didn’t have time to get anything to eat,” the professor said with a half filled mouth, munching happily away.

"Now, as soon as I have finished eating this, then we can continue with our work. So, what have you all been getting up to while I've been teaching this morning?"

"Not a lot, Professor Fergere," replied Alison,

"We were waiting for Robin to wake up. We thought it best that he be allowed to sleep on, seeing how tired he was last night. Don't worry, we made sure that he had a good breakfast."

She answered quickly, thus ensuring that everyone did not start telling different tales.

"Good, we should be able to get a lot of work done then! I hope you have no arrangements planned for tonight."

"Well, ah..." Robin tried interrupting.

"That's fine then," butted in the professor,

"I'll just get the folder containing my notes out and we can proceed."

He finished eating the biscuits and drank the last of his refreshment before rummaging deep down into his old, tatty, brown leather brief case.

"I found them! For an awful moment then I thought I had left them at home."

"What a shame he didn't," thought Robin to himself.

"Now, where did we leave off before Robin fell asleep?" mumbled the professor, fumbling through his notes, his glasses steadily slipping down his nose.

"We finished discussing the System and the people. All that was left was for Robin to draw a plan of Southampton," answered Harry.

"No, I do believe you are wrong, Harry. It seems from my notes that we just finished discussing what the environment out there was like. I think I have all the necessary information on that particular topic."

"Er, professor?" asked Robin,

"What are the other topics you've got listed that you want to discuss? If you read them off, then I'm sure it would be a lot quicker if I just described them, rather than you asking questions and me answering them."

He did want to go to the cinema and at least this way they would have a good chance of finishing in time to see the last showing, which commenced at about eight o'clock.

"That seems quite reasonable, Robin. Well, there are three other main topics — the people who lived there, i.e. the masses, the elite of the masses and, lastly, the System."

"Right. The people. They were truly a pitiful sight. There is not a lot I can say about them that you haven't seen for yourselves. I'll tell you what I found most amusing and that is this — Great Britain has always been

renowned as being an animal loving nation. Well, to see these people actually brutally killing cats and dogs... I wonder whether those minority groups, who protest against cruelty to animals, resorted to these primitive, but necessary means. Or did they starve? Seriously, it made me feel sick the first time I was there, seeing people living in such degrading conditions. They wandered about half-starved most of the time. It was the moaning that I found unbearable, seeing people, suffering, from... oh, it's anyone's guess what diseases they may have contracted."

Robin paused. There was complete silence as everyone listened with complete attention to the boy speak as he sat at the escritoire.

"The stench coming from those people was so nauseating, but what else could you expect if they had nowhere to wash or go to the loo. I think there must have been a great number of diseases, caused directly by the lack of hygiene. They were homeless and destitute. It was a shame to think that the majority of these people would have worked so hard to build themselves a comfortable home. Then this happens, the war, and before they know it, it's all gone, everything they worked for. I wonder what would happen to the structure of society, if they had seen for themselves what I saw not so long ago.

The mothers could do nothing about preventing the deaths of their children. You can't imagine how terrible it must have been for them, having their babies dying there, in their arms."

Once more the youngster paused, reflecting on the plight of those poor, unfortunate people. He swallowed, trying hard not to allow any tears to come to his eyes.

"Yes, thinking about it, I must have been one of the few children there... Remember what I had said about weird kinds of people wondering about? Well, what I meant was, that there were people who had lost the majority of their hair and had dreadful blemishes on their skin. Their faces were pale and withdrawn, they were like walking skeletons which possessed an outer coating of stretched skin. Just like zombies, literally the living dead. It was like having a nightmare, playing a major role in a horror movie."

"Oh, my poor baby," said Alison, sympathetically,

"It must have been terrible for you. I promise that I won't allow you to be subjected to anything so horrific ever again."

"Yes, I think I have a detailed enough account of the people now. Do you mind going over the section regarding the elite of the masses?" asked Professor Fergere. He could see that Robin was being affected by this kind of interrogation. He had been under an enormous amount of pressure in the futuristic city of Southampton, and now he was being asked to recall as

much as possible about it while it was all relatively fresh in his mind. A lot of people would have suffered a nervous breakdown after having been subjected to the same, extreme ordeal that Robin had.

"I'm all right," said Robin, seeing the concern on the professor's face,

"I would rather we got all this out of the way now, then I can relax."

"Okay, that's fine by me," replied Professor Fergere.

"The elite, ahh yes, they had a lot of courage," began Robin,

"One had to salute their bravery and foresight."

"Foresight? What do you mean foresight?" asked the professor, looking up,

"Have I missed something, or am I being plain stupid?"

"Yes, foresight. Maybe I hadn't told you before, but speaking to Jimmy, he told me that when it was first announced, you know, the Russians blocking off the Straits of Hormuz, that a group of people had made the best preparations possible for the likely event of a nuclear war."

"You mean to say it was these handful of people in Southampton, who didn't listen to the media and the governments, and had started preparing for a war?"

The professor sat back in his chair.

"Well! Maybe not all of the public are as stupid and mindless as I had thought."

"Can I please continue now?" said Robin,

"Now, where was I? Oh, I remember, it was about the elite. There isn't an awful lot more I can say about them. They were very organised. They mainly stole food and other necessities from the System, taking these items when the System had unloaded the crates from the ship. They were just normal people who had faith in themselves and did not take the same attitude as the majority of people, those who did not think that it was not worth surviving after a nuclear war. They had prepared themselves for it, they had taken the necessary precautions."

Some time later, the professor declared that he was satisfied and suggested that they move on to the final topic.

"Ah, now the system. As you know, the System was the ruling body there. It was strange that they had been set up there for almost three years and no changes had been made. No improvements to the living conditions of the people had been implemented. It's little wonder the people didn't respect the System. No one can expect respect and co-operation if they don't show respect for others. All they did was terrorise the people, ensuring that the masses would be kept weak and in no fit condition to cause any form of uprising or revolution..."

Robin turned around to Alison and looked deeply into her eyes. Something was bothering her... What? He could not quite put his finger on it.

"Professor, do you mind if we take a short break? It's half past five and we've been sitting here for approximately three and a half hours."

The professor acknowledged Robin's request, nodding his head, staring longingly at his empty glass and plate.

"Alison, will you come and help me make some tea and get something for the others to eat? They must be starving as we didn't eat anything at lunchtime."

Alison and Robin left the lounge, leaving Matthew and Harry engaged in trivial conversation with Professor Fergere.

Once they had reached the kitchen and Robin had switched on the kettle, the boy turned around and made Alison sit down.

"Now, what's wrong Ali? Is it this morning's episode with Harry that's upsetting you so much? Come on, you know you can speak to me."

"No, it has nothing to do with that. On the contrary, I'm relieved that that has been cleared up."

"Well, what is it then?"

"It was talking about the System that upset me. It reminded me of that bloodbath, in particular the barbaric way which one of the guards chose to kill that woman and her unborn child. I know I'm being stupid, getting so emotional over something that hasn't even happened yet, but..."

"Alison, you shouldn't be ashamed of being upset. You would have to be a very cold, inhumane person, not to have been affected by that spectacle. If I had had anything solid in my stomach at the time, then I would have vomited at the sight. God, how I wish I hadn't found that way for you to witness what I was doing there. Sorry Alison, please don't worry. Hopefully we'll be able to prevent that ever happening."

Robin went over to Alison and hugged her tightly, holding her close, making her feel more secure.

"I'm all right, Robin. Come on, the water has boiled, we had better get on and make the tea. The sooner we finish, the better. We'll be able to go and see that film if we get a move on."

Robin looked into her eyes, viewing each one carefully.

"Are you sure you are okay. I'm here to listen if you need me. I'm your friend who cares an awful lot about your happiness and well-being. Just trust in me, everything will work out for the best."

Alison nodded. She felt an extraordinary sensation, the tears that brimmed unbidden in Robin's eyes cut her deeply.

"Robin... you've changed a lot since you've returned from that place."

It's as though you've grown up by about ten years. You seem to be more receptive to the way people feel, and what's more, you seem to know the answers to their problems."

"It was being in that place, I had to grow up. I had to learn to help myself and not depend on others as I had done here. I couldn't be selfish there and expect favours from other people. When I had terminated the System's rule in that particular area, I was suddenly given the responsibility of having to act as father and mother to all those helpless men and women. They expected me to know all the answers to their problems, to make sure they were all comfortable, provided with shelter and food. They were like little children, totally dependent on their parents for their physical and emotional survival. You see, I didn't mean to change or grow up quicker than I had to, but I had no real choice there."

"I can understand that, Robin, but it is a shame that someone as young as yourself had to see those horrible atrocities. Any responsible parent wouldn't have permitted their child to experience that, even as a film on the television, let alone in real life. Come on, we had better get on."

While Alison made the tea, Robin got some plates out. He found some freshly made sausage rolls in a Tupperware box in the cupboard, a packet of muesli biscuits and a large, untouched, fresh cream Black Forest gateau.

"This should be enough to keep us going until we go to Burger King this evening," commented Robin.

They took the trays through to the others. A broad smile spread across their cuddly, old friend's face as he caught a glimpse of the gateau on the tray.

"I'll continue while we eat," said Robin, sipping his tea and munching on his muesli biscuit. It was some time before he said anything.

"Well, it seems to me that we have discussed all the topics that you had initially listed out to me. About the future world, I don't think there's anything else that we need talk about now. The events should be clear to you. After all, you did witness everything that happened there. Did you get a copy of the newspaper article while I read through it?"

"You're right, you have given us a run down of everything I had asked you for earlier on. In answer to your question, yes, I did take down a copy of the newspaper article."

The professor paused, fumbling through his file. He produced a piece of paper upon which some notes were scrawled. None of the students could even read the scribble which was the heading (they deduced what it was by its position at the top of the page). They only had the professor's

word for it that piece of paper had details of the newspaper article.

"Right, what time would you like us to see you tomorrow?" asked Matthew,

"There is nothing else, as far as I can see, that you need from Robin tonight. Nothing that can't wait until tomorrow."

He continued to speak, making his case for stopping. None of the other students uttered a word. They just sat there silently, staring at the professor, the pressure being on him now. The first side to speak would be the loser.

A few minutes passed.

Then it was revealed who was the weaker of the two sides. The professor's nerves had given way to his students. The truth was that he could not think of a feasible excuse for keeping the students there.

"Yes okay, there's nothing else for us to discuss now. I'll expect to see you all tomorrow, at nine o'clock sharp, in my room at the university. Make sure that you don't drink too much tonight and oversleep."

The last sentence he directed at Harry.

He finished putting his notes away in his file and put the top on his very expensive fountain pen. Always he wrote his notes with that treasured pen and always he got ink blots on his paper and shirt. The side of the middle finger on his left hand had a permanent ink stain on his callous, the mark of a person who enjoyed writing a lot. Many a time, the students had tried to persuade the professor to use a typewriter, telling him that it would save him a lot of time. They did not tell him the truth, none of them had had the courage to tell him, that his hand writing looked worse than that of an infant school child, that it was an absolute nightmare trying to decipher his supposedly well-ordered, notes.

"Don't forget, I want to see all of you, tomorrow morning at nine o'clock sharp. Have a nice evening and don't tire Robin out. Goodnight."

The professor left the house and, though he pretended to the others that nothing was wrong, there was a lot on his mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PERSECUTION

THE PROFESSOR DROVE BACK TO HIS HOUSE AFTER HAVING STOPPED OFF AT A PUBLIC house where he had several double Scotches. The depression he had been feeling earlier had set deep within his mind.

That morning he had not been detained at the university to cover for another lecturer — that had been a false alibi.

What he had been doing that morning was very different.

He had spent several hours on the telephone, trying desperately to speak to the British Prime Minister. He had had no luck — all his efforts were to no avail. The only person, to whom he was eventually permitted to speak, was the Prime Minister's Personal Secretary. Even this only resulted in his being informed that the Prime Minister was "engaged in a meeting".

He had tried his utmost to make the Personal Secretary understand that what he was telling him, about a war occurring in under a year from now, was true and that he was being deadly serious about the whole matter. He had been treated like some crack-pot trying desperately to get attention. The more the professor thought about the way he had been humiliated on the telephone that morning, the more depressed he became.

"If one's own Government won't take one seriously, then there is no hope of being able to prevent this holocaust from occurring," thought the professor,

"There is no way on God's given earth that anyone will take me seriously. What is to be done? I can't actually stop the nuclear weapons from exploding!"

He was not far from his home now, just a street away.

It was almost half past eleven. Professor Fergere sat silently in his armchair in front of the electric fire in the lounge. He stared blankly into the unknown, in total darkness. His eyes were swollen, very sore and blood-shot.

He was so confused — he felt as though he was in a small room, in which he could feel the walls quickly contracting. He should not be put under so much pressure, he should not have to be responsible for saving the world single-handedly, it was not his job. It should be the politicians', that was part of the reason they were elected. It was they who were responsible for the well-being of their subjects.

The more the professor sat thinking in the dark, the more he felt the chains getting tighter around his neck, and the walls of the room drawing closer and closer. He saw visions of himself, being persecuted though he was only trying to do what he thought was right.

It was a glorious April morning, infinitely better than the previous day when there had been showers almost continuously.

Matthew gazed out of his window. It was six o'clock, and the sparrows chirped their sweet song as the sun shone dazzlingly overhead. There were droplets of dew glistening on the petals and leaves of the brightly coloured wallflowers. Spring had come late this year and hence the new leaves on the Russian Ivy were only just starting to come through. It would not be long now, before the whole of the hideous brick wall at the bottom of their garden would be covered by the Russian Ivy. The only thing that spoils the garden was the lawn, which was in desperate need of a good mowing. However, this was a boring, tedious job, and none of them could honestly say that they enjoyed taking it on.

"I'll do it, it's a nice day and I have nothing else to do," thought Matthew to himself.

He dressed and washed, grabbed a glass of fresh orange juice and ventured out into the garden.

Now, where was the lawn-mower?

Matthew frowned as he pondered. The truth of the matter was that it had been so long since he had soiled his fair hands in the garden, he had forgotten such trivial matters as where the lawn-mower was kept. After a long hunt about, he found the lawn mower in the small room behind the kitchen.

It was half past seven when Matthew finished doing his good deed for the day. It had been hard work, especially for someone who was not used

to such great expenditure of energy first thing in the morning or, in his case, at any time of the day. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and gave a sigh of relief as he inspected his arduous work. He smiled to himself as he brushed down his clammy hands on his trousers. He took the lawn-mower back to where he had found it and put the kettle on. He had to have a cup of strong coffee while trying to recover from his out-of-character behaviour of earlier on.

He walked slowly and quietly up the stairs, carefully trying to balance the breakfast tray he had prepared for Robin. As his hands were full, he resorted to giving the door a light kick.

"Robin, I've got you breakfast. It's time you were up. It's nearly eight o'clock and we've to be at the university by nine."

Matthew put the tray down and opened the door. Once in, he placed the tray on the side table and opened the curtains, allowing the sunlight to enter the room.

He shook Robin lightly.

"Come on, your breakfast is getting cold. It is now two minutes past eight," said Matthew, inspecting his gold, antique timepiece. Slowly, a weary head ventured partially above the top of the quilt. An eye opened cautiously and, after seeing Matthew so wide awake, the head groaned profoundly and dived quickly under the quilt.

"Robin, if you don't sit up now, I'll pull the quilt off you and you'll get cold," said Matthew, sternly. Immediately Robin shot up from under the quilt and sat up. The prospect of having the cover taken off him was too much. Robin hated the cold, it did not take much to start him shivering.

"Breakfast, now that I did hear first time round this morning. What have you got me? Smells good, whatever it is. Mmm, I'm starving."

Robin breathed in deeply, enjoying the aroma which smelt so good to his complaining stomach.

"Well, there's your black coffee, a slice of toast, a toasted tea cake and two crumpets with butter oozing through them. How does that sound?"

"Thanks Matthew, that's sweet music to my ears. I take it that you remembered to make sure that there were no little bits in the marmalade on my toast?"

"No, I didn't forget that. Now eat up and get ready quickly, otherwise we'll be late."

Matthew handed the tray over and started looking for clothes for Robin.

"There's your things. I'll meet you downstairs when you're dressed. Enjoy your breakfast."

Already, Robin had started tucking into his food. As always, he

managed to get a fair amount of the marmalade around his mouth, leaving a sticky mess on his chin.

He noticed that Matthew had opened his window. Robin thought this was strange – Matthew never usually did that because he knew how much Robin objected to cold draughts. The boy climbed out of bed and went to the window to close it. It was then that he noticed the lawn.

“God, it’s been mowed. No, it couldn’t have been Matthew who did it. If he did, there must be something seriously wrong with him... and breakfast in bed, too!”

Robin left his bedroom and shouted to Matthew from the top of the stairs.

“Matthew! What happened to the lawn? Did you happen to be sleep-walking last night, having a terrible nightmare, in which you saw yourself doing some horrendous job... like mowing the lawn?”

Matthew came rushing up, dropping his lighter on the stairs.

“What do you mean, I must have been sleep-walking last night. I’m always willing to help.”

“Matthew, don’t try getting out of it. Admit it, you like nothing better than to do nothing. Laziness is your trademark. Who was it, the last time the lawn needed mowing, who said he was suddenly feeling ill? Come on, face it – you hate working.”

“No need to rub it in. I didn’t sleep-walk, I woke up early and decided to mow the lawn. Get dressed and then we can leave.”

Matthew left Robin and went back to the kitchen to finish eating his cheese on toast.

“Huh! The cheek of it. Fancy calling me lazy,” thought Matthew to himself.

By the time Matthew and Robin had arrived at the University, Alison and Harry were sitting in Professor Fergere’s office.

“You’re two minutes late. Makes a change doesn’t it? It’s usually us who are late. Don’t worry, the professor hasn’t come in yet. It must be National Be Late Day for the more punctual members of society,” commented Harry, briefly bringing his head out of his book.

Matthew and Robin found some chairs and drew them closer to Alison and Harry. They engaged in trivial conversation, laughing about their night out and how good the film was. It was not until they started to joke, about the way in which they had managed to persuade the professor to allow them the rest of the evening off, that they noticed the time. It was now half past ten and still they had no word from the professor.

“It’s probably nothing. Maybe he’s been detained by some roadworks

between here and Winchester. He’ll be here soon,” said Alison whilst drinking a cup of hot chocolate. The hot chocolate was the most bearable of all the drinks available from the drinks machine in the hallway.

“Guess what Matthew did this morning.”

“Come on Robin, shock us,” replied Harry.

“Wait for it, roll the drums... He mowed the lawn.”

“You mean...? He didn’t, did he? Gasp, shock-horror! What’s wrong with you, Matthew? Wasn’t that going against your grain somewhat? Sorry Matthew, that’s being cruel.”

Harry stopped talking and burst out into laughter, the others following his example. Matthew just sat there, his arms folded tightly.

“I don’t care if you take the michaelmas out of me. Just pretend I’m not here. Carry on, I’ll sit here, and when you’ve decided that you’ve finally recovered, then we can see about finding out why the professor has not turned up. It’s quarter past eleven and he would have got in contact with us by now.”

At that, everyone stopped their fits of hysterical laughter and sat up straight. Harry left the room and went to the Departmental Manager’s office.

“Professor Lion hasn’t heard from Professor Fergere this morning. He knows nothing of the professor having to go anywhere else this morning,” said Harry to the students when he returned.

“I think we had better go to his house and see if he’s all right. Robin, you’ve been to his house before, do you still remember where it is?” said Alison, turning to face Robin.

“Yes, I should have the address written down on a piece of a paper in my jacket pocket.”

He rustled through the rubbish in his pockets and finally produced a rather crumpled up piece of paper.

“Here it is, we better go now.”

About an hour later they pulled into the drive of Professor Fergere’s residence. His car was still parked there and the curtains were closed. The milk bottles hadn’t been taken in.

“That’s strange, it doesn’t look as though he’s woken up yet,” commented Matthew, peeping through the letterbox.

“The place is in total darkness and I can see some letters in the hallway. Can you hear his dog whining?”

“Try opening the door, Matthew.”

Harry sounded quite worried. Even though he teased the professor, the old man meant a lot to him.

"I can't, it's locked. I've rang the doorbell but he doesn't seem to want to answer the door. Is there any other way we can try getting into the house?"

They went to the back of the house. Once there, they found the kitchen door to be unlocked. The professor's dog ran up to them and started barking ferociously at these intruders.

They split up and went searching for Professor Fergere.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GRIEF

"HARRY, MATTHEW, THERE'S NOTHING HERE. HAVE ANY OF YOU FOUND ANYTHING?" shouted Alison.

"His bed hasn't been slept in. He couldn't have come back here last night," replied Matthew.

"If he hadn't returned here last night, then what's his car doing here? Just in case you hadn't noticed, it's in the driveway, in front of your car," Harry said in a sarcastic tone of voice. He did not mean to snap at Matthew like that, but he was very worried and concerned for the professor.

"Sorry Matthew, I didn't mean to be so short with you. It's just that..."

He paused and swallowed.

"It's okay Harry, I understand. Look, no harm done. Come on, let's find Robin. Professor Fergere is obviously not here. Maybe he's gone to London. He did say that sometime, not too far in the future, he would try getting in contact with the Prime Minister."

With that Harry and Alison followed Matthew down the stairs.

"Robin? Robin, where are you?"

There was no reply to Alison's question.

"Where's that boy got to? This is no time to start playing hide and seek with us," Alison said to herself.

"What was that Alison?"

"It was nothing Harry. Maybe Robin's in the dining room or the lounge."

Harry and Matthew went to check the dining room whilst Alison went to look in the lounge.

Just as she approached the closed door, she could hear a whimpering. Quietly, she opened the door and crept in. There she found Robin. He was

half bent over the professor, who was sprawled in the armchair. The electric fire was on.

Alison did not know what to do. This was the first time she had ever seen Robin crying. What should she do — go over to him, try comforting him by taking him in her arms? Or should she leave him alone until he came out of the room, when he was ready?

She left the room as she had entered, undetected by the lamenting boy. She closed the door, went quickly into the dining room and beckoned Harry and Matthew over to her.

“What is it, Alison?” asked Harry loudly.

“Sssh, whisper!”

“What’s wrong, Alison? What’s all this silence in aid of?” asked Harry, whispering this time.

“Oh God!” said Alison quietly, beginning to breathe quickly,

“I don’t know what to do about Robin.”

“Why, what’s wrong with Robin now? He hasn’t started putting himself into a trance, has he?” enquired Matthew.

“He’s crying! It’s the first time I’ve ever seen him like that. He’s in the lounge, bent over the professor crying, his heart out. Don’t you see? I think the professor is dead! Robin doesn’t know that I’ve seen him.”

“Oh God, what are we going to do? We had better phone the Police. Alison, you go and see whether you can comfort Robin,” Harry stammered. He was in shock. None of them had prepared themselves for this unlikely event.

Matthew went into the hall and telephoned the Police. He did not know quite what to say to them. What could he say, that they had broken into the house and found the old man dead in his armchair? It seemed that that was all he could say to them — he knew nothing else.

Alison silently entered the lounge and walked over to Robin. She put her arms around his shoulders.

He turned around, wiping his face with the sleeve of his jacket, and fell into her arms, starting to cry again.

“Robin... Robin, don’t cry. Please don’t cry, otherwise I’ll start crying with you.”

Alison found it hard to speak coherently, she had to swallow several times and cough to clear her throat. She wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Robin, do you know... why? The Police will be here soon. Do you have any idea what caused his death? Oh Robin, I know how you must be feeling now. Hold me tight, remember I’ll always be here for you.”

She caressed his hair and stroked his back, trying desperately to make him feel more secure.

“I think he committed suicide, Alison. I found these various envelopes in his hands and...”

His voice trailed off as he started to sob, tears streaming down his flushed cheeks.

“Can I read them, where are they?”

Robin handed her two envelopes. They were damp from his tears.

“Only that one we can give to the Police. The other one is personal to us.”

Alison opened the envelope which they were going to give to the Police, it read —

The Mind, The Human Race.

It’s time it died!

Why should it suffer when it can no longer be tried?

Every day being tested — can it be done?

Mind over matter, can that war be won?

From a race of scurrying, useless life,

Full of pain, pressure and strife,

To be free of the chains that burn like ice,

To leave this world would suffice.”

Alison folded up what was obviously a suicide poem, and put it back in the envelope. She got out her handkerchief, wiped her eyes and then blew her nose.

“From this, it seems that he must have been very depressed at the time he wrote it. But why? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Alison, he does explain why to us. In the other envelope. Read it to yourself, I don’t want you to read it out loud.”

Robin got up, took his jacket off, and put it over Professor Fergere’s face. He then went out of the room to find Matthew and Harry.

“Alison said that you had called the Police. When they do get here, this is the envelope you are to give to them, it contains some sort of suicide poem. I want us to keep his dog, we can’t allow it to be put down. Please Matthew, say we can have the dog.”

“Yes Robin,” replied Matthew,

“Of course we’ll keep the dog. The Police should be here any time now.”

“I want to go home now, I don’t want to have to speak to the Police. Can you take me home now, Matthew? Can’t Harry take care of this matter with the Police when they come round?”

"Robin, you'll have to stay and answer some questions. You did find Professor Fergere," interrupted Harry.

"Okay. But if I must stay, then you're all to say that you don't have any idea why he committed suicide. I'll go and tell Alison, so she knows."

Robin went back into the lounge. He held Alison closely.

"Thank you for comforting me earlier. When the Police arrive, remember: none of us have any idea as to why he would have wanted to take his own life. Can I have that letter back now?"

Alison handed the letter over to Robin just as the doorbell rang. Harry answered the door, permitting the policemen to enter the house. He directed them to the lounge.

Firstly they examined the body. Something that Robin had not noticed was discovered on Professor Fergere's person — a syringe and an empty Insulin bottle. None of the students knew that the professor had been a diabetic.

The police took several hours questioning the students, before taking them to the Police Station to give an official statement. Professor Fergere's body had already been removed to the mortuary.

At the end of it all, Robin was permitted to keep the professor's dog.

They returned to Matthew's house.

Robin left the others and went up to his bedroom, where he started crying once more. Hands trembling, he produced the letter that the professor had written to them, finding it hard to get the letter out of the envelope. His eyes were clouded with tears. The writing on the letter appeared to be hazy and some of the ink at the bottom of the page had run slightly because of his tears. He started to read through it again, slowly. He did not need to read it, he knew what was written off by heart.

To My Dear Students,

I don't want any of you to be upset over me. I know I have let you down. Yesterday morning I did not cover for another lecturer, sorry I lied to you. The truth is that I tried making the British Prime Minister aware of what we know, but I had no luck.

Do not give up hope, I'll always be with you, watching over you all, until you join me here.

It has been a pleasure working with you all for the last few years. Just carry on the good work, don't let what we've achieved go to waste.

Maybe you'll be able to find a way in which you can stop the nuclear holocaust from occurring.

Alison, Harry and Matthew, please do all you can to look after Robin. He is very special and needs careful looking after.

There is nothing else that I can say but, believe me, I am sorry that it had to end this way. I could not go on after yesterday, as I am sure that I would have been persecuted and made to keep silent.

I love you all very much,

yours sincerely,

Professor Fergere."

Robin returned the letter to its envelope and put it in the top draw of his desk.

He sat on his bed for a moment, listening. Then, when he was sure that no-one was going to come into the room, he rummaged through the inside pocket of his jacket and produced another envelope, one with his name on. He had not told any of the other students about this letter.

It had touched him greatly — the professor must have known that Robin would be affected the most by his sudden death. In the letter, the professor had explained more fully why he had chosen to commit suicide.

When Robin first became part of the Parapsychology research team at Southamton University, it was the professor who had taken special charge over him. Professor Fergere treated Robin as a sort of son. Out of all the people he knew, Robin felt closest to the professor. It was as if the professor was the only person who truly understood how Robin's mind worked. Robin felt like an outsider with the others, as though he did not truly belong as part of their social group. It was different with the professor — the boy did not feel an outcast with him.

He opened up the envelope, took out the letter and started reading it. This was all he had of the professor now, and there was no way he would allow anyone to take the letter away from him.

"Dear Robin,

I knew somehow that you would be the first person to find me, so I saw no harm in writing to you. The other letter is a bit mixed up. I did not

know how to express myself to them, they don't understand me as you do. I love you very much, Robin, you must never forget that. I meant it when I wrote that I would always be with you. I could never abandon you. No one on Earth understands your needs as I do. You will grow with my love and judgement within you.

I did try my best to make them understand that what I was telling them was the truth. But they were mocking, treating me like some loony. They took my name, and I had to commit suicide, otherwise I'm sure that they would have persecuted me. I did not tell them anything about you or the others.

You must understand that, after failing today, they would have hounded me. As a direct result, they would have gone out of their way to know how I had come to this conclusion and, eventually, they would have found out about you all. You too, with the others, would have been persecuted.

Please, please for me, do not give up hope. Try somehow, maybe with your powers, to prevent this unprecedented disaster from happening. It is imperative that no one finds out about your special talents. They won't look after you and shelter you as I have done. You'll be a glorified guinea-pig to them, not a person with feelings.

Over the last few years of research into Parapsychology and related powers of the mind, I have compiled a comprehensive series of files containing the most useful information. If possible, take them. You may find some of the information useful. Also, there are a lot of notes about the loading and firing mechanisms of nuclear weapons. They are kept under the floor boards, just outside the wardrobe in my bedroom.

I know you must think that I have let you down, but I couldn't continue this way. You must understand that. I did try, honestly I did.

Be patient with the other students. They do care for you. They'll protect you from the outside world until you become powerful enough to look after yourself.

The overdose of Insulin is starting to take an effect on me now. I can't carry on writing for very much longer.

Remember, do not give up hope now that I'm no longer going to be there, I have complete faith in you.

Please, don't forget,
I love you and I'll always be with you,
yours sincerely,
Joseph Fergere."

His handwriting at the bottom of the page had become quite scrawled, almost undecipherable. His hand must have been trembling a lot.

"I'll save the world professor, trust me," whispered Robin to himself, "If it wasn't for you requesting this, I wouldn't bother — they shouldn't be allowed to live, they deserve to die."

Tears rolled down his cheeks. He swallowed, then continued,

"But when I have finished that task, I am going to take revenge out on all those so-called politicians. They'll pay dearly for driving you to committing suicide," swore Robin.

He put the letter back into its envelope and put it in the top draw of his personal escritoire. He locked the draw ensuring that no one but no one could get into his private notes.

He left his bedroom and went downstairs to see how the others were.

"How are you all? Sorry I was so long upstairs but I needed to be alone for a while. How is Simpson?"

There were blank looks all round the room.

"Who the hell is Simpson?" thought Harry to himself.

"Oh! Don't you know who Simpson is?" replied Robin,

"That's the name of the professor's dog. He saw Simpson as being a kind of butler and trained him to collect the post from the door in the morning. But it wasn't how you would imagine it. Instead of carrying the post in his mouth, Simpson would put the letters onto a small silver dish and carefully carry the dish, without spilling the letters, to the professor who would be eating his breakfast in the dining room. It was also quite a comical sight seeing the dog trying to drag Joseph's heavy, blanket coat to him. His sweet nose peeping out from underneath, trying to see his way about without knocking the table over in the hallway."

Robin looked lost, reflecting back on the fond memories of when he used to live with Professor Fergere. It was only recently that the boy had moved out to come and live with Matthew.

"Robin, maybe you can help cheer Simpson up," suggested Alison,

"He wouldn't eat anything and just lies in the corner of the kitchen, whining."

She was hoping that Robin wouldn't feel so depressed if he was given the responsibility of looking after the dog. He would be able to have something that was very personal to Professor Fergere when he was alive. Anyway, the professor would have wanted Robin to have Simpson.

Everyone knew that Robin was very special to the professor, that the boy was his favourite. The old man treated Robin as though he was his own

son. Professor Fergere had no family of his own. He had been married once and had had a son, but they had been sent to the gas chambers, during Hitler's reign of terror during nineteen thirty-nine, just because they happened to Jewish.

The killing of his wife and child had devastated the professor. He had never really recovered from the sadness their deaths had caused. Robin, to him, was everything he had hoped his son would be. Robin possessed all the qualities he would have liked his son to have had. Also, Robin and the professor understood each other, they never had to explain their actions or opinions to each other.

After losing his wife and child, the professor managed to escape to the United States of America. There, he worked on 'The Bomb' with his colleague, the man who was later to be called its father. He and his friend had been horrified when their creation had been used against Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Never had they imagined that the effects of the radiation would be so great, killing so many people.

He had never forgiven himself for being involved in the design of a weapon which caused so much pain and grief to so many people.

Soon after the dropping of the bombs, Professor Fergere left his friend and emigrated from America to live in England. They never lost contact with each other until his friend died from a form of throat cancer.

His friend had been accused of passing secret documents, concerning the bomb, to the Russians. He had then undergone a terrible time of persecution from the American government. Supposedly, this was the cause of his cancer.

The professor's fear of persecution, which had eventually caused him to take his own life, had undoubtedly stemmed from seeing what became of his friend.

When the professor arrived in Great Britain, he began working with a group of people who he had been in contact with when he was in America. He had met them at a General Conference regarding parapsychology and its future. He worked at several institutions, investigating the various realms of his specialist subject. In 1977, the year of the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth the Second, Professor Fergere was granted full authority to set up a Department of Parapsychology, of which he was to be the Head.

He had seen a lot of students come and go, but Harry, Matthew, Alison and, in particular, Robin had been very special to him. Unlike the other groups of students he had had, this group worked as a team and were great friends out of the laboratory. They encouraged each other before any experiment, however simple. Also, they cared for each other and acted as one.

The students would have liked to have seen Professor Fergere receive a Nobel Prize for the great advancement he had made within his specialist field, Parapsychology. Without the professor's careful monitoring and training, none of them would have had the capabilities they had. They owed all their special skills to his training.

It was sad to them, that Parapsychology was not really accepted as a true science. With other, more 'conventional' scientists, unless one could explain what caused the results produced during an experiment, then those results had to be invalid. Even the experiments that were recorded on film were said to have been done by tricks of the camera. Whatever one did to try and appease the scientists, there was always someone who would remain unsatisfied, and that one would probably be an influential, respected figurehead in the world of 'orthodox', recognised sciences.

"I know we are all upset over the events of today, but we must not allow our emotions to obscure the great challenge we have before us. It is imperative that we fulfil the professor's ambition," said Robin. It was his vocation now, to make sure that the world would be saved from the Third World War, which was going to occur very shortly. He was doing this for the professor, not for the people of the world. To him, they deserved nothing better than to die, or live through the hardships and horrors that a nuclear holocaust would bring.

"Well, what do you propose we do? The professor has tried making the British Government aware of the knowledge he had, but they did not listen or take him seriously. Anyway, I don't think they should be given the option of having the privilege of life," said Alison adamantly. Her emotions had made her get carried away.

"Alison, you're doing exactly what I had told you not to do. You're allowing your emotions to get the better of you. We are not going to do this for the people, but because this is what the professor wanted. It's in his memory that we are going to do this, not for any other reason. I feel the same way as you do, but it's because he wanted it that I want us to at least try.

Remember, he'll always be with us, looking over us. What he did, believe it or not, was for our own good. He was only trying to protect us from being persecuted. He would not have been able to forgive himself if we had been hurt or hounded by people who did not understand. He did what he thought was best for us, he was saving us from emotional pain and hardship that would have been very difficult for us to endure."

There was complete silence whilst Robin spoke. The way he had

spoken with such feeling and vehemence had made them very emotional. They were all close to crying.

"You're right, Robin. We will try our best to control our emotions and stop them from hindering our work. Now, what do you suggest we do, Robin?" asked Matthew whilst lighting up a Camel cigarette with his Zippo lighter.

"Firstly, we must return to Joseph's house and retrieve the files he has. I know where they are. We need them, they'll save us a lot of time."

"What files are you talking about Robin? We know nothing of any files," questioned Alison.

"The professor had compiled a personal series of files which contained information that he didn't want anyone to know about. From what I gathered from the professor, they will be useful. We may be able to think of a way of preventing the war, from some of his information."

"That's easier said than done, Robin. There maybe a policeman there. If the professor brought himself to the attention of the government, then the house may be guarded until it can be searched by a government official."

"Harry, if that's the case, then going tonight, while it's dark, should make it easier for us. Anyway, I'm sure that we'll manage to get in, somehow."

"That sounds reasonable enough, but one thing that surprises me, and I'm curious to find out, is this — how come you are so aware of all this knowledge and have such a great insight, with regards to why the professor did what he did. Was he in contact with you last night?" asked Matthew. He could not understand how Robin knew so much about the professor.

"When I found the professor this morning, he clutched in his hands three envelopes. One of them contained the suicide poem, the second one had the letter to all of us and there was one other which he had addressed to me. It was in that letter, he explained why he had committed suicide and told me about the existence of the files. He wouldn't have mentioned them if they were not going to be of use to us. Also, he would have known that there might be policemen to contend with, and he would not have wanted us to be put in any dangerous situation, unless it was of great importance."

Robin stopped and looked at the others.

"Does that answer your question Matthew? Have any of you got more questions? I don't want us to have secrets from each other. Now that the professor is no longer with us, it would be for the best if we stay as close as possible together. Any objections or any ideas?"

Robin paused and looked carefully at the expressions on the faces of his friends.

"I'll have to back off," he thought to himself,

"I'm putting too much pressure on them. I must not let them know how powerful I really am. I need them to look after me."

He was right. They would not take well to being ordered about by an eleven year old boy.

"Okay, Robin," said Harry,

"If you're sure that you want to go through with this. It's now quarter past eight. We should make a move, it will be dark by the time we get to the professor's house."

Harry was behind Robin. He also had been quite close to the professor. Out of all the students, he had spent the longest time with the professor, researching into Parapsychology. Now, he wanted to do this last quest for the professor. Many a time, the professor had said to Harry how he wanted nothing more than to fulfil his greatest ambition — which was to save the world from a Third World War.

"I'm sure that I speak for the others, when I say that we want nothing more than to help you prevent this tragedy. For Professor Fergere's sake," said Harry.

Robin smiled, as did the others. If the professor could only have been there, he would have been so proud of their show of unity.

"I had better not pose as the leader of this operation," thought Robin,

"I'll be able to make them do what I want a lot easier if I make them think that they are responsible for all the better ideas. Also, I should explain any ideas more fully to them. That way, they shouldn't feel as though I'm cutting them off or neglecting their feelings. Have patience with them, that was what Joseph had written in his letter."

"Shall we go then?" asked Matthew. He stood up, picked up his packet of cigarettes and lighter, and put them into his jacket pocket. Alison and Harry followed suit.

Robin locked the back door and put his jacket on. Briefly, he stroked Simpson.

"Don't be sad, Simpson. Joseph wanted it. I'm going back to his house now. Tell you what, I'll bring back your feeding bowl, basket and your blanket. How's that? I'll look after you and make you feel at home here," whispered Robin, kissing Simpson lightly on the head.

"Robin, come on. We're waiting for you so that we can go," called Harry, putting on his coat.

"Just coming. Wait, I've got to nip upstairs to get my jacket."

"No need, I've already brought it down for you," replied Alison.

"Where is it, Alison?"

"There, on the coat hanger, where you should put it always, as soon as you come through the door."

"Sorry Alison, I'll remember that in future. Although, you know what a scatter-brain I am, you'll probably have to remind me from time to time," chuckled Robin, slipping into his coat.

They left the house, leaving the hall light on and locking the front door.

"Whose car are we taking and who's going to drive?" asked Matthew.

"You can drive, Matthew. I'm quite tired. But if you want, I'll drive there and you can drive back," replied Harry.

Alison started shivering, her arms wrapped around herself as she stepped about,

"Make up your minds quickly, I'm getting rather cold standing here. Come on Robin, let's sit and wait in the car. They could be ages coming to a decision, by which time it'll be daylight again."

"Okay Alison, point taken. Harry can drive there and I'll drive back," said Matthew.

"Finally! A decision! Will wonders never cease, I ask myself?" said Alison.

Harry unlocked the car doors and got into the driving seat.

"How long do you think this will take?" asked Matthew.

"Depends on whether there are any police there," replied Harry.

"I doubt whether there will be any, quite honestly," commented Alison.

"Why do you say that, Alison?" asked Robin.

"Well, the body was taken away this morning and the forensics will have done what they wanted. It was quite clear that the professor had committed suicide."

"Oh. I hadn't seen it that way. Good point Alison," replied Robin.

"Okay, so we think there aren't going to be any policemen there, but we still have the problem of trying to find the files. I presume that, if they were so valuable to the professor, he placed them in a good hiding place," concluded Matthew.

"Oh, that's no problem. I know where they are. The professor revealed their location in his letter to me. They are under the floor boards in his bedroom."

"Fine! So we have to take the floor apart to find them! That'll take ages. If the police have a second look around the house, then they are sure to notice that someone has been there."

"The only floor board we have to take up is the one in front of that old antique wardrobe. But you do have a point — we'll have to make sure that we leave no trace of our visit. We'll have to be careful to leave everything as it is. Oh, but I had promised Simpson that I would bring back his things. Well, I doubt whether they'll notice if I take them."

"No, Robin. That's too risky. Tomorrow you can go to the Police Station and ask them whether they'll allow you to take Simpson's possessions," stated Harry.

There was silence as they drove the rest of the way to Winchester. It had got quite dark now, and a mist had become apparant. Harry put a cassette in to the tape deck and put the volume up.

"Oh no! Harry, please don't try acting as a lead singer. No way is your voice anything like Jimmy Somerville's," shouted Alison over the din. None of them minded listening to the Communards on occasion, but one thing they could do without was Harry's accompaniment.

"Sorry, I can't help it. I like this song, but I'll try not to sing if it bothers you all so much."

"Harry, turn right here — we're there," said Robin.

"Best if we drive around the block slowly, just in case there are any police about," Matthew added. Harry did as Matthew said. There appeared to be no activity there and the lights in the house were off.

"What's the time?" asked Alison.

"It's just gone nine o'clock. Let's park the car outside the house," replied Harry.

Robin remained silent, allowing the students to take control for a while, over unimportant matters. He would only intervene or object if he thought that they were wrong.

They got out of the car and went round to the back of the house. They tried the kitchen door, but found it locked.

"How are we to get in? We can't very well break in," said Alison, looking about the back of the house,

"Actually.. I don't know, there may be a way."

"What?" asked Robin.

"Well, if you look up there, you'll notice that the bathroom window is slightly open. If you were to metamorphose into a bird, then you could fly up there and into the house. Once in there, you could metamorphose back to your normal self, then come down and open the front door to us."

There was silence, and everyone considered Alison's idea.

"That should work. Do you think you could do that, Robin?" asked Matthew.

"No problem. Just watch me," replied Robin, confidently. Almost immediately, he metamorphosed into an eagle, before their very eyes. Still they found it a spectacular sight — although they could metamorphose themselves, it took them a while longer.

In no time at all, Robin had flown through the partially opened window, metamorphosed into his former self and opened the front door.

"Come on, upstairs we go," said Robin. They followed him upstairs and into the professor's bedroom.

"There's the wardrobe. You say that the files are under the floor boards? Right, they should be directly under here," said Matthew pointing to the spot on which he was standing.

Carefully, they removed the floor board. There they were, what they were looking for, the files. Everyone looked down the hole.

"Come on, let's get them out and leave this house. I'm feeling uncomfortable here," said Alison, a shiver running up her spine. She could feel the small hairs on the back of her neck standing up on end.

There were six files altogether. Some of them appeared to be quite old. Each file was jam packed with papers, smelling musty and covered in dust. On the front of one of the files, Robin wrote his name in the dust with his finger. Harry sneezed a couple of times, the dust getting up his nose by accident.

Matthew replaced the floor board, banging it down securely, just as they had found it. Then, each of them carried two files down the stairs. They slammed the front door shut behind them, put the files in the boot of the car and drove back to Southampton, as quickly as the speed limits permitted them to.

As soon as they had returned to Robin's house, they took the files indoors and put them in the lounge.

"Before we start reading through that lot, I suggest we get something hot inside us. I'm starved."

Harry's stomach grumbled longingly at the thought of meeting up with some food.

"How can you think of stuffing your face at a time like this. We've got a colossal amount of work to do," Matthew snapped back.

"Matthew, there's no reason to reply that way. We won't be able to work that well, or for very long, if we don't get a decent meal inside us. Anyway, for a minute I thought Harry was about to be rude, but I was wrong. Come on into the kitchen, we can talk while I'm cooking."

Alison turned and headed towards the kitchen, the others following quickly behind her.

Alison looked in the fridge. All she could find was half a dozen eggs and some rashers of smokey bacon.

"Well... we haven't a lot of choice over what food we are going to have tonight. There's either bacon and eggs or bacon and eggs. So what do you want to eat?" she said, getting out the eggs and bacon.

The others sat around the table, their mouths watering.

"I don't think any of us care. Speaking for myself, I'm so hungry that I don't care what we have to eat, as long as it is quick," replied Robin. Matthew and Harry nodded in agreement.

"What are the chances of having some fried bread with it, Alison... please?" asked Harry, putting on his sweet voice.

"Okay, you can also have fried bread — if you can find the bread. Don't just sit there, the bacon and eggs should be ready soon. Get the plates and cutlery out. Or do you expect me to do that as well."

Robin stood up and got the plates out, while Matthew got the cutlery.

"Does anyone want any tea with their meal?" asked Harry, who felt a bit guilty watching everyone else doing something useful.

"That doesn't sound such a bad idea. But I would prefer a cup of coffee," replied Alison.

After eating their hearty meal, everyone sat back, their stomachs quite content. They sat back and relaxed, drinking their tea and coffee.

"Seeing as you cooked for us Alison, you sit and rest. We'll do the washing and drying up," Robin suggested.

"That's nice of you Robin, but you don't have to."

"No, that's the least we can do. You're just as tired as we are. Now, don't argue, we'll start clearing up," said Matthew.

He thought Robin's idea was a good way of showing Alison how much they appreciated her cooking them a decent meal.

When they cooked themselves, the food always turned out burnt.

CHAPTER NINE

REVELATION

IT WAS NOW APPROACHING QUARTER TO TWELVE. THEY HAD NOT NOTICED THE TIME slip quickly by while they sat in the kitchen.

The lounge was quite cold. Matthew switched on the electric fire and the students sat around it. Shortly after sitting down, Robin got up and went back into the kitchen.

"Come on, Simpson. I've been very selfish tonight. I've neglected you too much. Come on into the lounge and you can sit in front of the warm fire with us," Robin said softly, stroking Simpson fondly. He picked the dog up, carried him into the lounge and placed him in front of the fire.

"Now that Robin is here, should we start going through these files? I suggest we have a file each and slowly read through them, taking any notes down that we may find useful."

Matthew got up and fetched the files to them.

"Well, we have eight files — that means two files each. Here, everyone take two. Robin, do you want to bring us a refill block each and something to write with? There should be some stuff in the bottom drawer of the *escritoire*."

Robin jumped to his feet and brought the refill pads and pens as requested.

When Robin opened up his file he was astonished to find a very comprehensive index.

"Well, this is going to be far easier than I thought. With this index, we'll be able to refer back to the more interesting notes with almost no trouble at all. It starts off with a main index which states on which page each topic

commences. It then follows with another index, that shows the exact page and line a sub-topic begins. Then, finally — the icing on the cake — there's a third index which has the more interesting notes with a page reference and a line number. Look, on each page he has numbered every line. God, these notes are so beautifully laid out, it's going to be so easy to find our way around them."

"Yes... And look, it's not in short-hand or German. That's a help as well," commented Harry, quickly flicking through the pages.

They all looked through the layout of the index and notes with awe.

After the students had got over their admiration for the professor's method of keeping notes, they started reading. Silence reigned. All that could be heard was the the ticking of the clock and the occasional chimes.

Simpson had nodded off. Several times he whined in his sleep, at which point Robin caressed the dog and whispered some words of reassurance to him.

"It's going to be okay, Simpson. We'll take care of you. Joseph hasn't really left us. He is watching over us now. He's all around us."

The scribbling of pens moving across the page seemed much louder than usual.

The clock had not long chimed two o'clock when the absence of mention was finally broken. It was Matthew who was the first to speak.

"If we find something that is important, are we just going to make a note of it and, when we've all finished going through the files completely, then discuss what we found? Or are we going to discuss the main points as we go along?"

"Oh, I hadn't considered that. I thought we were just going to take notes for now and then discuss them when we had finished. What do you think, Robin?"

"Well, Alison, I think that we should discuss anything that we feel is important, as soon as we find it. That way we won't be in danger of wasting time by wading through masses of information which may have no bearing on our main objective."

"Yes, Robin is right."

"Okay, Harry. Seeing as the feeling is unanimous, I'll read out what I've found.

"The heading is 'Nostradamus'. According to this, there appears to be several starting dates, from which one calculates the approximate time

that these prophecies are to happen. They are as follows:

a) In Nostradamus's Epistle to Henry II, he states that the starting date is the fourteenth of March fifteen fifty-seven.

b) But to confuse things more, Nostradamus also says that the starting date is from Creation day, which is four thousand and four B.C. according to Archbishop Usher in sixteen fifty.

c) A person called Wollner said that he thought the starting date was four hundred and eighteen B.C.

d) This is the last starting date. Apparently it's widely accepted that the beginning date was that of the Council of Nicaea in three hundred and twenty five A.D.

Here he has listed verses — some sort of riddle — below which the professor has written his own conclusion as to what he thinks they apply. I'll read all the verses first, then tell you what he has written."

Matthew took in a deep breath before reading the rhymes aloud.

The scourges past the world gets smaller,
Peace for a time lands inhabited:
People will travel by air, land and sea:
Then wars will come again.

Weapons will fight in the sky for a long period,
The tree in the middle of the city will fall:
Rats, disease, steel in the face of revolution,
When Italy falls.

At night the rainbow will appear near Nantes,
Fountains of water will rise from the sea:
A great fleet will be sunk in the Persian Gulf,
In Germany a monster, a bear and a sow.

They'll think they've seen the sun at night
When they see the half-hog man:
Noise, screaming, battles are seen in the sky,
And brute beasts will be heard talking.

So a great famine caused by a pestilence,
By long rain of the Arctic Pole:
Sam R. O'Bryan a hundred leagues from the earth,
Shall live without law, exempt from politics.

When in the iron fish documents will be shut
Out of it will come one who will make war,
His fleet will have travelled secretly,
Appearing near Italy.

The great force will pass over the mountains.
The gods of war using submarines:
Poison hidden in the heads of salmon,
The chief depending on a string of Polaris.”

The great star will burn for seven days,
A cloud will make two suns appear:
The big mastiff will howl at night
When a Pope will change his country.

During the appearance of the bearded star,
The three great leaders will become enemies,
Struck from the sky the shaky peace of earth,
Po, Tiber, overflowing, serpent on the shore.

After a disaster for mankind, a greater one approaches
The great motor the cycle of the ages renews:
It will rain pollution, ash, famine, war and disease,
In the sky will be seen a fire with long sparks.

Matthew paused, and took a deep breath before continuing.

Mabus will come and soon die,
Of people and beasts a horrible destruction,
Then suddenly vengeance will be seen,
Blood, hand, thirst, hunger, when the comet rushes past.

The English chief stays too long in Nimes,
Towards Spain to the rescue Redbeard:
Many will die in the war started that day,
When a bearded star falls in Artois.

The Prince Arabe Mars, Sun, Venus, Leo,
The Christians will be defeated at sea:
Near Persia almost a million men,
Turkey, Egypt the true serpent will invade.

“Well, that’s it. What do you think?”

“Nostradamus seems intent that we’re in for a disaster.”

“I’ll read you his notes that follow on from that,” interrupted Matthew, cutting Harry short.

“He dates this following entry as being February nineteen eighty-one — ”

I’ve been studying the verses of Nostradamus for the last ten years. I now realise what a great prophet he was. Looking back at some of his verses, I find that he predicted correctly when the late Shah of Persia was taken by Egypt, and I now realise how right he was about the U.S. hostages in Iran. Both of these events, Nostradamus had said would occur in nineteen eighty.

After having gone through the above verses, I think I can be fairly correct in saying that, from nineteen eighty-five onwards, a verbal war shall begin between the Superpowers. This I back up with the reference of Mabus, which is clearly Haleys Comet (this is backed up further with mentions of Redbeard and the Bearded Star). I firmly believe that the actual war will begin sometime in nineteen eighty-eight to eighty-nine — exactly when, I’m not sure. It seems that the war will start near the Persian Gulf, when a naval force will be sunk, that being of NATO.

Matthew stopped. He had come to the end of that extract.

“God, that seems so real! It coincides beautifully with that newspaper article Robin found in the futuristic Southampton — the starting of the Third World War because the Russians decided to block off the Straits of Hormuz. Once war had been declared, then the NATO fleet would have been sunk.”

“And what about the mention of submarines and the salmon heads that carry poison? That’s so obvious as being a nuclear warhead, Alison.” Robin coughed, trying to get their attention.

“What is it, Robin? What have you got for us?”

“Well, Harry. What do you think of this then? Hang on, I’ll just check that I’ve calculated it right...”

Robin paused as he pressed the keys on his calculator.

“For Nostradamus to have used ‘Polaris’ as the name of the nuclear missiles used in the submarine. I’ve just worked out the probability of him coming up with that name. It would be one chance in ninety five thousand million that he would have done so by pure luck. Pretty close to the mark, for a several hundred year old prediction, don’t you think?”

"That's fairly impressive, I must admit," said Harry,

"I haven't really found anything that's worth mentioning. All I've been reading through is the records of his past students, on whom he had been studying, before our time. Has anyone else found anything that they want to discuss now?"

"Actually Harry, looking at the clock, it's gone half past four. I'm so tired, I want to go to sleep. I don't think it's worth carrying on now. We'll probably miss some vital bit of information if we continue. Even if the vital bit of information was to hit me between the eyes, I don't honestly think I'd notice."

"I agree with you, Alison. I hadn't noticed that it was so late," seconded Robin, getting up. He bent over Simpson and whispered in his ear.

"Come on Simpson, we're off to bed now. Come on, you can sleep in my bedroom. Hey, Alison and Harry, why don't you stay here for the night? Harry and Matthew can share a bedroom, you can have the spare bedroom and Simpson can sleep with me. It seems a waste, you both having to travel back tonight. Well, what do you say? Yes?"

"Is that okay with you Matthew? Do you mind sharing your room with Harry?" asked Alison.

"Sure, that's fine. Come on Harry, I'll get the camp bed out for myself."

Robin switched the electric fire off, made sure that the other plugs were safely out of the sockets, and carried Simpson upstairs to his room.

Robin could not get to sleep straight away. Although he wanted to, he just could not sleep. He was not able to pinpoint what was nagging him, but he felt sure that they had overlooked something important. Robin held Simpson close to him.

"Don't worry, we'll stop the holocaust somehow. I've no idea yet, as to how we are going to manage it, but we will..."

The boy paused for a moment.

"I know what I'll do. It's obviously all this reading tonight that's stopping me from sleeping. I'll get up and draw. That should relax me enough so that I can sleep. Keep the bed warm for me, Simpson."

Robin got out of bed and drew his chair closer to his easel. He sat down and started drawing.

Within about half an hour, the picture started to take shape — he had drawn the outline of a young woman's face. It was not long after, that he had finished his first masterpiece.

Robin was astonished at the outcome, and he had good reason to be. It was a well known fact that Robin was no artist — though he enjoyed

looking at paintings and sketches by other artists, he felt sad that he had no similar talent. The pencil drawing of the teenage girl's face was amazing.

Robin sat back and gazed at the picture, admiring how well he had managed to capture the facial expression. The eyes depicted a young girl who was sad and under a great strain.

The more he looked at his creation, the more uneasy he felt. There was something wrong with the face. The eyes... it was the eyes. They were strange, there seemed to be something odd about them, drawing Robin to look into them more and more. He signed his name at the bottom and wrote the date.

He snuggled himself deep underneath his thick quilt. Whatever had been niggling at his mind had disappeared. He was feeling relaxed and content. He fell asleep with a smile on his face, as he thought of the quality of his drawing.

Robin was wakened the next day by Simpson's tongue licking his face. Simpson drew the bedclothes off Robin and barked at him. Robin got out of bed and unenthusiastically followed the dog down the stairs. They had reached the back door of the kitchen before it dawned on Robin what Simpson wanted.

"Ahh, you poor dog. You need to go out to relieve yourself, eh? One word of warning: try not to foul the lawn if you can help it. Matthew won't be very pleased with you. He actually, for the first time in God only knows how long, mowed it. So please, do your best to keep it fairly tidy. Otherwise, it'll be my head he blows off."

With that, Robin unlocked the back door and let the dog out. He looked at his watch and felt very dismayed to see that it was only half past seven. He had only had about two hours' sleep.

"It would be too cruel to wake the others up yet," thought Robin, wearily,

"I'll just have to try and get back to sleep."

He trundled up the stairs, and went to look at his picture.

"God, it wasn't a dream, I did actually draw it. Though, I don't remember writing 'Helen' on the top of the picture... maybe I did — I was so tired last night, I could have written anything and I shouldn't think I would remember it today," thought Robin to himself. He clambered back into bed and drifted into a deep sleep.

Several hours later, Robin was woken up by the sound of Matthew shouting from outside the bedroom door.

"Robin, get up. Alison is cooking breakfast for us, it'll be ready in a few minutes."

It was now about nine o'clock. Robin had just finished dressing and was about to go downstairs, when he decided to go back into his bedroom and fetch his masterpiece. He took it with him to show the others.

They were just as astonished as he had been.

"You couldn't have drawn that yourself, you're naff at drawing. Come on, tell us who drew that. It's no use lying to us, that picture's miles to good for you," said Alison, laughing.

"Honestly, I did draw it. Ask Simpson, I was just as surprised myself. Maybe my luck has changed. I've been trying to draw for ages, perhaps all the practising has finally paid off..."

Robin paused, then frowned.

"For some reason or other I called the face Helen. Though I can't remember writing that."

"I believe you, Robin. I was the person who tidied up your bedroom yesterday, and the picture wasn't there then."

"Thank you Matthew. At least someone believes me. Anyway, that's enough about that. Now, where's this food. It smells great and I'm starving."

After having eaten their breakfast, they retired back into the lounge. Their faces were buried in their files, the sounds of breathing could be heard distinctly. Their minds were concentrating solely on their reading material.

The clocked chimed three o'clock, and still not a word had been said. Finally, the silence was broken by the distant barks of Simpson. Robin left the others and went back into the kitchen.

There was Simpson, his wet nose squashed up against the glass of the kitchen door. He stopped barking as soon as he noticed Robin entering the kitchen. Robin opened the back door to Simpson who, once back into the kitchen, recommenced barking and whining.

"I know what you want, you're hungry. Oh, I feel so guilty! Fancy, forgetting to feed you! We ate this morning, but it didn't occur to me that I hadn't fed you. I'll just see what we have in the fridge for you."

Robin opened the fridge — it was almost completely bare. There was a piece of cheese, eggs and half a pound of fresh mincemeat.

"Well Simpson, it seems as though you are going to have mincemeat tonight. Here you are... and there's some water for you."

Robin returned to the lounge and continued with his reading. Once

Simpson had finished eating, he came into the lounge and curled up beside Robin. The time was passing very quickly — the students were so wrapped up in their work that they had not noticed it was now half past seven.

"This may be the information we've been looking for," said Alison,

"From this we may be able to form a strategy that will prevent the war from happening. I think that what we are going to have to do, is to actually prevent the nuclear missiles being activated and going off."

"That's fine saying that Alison, but it's another thing being able to put words into action."

"I know, Robin, but the secret is not in trying to disarm the missiles individually, because there are too many of the darn things. No, according to all this stuff through which I've been reading, our best bet is to get at the computers..."

"Alison, you're not making yourself very clear. Computers? What have they got to do with anything?"

"Matthew, I wish you would belt up a minute and hear me out. Of course you don't understand the connection if you keep interrupting me between every syllable."

They were silent and permitted Alison to finish what she was saying, uninterrupted.

"Now, where was I? Oh, I know, computers. Right, the point I was making was that the computers control the mechanisms that allow the warheads to be armed and fired. Now, if we were able to make one of the main computers malfunction in some way, then the other computers would follow suit, causing a domino effect. Hitting the computers is the only feasible method. That way, we'll be able to hit all the missiles. I know that it's only an idea, and that, until we've actually got some way of doing it, it's not of much use to us. But, mark my words, it's the computers that we'll eventually be attacking."

"Yes it's an idea," said Harry, thoughtfully,

"But can you imagine what the security on that sort of a place would be like? There's no way we'd be able to infiltrate any base. Whatever we were to do, we know that we wouldn't be able to get through their defence systems."

"My idea about the computers is the quickest and, as far as I can see, the only way of stopping the holocaust from occurring."

With that last retaliation from Alison, they continued with their reading.

Robin began getting restless — he could no longer concentrate his mind solely on his reading. He put the file down on the floor, leaving a book

marker in between the pages so that he wouldn't lose his place. It was now nine o'clock and the Civic Centre clock could be heard chiming nine times. Robin went upstairs and brought down his easel, sketch pad and drawing pencils.

"It worked last night — I did feel a lot more relaxed after having drawn that face," thought Robin to himself.

Within about half an hour he had produced another masterpiece. It was a sad picture, depicting a post-holocaust city, with score of people lying dead in the half-demolished streets.

Robin showed the others his drawing.

"Look! What do you think of this? Now do you believe that I drew the other picture last night? You were all in the same room as myself, so there's no excuse — you have to believe me."

"It's a bit morbid, isn't it?" observed Harry,

"What possessed you to draw that for heaven's sake? It doesn't look much like Southampton, not as we saw it. I wonder where it's meant to be..."

"To tell you the truth, Harry, I don't know why I drew that. I just felt like drawing. I didn't think I would end up producing something like that."

"I know where that's meant to be... it's New York, I'm sure of it! I went there a few months before I came here."

"Are you sure, Matthew?"

"Of course I'm sure, Robin. I wouldn't have said so otherwise, you should know me better than that. I never say anything if I'm not ninety-nine percent sure of being right."

"No, I suppose not. Anyway, it's half past nine approximately, and I'm starving. Can we eat before continuing? We haven't had any lunch."

"Yes, I'm also very hungry. I was wondering when we would have a break," replied Harry. They all got up and went into the kitchen, Simpson following close on Robin's heels.

"Where's the mincemeat gone?" said Matthew, turning from the almost-empty fridge,

"I bought some mincemeat yesterday... what the hell's happened to it?"

"Mincemeat?"

"Yes, Robin — mincemeat. Didn't you hear me properly or are you becoming a parrot in your spare time?"

"You don't have to get personal. I won't tell you what's happened to the mincemeat otherwise."

"Robin, I'm rapidly losing my patience. If this is meant to be some sort

of practical joke, then I don't find it very funny. I'm starving! Now, stop fooling around and give it back here."

"Matthew, I hate to tell you this, but I can't give it back to you."

"What do you mean, can't give it back to me?"

"Exactly what I said. I can't give it back to you. You see, it's already been eaten."

"Who has eaten it?"

"Well, you see... Simpson was hungry, and he hadn't eaten anything today. There was nothing else that I could give him."

"You mean that we are going to have to starve because that dumb dog ate our mincemeat?"

"He's not a dumb dog. Anyway, I think you're being very selfish, thinking of your own stomach all the time. There's cheese and eggs in the fridge."

"I'm sick and tired of eating eggs..."

"Come on, you two," interrupted Harry,

"Enough said about the mincemeat, there's no use arguing over something that's already happened. Look, Alison and I will treat us all to either a meal at Pizza Hut or Burger King. Now, make up your minds which it is to be. Don't sulk, shake hands. No harm done."

Matthew and Robin shook hands and apologised to each other.

"I think that we should go to Burger King because we haven't got enough time to spare, waiting at least twenty minutes for our food to be served at Pizza Hut. What do you think, Matthew? It was your mincemeat that I had fed to Simpson."

Matthew agreed to Robin's choice of eating arrangements.

Harry drove them to Burger King.

About half an hour later, they rolled out of Burger King, their stomachs feeling rather uncomfortable.

"I've eaten miles too much. I've got a sickly feeling in my stomach, the slightest uncoordinated movement hurts. All I want to do now is lie down and not have to move."

"I agree with you, Alison. My stomach feels as though it has grown several metres in girth. It's as though I've got a football being chucked about inside there, or maybe the whole team's having a knock about."

There were only groans to be heard from the occupants of the car as Matthew drove them back to the house. Clutching onto their stomachs, they staggered out of the car, up the concrete path and sprawled themselves into the nearest available armchair.

"I know we're not feeling quite at our best, but I do think that we should continue with our reading," said Robin,

"Look on the bright side — at least we don't have to move about too much. It would be worse if that had been at breakfast time and we'd have had to do some housework immediately after. Now that, you must admit, would be horrible."

"Robin, I don't care. There's no way I would do anything vaguely vigorous in this condition."

"Okay Harry, point taken, but can we please carry on with the work?"

So, with a lot of discomfort, they endeavoured to read. Soon, their uncomfortable stomachs ceased to bother them and the groans stopped. Robin let Simpson out into the garden, leaving the kitchen door partially open. When Simpson had returned, Robin locked the door and carried the dog into the lounge and put him in front of the fire. Robin stroked Simpson whilst flicking through the pages in the file.

"Hey! I may have something here."

"God, Robin. You startled me then. I almost jumped out of my skin. So, what have you found?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make you jump, Alison. There's a bit about Uri Geller here. Apparently, on the tenth of September nineteen seventy-four, he did an experiment where he made half a piece of circular vanadium foil disappear. The vanadium foil had been enclosed in a capsule, which leaped about like a jumping bean. Old Uri Geller had succeeded in actually making the molecular structure of the vanadium foil disintegrate. We could do that, no problem. Also there are notes about people having been seen to make objects travel through walls..."

He read on for a moment.

"Now, this I don't believe — some material about psychic powers being basically a form of poltergeist activity that is under control... So anyway, what do you think?"

"That's perfect, Robin. With that and the idea I had earlier on — you know, about doing something that would cause the computers to malfunction — we should be able to come up with something that'll work."

"Yes, Robin. Alison has got a valid point. There's only one problem that I can foresee, and that's knowing what bit of the computer we would have to make malfunction."

"Maybe that won't be too difficult. All we'd have to do is make a few discrete enquiries, about how computers work, in the computing department at the university. They may know what makes a computer go haywire. See, Matthew? Don't be disheartened, have a bit of faith in us. It's going to work, don't worry."

"It's fine you saying don't worry, but if you remember, we didn't even

exist in post holocaust Southampton. Our lives depend on us getting this right."

Harry had not thought of that aspect, and his face suddenly dropped. All this time he had been viewing this task just like another experiment, or another assignment — to be completed for grading.

"Look, you lot, don't be sad. Remember, we'll succeed, there's no question about it. All we have to do is plan everything carefully and it'll all work out just fine. Believe me.... or don't any of you have any faith in what I can do with my mind anymore? Come on, it's late. We'll switch on the television and see if there's a film. It is Good Friday, there should be something decent on."

Robin switched on the television and they watched a film called *The Hot Rock*, after which they went to bed. The sleeping arrangements remaining unaltered from the previous night. Alison was the only person who had enjoyed the film, perhaps because it starred Robert Redford. In any case, she insisted on them all sitting down with her and watching the film until it had finished.

Robin woke up early the next day and took Simpson with him when he went shopping. He bought plenty of meat and vegetables, and this time he made sure that he had also bought enough tins of dog food.

By the time he had returned home, Alison was in the kitchen making toast and tea. Though none of them knew it, it was to be a good day for them.

They continued going carefully through the notes, as they had been doing so for the last couple of days. Suddenly, Robin threw down his folder, and the notes he had been taking.

CHAPTER TEN

FEARS

"GOD, WE'VE BEEN STUPID!" SAID ROBIN,

"All this time, and we hadn't thought of it."

"Robin, what haven't we thought of?"

"Don't you see, Matthew? It's the note that the professor had entered after the rhymes written by Nostradamus. Nostradamus claims that the Third World War starts in August nineteen eighty-seven, but we know that the bombs are actually dropped in April nineteen eighty-nine."

"What he obviously meant, was that the verbal war started in August. If we were to stop the events that lead to the beginning of the verbal war, then we won't have the problem of stopping the nuclear war."

"That's fine, you saying that we should stop the events that cause the war, but we don't really know what the events are until April the fifth, nineteen eighty-nine, and by then it's too late."

"Matthew, think of it. The Russians block the Straits of Hormuz. To do that, the Iranians must have given the Russians authorisation to mobilise their armies within Iran. All we have to do is make sure that the authorisation is never given. Understand now?"

"Not bad, Robin. Not bad at all. You may just have something there. Now, is there anything else that we could do, or anything that we may have overlooked?" asked Harry, resting his chin on his hands, pondering.

Robin's new perspective on the matter had suddenly opened up a variety of possible solutions to the problem. His imagination was running wild.

"Yes, Harry. Something does come to mind. It was something you said... In one of the files that you were going through, there were records of the other students that the professor had been working with before us.

Can you please dig it out? I don't know why, but I'm sure that there's something that we've overlooked in that lot."

"Okay, Robin — whatever you say. But personally, I can't see any reason why you should want to have a look through them."

While Harry was searching out the information, Matthew and Alison disappeared into the kitchen to start preparing lunch.

For once, lunch did not merely scrape into the bracket of 'eating while it was still light outside' — on this occasion it was the more conventional time of half past one. Matthew was pleased that they were not having bacon and eggs again, but instead were going to eat a meal which could be classed as 'proper' food. The smell of the lamb chops being grilled whet his appetite. Alison was busy preparing the salad, watching over the potato waffles.

Robin took the comprehensive records that the professor had made on his past students. He skimmed through the notes, carefully checking for any exceptional capabilities that any of the students may have possessed. He had looked at eight different profiles and had not come across anything that had caught his attention — none of them appeared to have any special talents.

Finally, he came to one that could have been a possibility. Martin Gaugh, he was twenty years old at the time he worked with the professor — approximately four years ago. He had shown great promise, having the ability to bend metal by stroking it very lightly. However, that was one of Matthew's specialities, and when Matthew did it, he didn't need to touch the metal.

No, Robin was looking for someone who had psychic powers comparable to his own. For what he had in mind, he needed someone with amazing abilities...

His concentration was interrupted by Alison calling from the kitchen.

"Robin, lunch is ready. Come on, it's on the table. Don't let it get cold."

The smell of the food wafted into the lounge. It smelt very tempting. Robin's stomach talked him into leaving what he was doing and following the scent to its source.

"Robin, have you found anything of interest? What were his past students like, any of them as good as us? Actually, that's a stupid question — no one could be as good as you."

"Thank you for your compliment, Alison. No, as yet there is nothing that could help us in any way."

It was not long before they had finished eating and Robin was back looking through the records of the professor's past students. Simpson came into the lounge and sat beside Robin on the floor. He peered over the boy's shoulder, desperately trying to gain his attention.

"Ahh, I've been neglecting you again," said Robin, stroking Simpson absently.

Suddenly, he jumped and shouted out loud to the others —

"I found it! I found it!"

They came rushing into the lounge from the kitchen.

"What's all the shouting about?"

"Alison, it's here. This is what I've been trying to find."

"There's no use just flashing a thick wadge of paper at us. We can't read it from here," said Matthew, impatiently.

"Who is it that you've found? Does he or she have a name?"

"Give me a chance to speak, Harry. With the way you've all been throwing questions at me, I haven't had a chance to get a word in."

Robin consulted the papers.

"Her name is Helen Parker. She must be about thirteen years old now. She worked with the professor about five years ago, but only stayed here for one year."

"The professor sent her back to her parents in New York, but they still kept in touch by sending each other letters. There's stacks of the things here. According to the last letter, it seems that she was the youngest person ever to get into one of the best Art Institutes in the United States."

Robin looked back to his papers for a moment.

"Listen to this. It seems that she gained her powers from having an electric shock when she was a lot younger, roughly at the age of four. Her parents claimed that, since that electric shock, she was able to draw perfect, detailed sketches, of places that she had never been to. Professor Fergere concluded that, perhaps when she had suffered the electric shock, it was the equivalent of blowing a fuse. This in turn, made her totally susceptible to the forces of the earth. This so-called 'fuse blowing' would either have made her totally non-psychic, or possibly have given her a great amount of psychic power, more than we could ever imagine!"

The others listened to Robin, engrossed.

"That was only the start. The rest, if you'll pardon the expression, is mind-blowing!"

Robin flicked through a couple more pages.

"If circumstances hadn't forced the professor to send Helen back, then there is no telling what she would have been able to do by now."

Although, it seems from the letters that she wrote to to the professor, that they continued to experiment..."

He paused for a moment, thinking.

"I wonder whether she knows that the professor has committed suicide."

His eyes suddenly lit up and he started trembling from his excitement. He stared wildly around the room. It was clear that he was not looking at any set object, but imagining something.

"Robin. Robin! You're cutting us off. Remember, we're meant to be working as a team now. What's going on in your mind?"

"Yes Robin, Harry is right. You've put up a barrier, preventing us from knowing what you're thinking about. Now, none of us do that to you. We're always totally honest with you."

Robin turned around to face Matthew. His eyes showed great anger, a fire could be seen to burn within them. He clenched his fists tightly and his voice tremoured from the anger as he retaliated to Harry's and Matthew's accusations.

"I've done no such thing! It's your own fault if you can't always read what's on my mind. You're both so wrapped up in competing against each other, trying to win Alison's favour, that you allow your emotions to take precedence over your work. How can you expect to concentrate your mind on anything?"

Harry was just about to interrupt but Robin cut him short.

"Shut up, Harry! Listen for once, concentrate your weak mind on what I'm trying to explain and not on what you want to say."

Robin quickly glanced to see what Matthew's reaction had been to his outburst but, as always, Matthew was not showing his feelings. His face was totally expressionless.

"Now, all I want from you all is total commitment and loyalty, until this project has been completed. Then, you can rest your efforts and do whatever you want in your private lives."

Robin looked round at them all, then continued more quietly.

"I'm sorry about my outburst. But you must try and understand the situation we're in. I shouldn't have blown up at you like that, but I've been under a lot of pressure lately. So please, if you want to be a part of this and help, then bear with me and don't put any extra, unnecessary pressure on me."

Again, Robin paused.

"So, Matthew and Harry. No hard feelings, is all forgiven?"

Robin went silent. It was Matthew's expressionless face that had been responsible for his sudden change of manner.

Matthew was a lot stronger than Harry and, if he had been pushed too far, would have left and allowed Robin to do what he wanted. Harry, being quite a weak character and easily influenced by Matthew's actions, might well have followed suit.

Although Robin's psychic powers were more than all the others' combined, he would need them for what he had planned. Also, he had been put in their care. The last thing he wanted was for them to abandon him. The professor had warned him in his letter to be patient with them.

"Okay Robin, I forgive you. But don't think that I'll stand for your tantrums again. You're not the only one who is under pressure. Remember, from your trip into the future, it seems that we get killed. So you must see that this 'project', as you put it, is very important to us. Our lives depend on its success."

"Sorry Matthew, but thank you for understanding this time. I promise that I'll try not to lose my temper again."

By now the fire in Robin's eyes had died down completely. There was only peace in them.

"What were thinking about before, Robin?" asked Alison, trying to change the subject. All this time she had remained quiet, keeping out of their argument. A long time ago, she had sworn to the professor that, whatever happened, she would take care of Robin and never abandon him.

"I'm not sure how we are actually going to prevent the events that will be responsible for the war," said Robin, thoughtfully,

"But a gut feeling tells me that, whatever it is that we eventually decide to do, we'll need someone else who possesses the same sort of capabilities as ourselves."

"So what do you want to do regarding Helen — that was the name of that girl, wasn't it?" asked Alison,

"It'll make a change, not being the only girl in the group."

"Yes, her name is Helen, Helen Parker..."

Robin suddenly turned to Alison.

"God! It's only just occurred to me. Wait, I'll show you! Look at this photograph in the file. That was taken when she was eight years old. Now, see the drawing I made? Don't you see? That's her!"

"Robin, I hate to shatter your illusions, but I bet you anything that it wasn't you who drew that. It was Helen."

"What do you mean, Harry?"

"It was your hand that drew that, but it was in accordance with Helen's guidance. It was her mind that compelled you to draw it."

"If you're right about that, then it wasn't me who drew that post holocaust scene, but Helen. She must have been drawing the picture at the

same time as myself. And Matthew was right, if it was Helen, then, as she lives in New York, the picture that I drew was actually set in New York."

"To think that your hands had been an instrument of communication," said Alison, dazed by the sudden understanding,

"She had probably sent out some sort of S.O.S. hoping that someone would pick it up."

Alison was very sensitive, and considering the early part of her childhood, it was not surprising that she was upset by seeing people, especially those that she loved, arguing.

Suddenly, she felt threatened by Helen. Alison knew that Robin was not one to exaggerate. He was excited at finding the file on Helen and was convinced that she had just as much power as himself. If that was the case, then it would be very hard to control her. Helen could use them to do whatever she wanted — she had managed it with Robin, so what could stop her from doing it to the rest of them?

"Alison! Alison!"

She was not aware of any of the others trying to gain her attention. Matthew waved his hand in front of her face — she did not blink. She just continued to look straight ahead, as though there was nothing in her view.

"Harry, help me sit her down! I don't want her to fall over."

Moving Alison, jolting her slightly, finally brought her back to the real world.

"Alison, what was it?"

"Oh... nothing."

Still in a slight daze, she turned around to face Matthew. Her face appeared to be startled at his question. For a brief moment she did not take his concern to be as innocent as he had intended it to be. Still she was feeling threatened.

"Sorry I asked! I was only concerned. I didn't think that me showing an interest in how you were feeling would cause offence. There was no need to snap back at me. God, it must be contagious. First Robin, and now you."

He turned to Harry and continued, sarcastically,

"I think that we should remain silent. Whenever we speak, we end up getting our heads bitten off."

"Sorry Matthew!" said Alison,

"I didn't mean it to seem as though I was snapping at you."

"As long as you're okay, then that's all that matters. Are you sure that you're okay? Tell the truth."

"All right... if you're sure you want to know..."

Matthew nodded his head.

"It's silly, but I was thinking that, if Helen was able to control Robin — i.e. making him draw those pictures — then, what's to stop her from doing the same to us. Or something worse."

She shook her head,

"See? I told you it was stupid!"

"No, Alison," said Harry,

"It wasn't silly. Of course there is always a threat, but that's a chance we'll have to take."

"Harry, I can't see that she would actually use her mind to try and control us," said Robin,

"Remember, she must have had the same sort of visions as myself to have drawn that picture. I think that she was frightened, looking for someone to help her. I very much doubt we're taking a chance at all."

"I agree with Robin," added Matthew. He turned to Robin.

"How do you propose getting in contact with Helen?"

"Well Matthew, what do you think of me racking up the telephone bill? I promise you that it won't be a common occurrence. It's only so that I can introduce myself to her. Then after that we can communicate with each other using telepathy. Don't worry, try trusting me."

"Well... how long are you thinking of speaking to her on this initial phone call, Robin?"

"Don't worry, Matthew. I think that, somehow, she knows who I am. Really, it's a sort of confirmation phone call, telling her that I picked up her messages."

Robin flicked through the file and the letters, looking for the telephone number. He remembered seeing it somewhere, but he had skipped through so many pieces of paper that he could not quite recollect where he had seen it.

"There! Found it." said Robin, waving the piece of paper around in front of the other students.

"What are you going to say to her?" asked Alison,

"What if she doesn't know anything about you — she may not have realised that anyone was going to pick up those pictures whilst she was drawing them. Remember, she's an art student. They may have been part of her course work. She may not realise why she had drawn the post holocaust picture of New York."

"That's a chance that I'll have to take. But, whatever, I just want her to know about me. After that, I'll tell her what we're up to, telepathi-

ically... God, we'll have to break the news to her about the professor's death I wonder how she'll take it. She couldn't have been too emotionally attached to him — she still has her parents."

"What's the time difference between here and New York, Matthew?"

"Approximately five hours."

"Well, it's not going to be a good time for Robin to try phoning her up now," remarked Alison,

"It's twelve o'clock there, she's probably eating. I'd wait about two hours."

"I hadn't even thought about there being a time difference."

"Well, Robin. It only just occurred to me that, when you were drawing her portrait, it must have been about twelve o'clock midnight there, and the latest one must have been done sometime during the morning"

"Well, whatever, it was something for which I hadn't accounted. But I'll take your advice and not telephone her for a couple of hours. I'll just go and feed Simpson and put him out in the garden."

As soon as Matthew had checked that Robin was in the kitchen attending to his pet, he spoke seriously to the others in a low tone of voice, listening carefully for Robin's return.

"He's got something in mind, but he's not saying. Somehow we're going to have to get him to tell us! God, he's put up a good act, but he does know how he thinks the holocaust should be prevented! I'm sure of it!"

"Matthew, you can't be completely sure. He knows he will have to tell us sooner or later, there's no way he would be able to do anything like this on his own!"

"Haven't you noticed a change in his attitude, Harry? Ever since he came up with that idea earlier on, he's been much more calm and collected about the whole affair. Think — you've seen how much power over his mind he has, he doesn't have to consult us over anything! If Helen has got as much power as he makes out, and if he's able to persuade her that what he wants to do is for the best... Well, we can't be certain and we must keep a careful eye on him."

"He's only young, Matthew. He still needs us for advice. Now relax, give him time. He's like yourself in some ways — you never like to comment on any ideas you have, unless you're sure that they're going to be right. He's just being careful. Like everyone, he doesn't want to end up with egg on his face. The success of this project is the most important thing in his life. He's working flat out for the Professor."

"Alison, he can't be trusted. He doesn't mind how he goes about getting his own way, as long as he succeeds. He killed your father and his own parents at a drop of a hat. He needs to be kept under tight control. He believes that the end does justify the means... Enough said, he's coming back now!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DECISIONS

IT WAS NOT TOO BAD A DAY, AND THE BBC HAD, FOR ONCE, MANAGED TO GET THE weather forecast right. Until about nine o'clock that morning, it had rained very heavily. After that downpour, the sky had cleared up and the sun shone brightly. The warmth from its rays spreading evenly, like a blanket, covering over the whole of the city.

The young group made the mistake of going shopping in the City Centre. They had thought that, being a Wednesday, most of the people would be working. But no — the whole of the precinct was buzzing with life. A sea of unfriendly faces, pushing and jostling each other.

It had been a disastrous outing. Harry and Robin could not stop arguing, and this had the effect of involving Alison, who felt some maternal need to protect Robin. Matthew had been wise and had kept silent.

All the way back to their house, not one word was uttered. Beads of sweat dripped from Harry's brow. His arms were folded tightly.

"Stop sulking, Harry. Only children get stroppy like that."

"I'm not sulking, Alison. Anyway, it's between Robin and myself, not you!"

"Okay. Please yourself. This childish behaviour you're currently displaying is only hurting yourself, no one else."

Robin stopped off at a newsagents and bought an ice cream for everyone except Harry. Harry turned his nose up, pretending that he did not really care about ice cream. In truth, he was just as hot as everyone else, but could not bring himself to swallow his pride and apologise for his foolish behaviour. His arms dropped from being crossed, and he stuck his

thumbs into his pockets. For the remainder of the walk home, he dragged his feet sluggishly.

Robin felt pity for his behaviour. Harry was not gaining sympathy — on the contrary, he was making a complete fool of himself. Professor Fergere had instructed him that he was to keep the group together. That was, of course, until he was strong enough to look after himself...

"Harry, I'm sorry, it was my fault. It's the weather — it's so hot that I must be getting irritable. Shall we call a truce?"

Robin offered his hand to Harry who, after pausing, took the hand and shook it.

"I forgive you, but no hard feelings, okay?"

Robin conceding had made Harry feel bad. It was now that he realised how childish he had been, that really it had been Robin who had won the situation.

It was now two o'clock, and they were all starving.

"Isn't it today... that Helen should have returned from Paris? That was what her parents told you, wasn't it Robin?"

"Thanks for reminding me, Harry. I had completely forgotten about that. In fact, I think it was yesterday that I was meant to phone her. I'll just go and attend to Simpson, then I'll phone her."

"It's okay, I'll feed him. You go and phone Helen."

"Is that Helen?"

"No, I'm her father. Who are you?"

"I'm Robin."

"Oh, the Brit. I'll go call her."

Helen's father placed the handset down onto the table and his booming voice could be heard by Robin.

"Helen, that boy I told you about is on the phone."

"Hi, it's Helen here. You're Robin, right? My Dad said you tried phoning a few days ago."

"Yes, I'm Robin."

"Why are you calling, and where did you get my name from?"

"Does the name 'Joseph Fergere' mean anything to you?"

Suddenly, her defences shot up.

"What do you know about Joseph?"

No one except for her parents and Professor Fergere knew where she was.

"Professor Fergere looked after me, like he did with you," said Robin,

"We have a lot in common. I can explain the matter a lot better to you, not with words over the telephone, but with thoughts. Do you understand? Don't blank your thoughts off when I put the receiver down. I need your help. If not for me then for Joseph."

"What do you mean 'for Joseph'? Does he need me? What do you want from me?"

"Look, Helen, calm yourself down. I'll explain to you soon. Now, when you've put the handset back down, go to your bedroom and lie down. Relax yourself, you'll hear from me then. Goodbye for now."

"Okay, but..."

By now quite distraught, Helen did not have time to finish her sentence. Already, Robin had replaced the handset.

Helen sat on the stairs, bemused by the mysterious phone call. Her chin held in her pale, delicate hands — contemplating the whole affair, she could not understand what this boy wanted from her. Professor Fergere... not once, in any of his numerous letters to her, did he mention Robin. But as she thought back to all the letters she had received, the professor had mentioned that he was quite excited about a young boy who was under his supervision. He never had named the boy in question...

This still did not explain why Professor Fergere had not contacted her. Instead, she had received a totally unexpected telephone call from a complete stranger.

Also — it worried her — the fact that, what she had understood as being behind her, had suddenly caught up with her.

After the circumstances that resulted in her having to leave Great Britain, she had thought that she would never again be called upon to use her psychic powers.

Suddenly she felt awful. She could not pinpoint the cause of this overwhelming sadness, but she could feel the unhappiness rushing up through her, a terrible wave of despondency surging over her body.

Slowly, she stood and trudged up the staircase, holding the bannister tightly to keep herself from falling. The shock of hearing someone, totally unknown to herself, uttering her beloved friend's name, took a lot out of her. She began to feel weak and nauseous.

Though she did not know it, this initial contact of minds between Robin and herself was going to be the start of a union which, in the not too far distant future, would change their destined fate and also that of the people of the world.

She lay on her bed in the corpse position and concentrated her mind

on listening out for the voice of the unknown person — the person who, somehow, had managed to draw her into submitting to him. It was as though he had some compelling force over her. No one but the professor would have been able to make her use her mind while she was in a conscious state. But he, Robin, had succeeded in doing so.

Helen ran her lilly-white fingers through her long, mousey hair, moving it away from her eyes and forehead. Her eyelids slowly closed, cutting off the distractions of her bedroom, her artwork hanging on the walls...

"Helen? It's me, Robin. Now, I don't want you to say anything, not until after I have finished saying what I want to tell you."

"Okay, Robin..." replied a faint, bewildered voice.

"I know that my calling you has been a shock, but believe me, I wouldn't be asking you to help me unless it was of the greatest importance.

I'll start from the very beginning — that way you'll understand more easily what I'm about to tell you.

Not long ago, my mind somehow travelled forward in time. I had no idea what was happening. I became very ill and it was the professor's idea to put me under hypnosis in order to find out what was bothering me. It was then that we found that I had travelled in time to the date of April nineteen eighty-eight. There I witnessed the horrors of living in a post-holocaust Britain. When enough information had been gathered about how the war had started, and who was the final victor of this full-scale conflict, I only just succeeded in travelling back in time to now. Soon after returning here, the professor had tried to make the Government aware of the oncoming disaster. He didn't tell them how he came about this information — he was protecting me and my colleagues from being exploited by the politicians. So that he wouldn't be persecuted himself, he committed suicide..."

"What did you say? Tell me it can't be so!" her mind cried,

"I don't believe you, Joseph can't be dead. Oh no, please say it's not true, please!"

She moved restlessly across her bed. This came as a great emotional blow to her. The professor had treated her as his own child — she could relate to what Robin had said about him, protecting his friends from the government. He had done the same for her.

"Helen, it's true. I found him myself. I know how you must be feeling, I cried for days. Please believe me and trust me. Before the professor died he had written a letter to me. In it he explained why he had taken his life — it was for me. He didn't want anyone to know about my powers, until I was

stronger and older. But what he had asked me to do, for his sake and memory, was to somehow stop the war from happening. He said not to allow emotion, my emotions, to cloud my vision of what I was to do. You must do the same. Joseph did what he did to save us and the world. Don't let his death go to waste. Do you now understand? Though he's not here on earth with us physically, he's all around us. He wrote in his letter that he would always be with us. I believe him and so must you. We don't have much time now."

Helen remained silent, twisting her hands in anguish. She felt as though her heart was being splintered, sharp dagger points turning slowly within her, causing her terrible pain. A tear ran down one side of her face.

"Robin, what are we going to do? Are you sure that we are going to have a nuclear war in nineteen eighty-nine?"

"Yes Helen, I'm sure. I wouldn't joke about anything as important as that. Something that puzzled me for a while was that I started drawing some pictures for no apparent reason. My friends were surprised to see them — you see, I'm no artist. I drew a portrait of you, before I knew of your existence, and also I drew what only could be described as a post-holocaust scene of New York. Now, did you draw those pictures yourself anytime during the past week?"

"Yeah, I drew both of those. How did you know that?"

"Well it was a colleague of mine that came to that conclusion. You see, I was going through the professor's files when I came across your name. When I told the others your name and where you lived, Alison saw the connection. She said that, as I'd named the portrait as being Helen and also drawn the landscape of New York — well, we guessed that I must have been copying your drawings. That was the only sensible conclusion we could think of."

"Oh, I get it now. What probably happened was that, when I was drawing these pictures for my course work, my subconscious was sending out some sort of signal. I'd been having these nightmares over the last month. I used wake up during the night screaming and crying, cold sweat literally dripping off my body."

"What exactly did you see, Helen?"

"It was horrific. It was a city, but it had deteriorated so much that there were people wandering around hungry. There would be people, lying in the sides of streets, dying. Weak hands stretched out, begging for food... I don't want to talk about it, it upsets me too much."

"Okay Helen, you needn't say any more about it. I understand what you're going through."

"Robin, I'm scared. How are we going to stop the war? It's going to be damn near impossible."

"Don't worry! I'm sure we'll come up with something."

"I can't help but be scared. I'd rather die than live in this world after a nuclear war."

"You mustn't talk like that. Now Joseph had faith in us. He wouldn't have committed suicide if he thought that we wouldn't be able to do something. We mustn't be disheartened. Remember, this is for him, not for anyone else."

"All right Robin, I'll help you as best I can."

Helen stopped short. She could hear a distant cry from her mother, calling for her to come down.

"What's wrong, Helen? Why aren't you talking to me?"

"I can hear my mum calling. I've got to go now, but we can do this again later. Look, I'll be in bed by ten tonight, speak to me then. We won't be disturbed then."

"Okay, I'll speak to you ten o'clock, your time."

Robin gasped a sigh of relief once their communication had ceased. He had been very nervous, not knowing how Helen would react.

He went downstairs to see his friends, who had been waiting patiently in the lounge.

"How did it all go, Robin? Is she going to help us?" asked Alison, anxiously. The others nodded their heads, beckoning him to reply quickly.

"Well? Tell us Robin, did it go well?"

"All right, hang on. At least let me sit down, then I'll tell you. I've always said that you're too impatient, Harry."

Robin sat himself down in the armchair and made himself comfortable before giving a full report to the students.

"Not bad, not bad at all! She was as cold as ice when we first started talking. I think she must have thought that I was some person working for the Government. You see, I had hit a sore note when I mentioned Professor Fergere's name. She didn't want to believe me at first, that Joseph had committed suicide. But after a while, once she had brought her barrier down, she was quite willing to listen to me. I've arranged to speak to her at greater length after ten o'clock, her time, tonight. She's taken the same attitude as ourselves — that we must succeed in this project, if only because it would have meant so much to the professor."

"Oh, thank God for that. So she is willing to help us?"

"Yes Harry, she's going to co-operate with us fully, to the best of her abilities. And, believe you me, they are phenomenal abilities. I could feel

how much power she possessed, even from our brief conversation just now."

"Robin, I still can't see why it's so important that Helen is involved in this. What exactly have you got planned, if anything?"

"I don't quite know what yet, Matthew, but I'm sure that Helen's powers will be needed..."

"Come off it, Robin, pull the other one. It's obvious that you've got a damn good idea of what you think should be done. So why don't you tell us? Are you scared that we'll disagree and tell you to think of something else? I thought we were meant to be working as a team. In a team, each member trusts and respects the other members, enough to inform them about their possible plans and ideas. For all we know, it's probably a smashing idea that's being hatched in your mind. So please tell us — you never know, we may be able to elaborate on it and come up with some other good points."

Matthew drew a deep breath. He had been waiting for a long time to tell Robin, truthfully, exactly what had been preying on his mind. He was right in what he had said. The other students had realised what was happening — that each day, Robin told them less about what he was planning.

"So you're right again, Matthew. Yes, I have got some idea of what should be done to stop the war. But I would have told you all about it sooner or later, it was just a matter of time..."

"Don't dither! There's no use waffling, I won't forget what you're meant to be telling us, Robin. I'm not going to let you pussy-foot your way out of this one. Now, all I want to know is, what are you proposing we do?"

"Okay, okay! If you really want to know, then here goes."

Matthew listened expectantly as Robin began.

"Now, you remember what I said about us having looked at the problem from a wrong perspective?"

"Yes..." replied the students in unison.

"Well, the root of the problem as I see it, is Iran making the mistake of allowing Russia to enter their country. Right, it's well-known that the Iranian leader is heavily inclined towards Communism and that his people are unhappy with the situation. So, with the Iranian leader shortly off to America to meet the President, what better than for him to have a heart attack or a brain haemorrhage. It would be expected, sooner or later, for him to die. He's so old now. Anyway, as I figure it, the people of Iran would see it as a God-send. It is almost certain that the next leader to be elected would be more right wing, and hence wouldn't allow the Russians to use his country."

"That's not such a bad idea, Robin. It means only one person would have to die to save mankind from this formidable disaster."

Matthew praised Robin's ingeniousness.

"One point, Robin..."

"Yes, Matthew?"

"The idea, as I've already said, is brilliant. But what do you need Helen for?"

"I was was wondering when you would come to that. When the time is right — you know, when the Iranian leader is at a press conference, soon after he arrives — what we'll do is concentrate all our powers into Helen, who will use the power to cause the brain haemorrhage or heart attack."

"Yes, but can't we do do that without her?"

"I was thinking that. But what if the distance, from us here in England, to New York or Washington, is too far? What if our powers don't have the desired effect? Helen is based in the States and, although there's going to be quite a distance between her and the Iranian leader, it won't be as much of a problem. With our powers backing her up, there is no reason why we should fail."

"Okay Robin, I can't argue with that. Sorry I had niggled at you before, but I had to do it. All I can say now, is that I'm pleased I know what you're planning. All that remains is for you to tell Helen of the plan and for us all to pray that everything runs smoothly on the day. We haven't a lot of time, have we? The Iranian leader is due to go to the States in about a fortnight's time."

"Thank you for your vote of confidence, Matthew. It means a lot, coming from you."

They spent the rest of the day out of the house. Everyone was pleased with the situation — they had no fears of Robin's plan failing.

They decided to go to the New Forest. It was, after all, a warm day, and the sunshine made them all feel a bit brighter.

It was the first time in months that they had felt at ease — as though a heavy burden had been lifted off their shoulders. The whole day was relaxing and enjoyable, and there were no arguments.

Wandering through the trees, they took turns in playing with Simpson.

All in all, it was a very peaceful stroll, in some beautiful scenery...

CHAPTER TWELVE

AFTERMATH

IRANIAN LEADER DIES ON TOUCHDOWN

By JIMMY STRAISON In Washington.

YESTERDAY, FIVE MILLION TELEVISION VIEWERS WORLDWIDE WITNESSED THE sudden death of the Iranian leader.

He, and the President of the United States of America were to begin top level peace negotiations, in the hope of solving the current Gulf crisis.

The Iranian aircraft landed in Washington at nine thirty last night. Only twenty minutes later, whilst the Iranian leader and the President were giving a live press conference, the Ayatollah collapsed and died within seconds. He had suffered a cardiac arrest.

The delegation of Iranian aids admitted that their leader had been ill, on and off, for a long time. According to one spokesman, it was only a matter of time before something like this happened.

President Ronald Reagan, for the last few months, has been pressing the western allies to give the U.S. support in its effort to escort and ensure the safety of oil shipments in the Gulf. Just two months ago President Reagan had built up the U.S. Middle East task force with another three warships, in order to assist the six naval ships already there.

The sudden crisis in the Gulf started when an Iraqi exocet missile hit the U.S. warship Stark, killing thirty seven sailors.

Future titles from Abstract Concepts

GOODNIGHT CRUEL WORLD

By 1998, New York has become a violent police state. Ravaged by constant gang warfare and organised crime, the police have fallen back, leaving no-go areas in the control of the drug barons. Disease is rife and areas of the city are frequently sealed off to control an epidemic.

And yet, throughout all of this, life goes on as normally as possible for the people of Manhattan.

John Schulz is a computer operator for the Rosling Corporation. He lives with his girlfriend, Val, in a basement apartment in the Chinatown area.

One night after a row, Val leaves the apartment and vanishes. John's worries turn into a nightmare when he learns that the police suspect him of foul play. Knowing the Justice Department's 'Shoot First, Ask Questions Later' policy, John goes into hiding.

His fugitive search for Val uncovers deeper crime and corruption than he had ever imagined . . .

PARISIAN KNIGHTS

In the wake of the First World War, amid crumbling empires, economic depression swept the world. International tension eased but remained present as some countries sought refuge in the ideologies of Fascism and Communism.

It became an area of rebellion, civil war . . . and spies!

The story follows the progress of a French secret service agent, Monsieur Phillip Grouchy. Returning from a disastrous mission in London, Phillip is severely reprimanded by his superiors. Although certain that he was betrayed, he can show no evidence to excuse his failure. Subsequently, the success of his next mission is vital to regain lost credibility. However, as he discovers the ever-increasing dangers of his current assignments, he begins to suspect that he may be walking into a trap and that the traitor may be closer to him than he thought . . .

Further Notes from Abstract Concepts

REDAUGHT IDEAL WORLD

The world has a rich history of various cultures and traditions, each with its own unique values and beliefs. It is a complex and diverse place, shaped by the actions of the people who live in it. The world is a vast and beautiful place, full of life and hope.

It is a place where we can find meaning and purpose, and where we can make a difference. The world is a place where we can learn and grow, and where we can find the love and support we need to thrive.

Let us work together to make the world a better place for everyone. Let us strive for peace and justice, and let us work to create a world where everyone has the opportunity to live a life of dignity and respect.

The world is a place where we can find the beauty and wonder of nature, and where we can experience the joy of human connection. Let us cherish the world we live in, and let us work to protect it for future generations. The world is a place where we can find the love and support we need to thrive, and where we can make a difference.

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REDAUGHT IDEAL WORLD

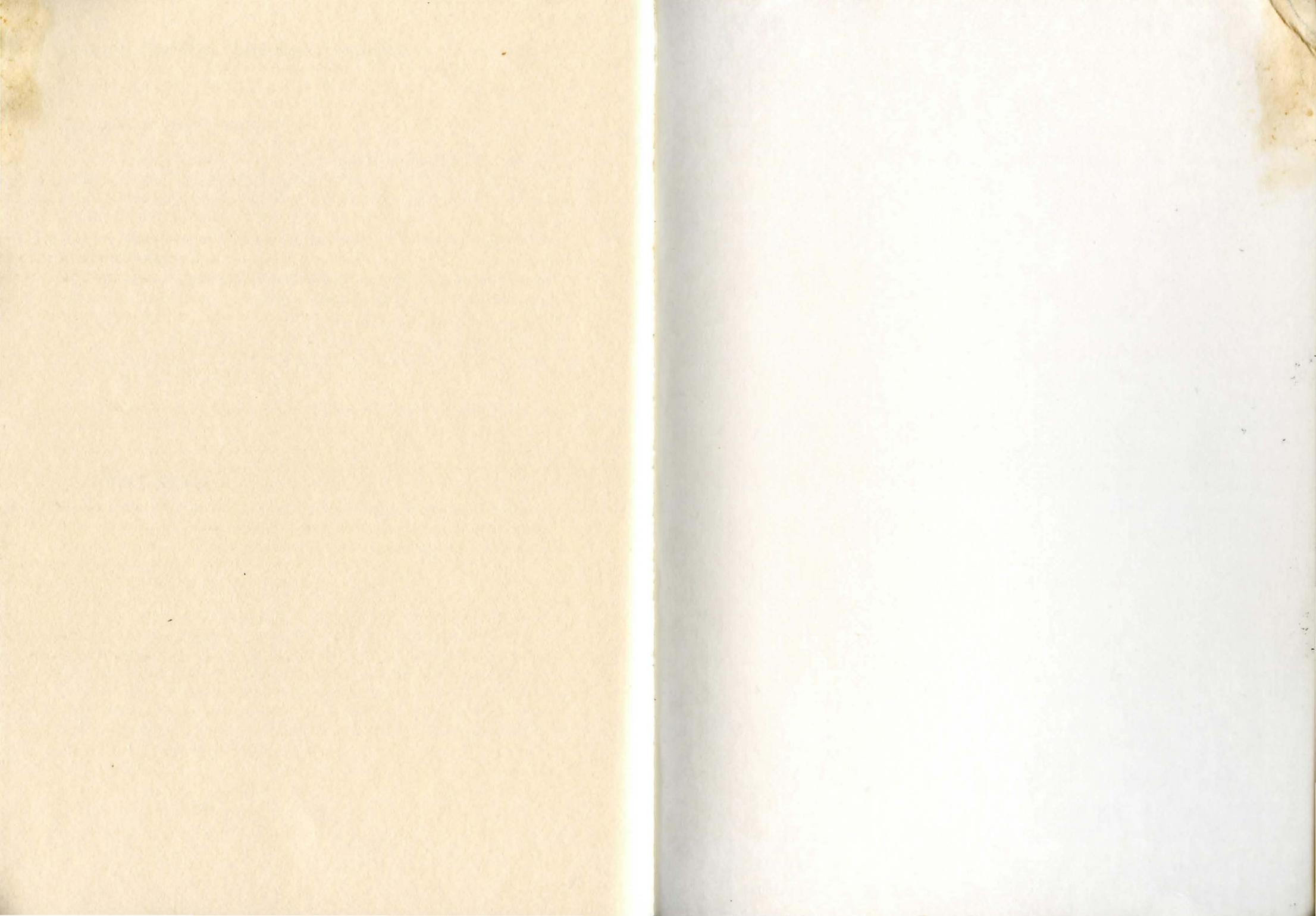
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TOWERING CRAGS OF CONCRETE ROSE UP AGAINST THE RED SKY, TRAILING TWISTED CLAWS OF METAL. THE SWEET SMELL OF DISEASE AND DEATH WAS IN THE WIND THAT MOANED THROUGH THE RUBBLE-STREWN STREETS. AND EVERYWHERE, THE BODIES, THE SILENT POPULATION OF THE CITY . . .

Everyone had been amazed at his psychic powers. But when Robin pushed his mind into the future, trying to discover his exam results, he found himself trapped in a post-holocaust nightmare. His body remained in the present, in a coma-like state. His friends maintained a worried vigil. In the future, Robin was frightened and confused. All he wanted was to go home.

EXPERIENCE THE STARK REALITY OF THE AFTERMATH IN ANNA POPKESS' THOUGHT-PROVOKING NOVEL. SET IN THE SHADOW OF THE GULF CRISIS, IT IS CHILLINGLY RELEVANT . . .

Edited by — *Gary Penn*

Illustration by — *Mark Wilkinson*

