

The Eiffel Tower

by

Karl S. Green
(for NaNoWriMo 2011)

I wrote 'The Eiffel Tower' for National Novel Writing Month 2011. I also wrote it to raise money for charity. The specific charity that I want to help is St Luke's Hospice (Harrow and Brent). They provide care and support to terminally ill patients and their families from the Harrow and Brent areas of north London, regardless of their background. In May 2009 my father sadly passed away, but his final days were made more comfortable by St Luke's, and I'm grateful for the care that they gave him and the support that they gave to my family. And so I would like to raise some money for them as my way of saying thanks. You can find out more about St Luke's via their website at www.stlukes-hospice.org

If you would like to sponsor me you can do so via my Just Giving page at www.justgiving.com/karlsgreen2011 I and St Luke's will be grateful for anything that you're able to give.

This document is merely a first draft, but it is being shared now so that people can read what I wrote this year for NaNoWriMo. Any feedback can be sent to: karlsgreen@hotmail.com

This file was made available on my website at <http://www.karlsgreen.co.uk/eiffeltower.html>

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'...space.'

Ryan woke up with a start. A word ringing in his mind. He felt that it must have been from a dream, but he couldn't remember what the dream had been about. But he had a sense that he had been afraid in the dream.

He put it out of his mind. He could see the bright sunshine shining into his room, and he could hear the seagulls outside. The window was slightly open, and a pleasant breeze was blowing into the room. It looked like it was going to be a good day.

Ryan looked at the clock to the side of his bed - it was 7.30am. There was no need to get up straight away. He wasn't in any rush to go anywhere. He then looked at the calendar on his wall - it was Saturday 3rd September.

He always liked September. His mind still worked in academic years, and so September always felt like the start of a new year to him. A new year, a new beginning. He remembered going back to school on the first day of the new school year. Being given his new timetable, being given a clean exercise book in each class. Everything for the year ahead full of promise.

He would also get to see all of his friends again after the long summer. He got to see some of them, on and off, during the summer, but this was the first time since the end of the school year when he would get to see all of them together, and he liked that.

Then, as he got older, and went into High School, the excitement of seeing his friends started to wear off. But he still liked the start of the school year. Each year the work got more challenging, and by Year 10 he had his GCSE's to focus on.

He did his A-Levels at a local college, like many of his friends. There they had a lot more freedom, and didn't have lessons all day. There was much less of a sense of a first day of term, but he still felt that there was something special about September, that it was still a new beginning each year. And that sense went with him all throughout university, and then into work as he started his first full time job in the September after he had graduated.

But all of that now seemed far away and long ago. He was now here, in this room, on this September morning, with the seagulls outside.

He closed his eyes and focused on what he could hear. In the distance he could make out the sound of the waves crashing on the beach. He lay there and listened to each on in turn. It was a sound that he never got tired of hearing.

After a while of this he decided that it was about time that he got out of bed. He crawled out and stood by the window. Looking out he could see that there were only a few white clouds, high up in the sky. It was going to be a good day. Another thing that he always liked about September was the weather. It was the time of year where it wasn't too hot, as it often was during the height of summer, but it was still warm and pleasant. He would be quite comfortable in a cotton shirt, or a t-shirt. He wouldn't feel too cold, and it would never get so hot that he felt that he had to have a shower the moment in got inside.

For him, this was the most wonderful time of the year.

After he had washed and dressed he made his way to his kitchen and set about making his breakfast. The milk for his cereal was fresh, the toast was toasted to perfection, and the orange juice tasted crisp and clear. He found his breakfast to be very satisfying.

He then started to think about what he was going to do today. Maybe he would go down to the beach and read his book for a while. Or maybe he would go for a walk in the woods nearby. Or perhaps he would take a trip on the old steam train down the coast for a bit. Whatever it was he ended up deciding on doing, he knew that he would find today relaxing, and that he wouldn't have anything to worry about.

In the end he decided that he would go and pay his friend William a visit. He only lived a short distance away, and Ryan knew that he would be pleased to see him.

It was a pleasant walk to William's house. The air was crisp and clear, and there was no traffic in sight. When he got to William's house Ryan saw him sitting on a bench to the side of the front door.

William waved at him and said, 'Hi there, Ryan! How's you today!'

'I'm very well, thank you,' replied Ryan, and he sat down next to William. 'How's things with you?'

'Not too bad at all. Can't complain at my age.'

'Come on, you're not that old.'

'Compared to you I am! How old are you now?'

'30.'

'Well, that makes you a spring chicken compared to me.'

'I certainly don't feel like one.'

'Oh, come now. When you get to be my age you'll long for the days when you were 30 again.'

'Yes, but not as much as I'll long for the days when I was 18!'

'Yes, that's true enough!'

'Anyway, how's Kate doing? What's she up to today?'

'Oh, she's gone down to the beach for the morning with Pippa.'

'Well, it's a good day for it.'

'Yes, that it is.'

They carried on chatting like this for what seemed like a long while. William mentioned that he would be going to see his father, Charles, later in the week, who lived in a village a little way inland. When William asked Ryan what his plans were Ryan said that for the time being he didn't have any. He was just happy to relax for a while.

Eventually, Ryan decided it was time that he headed off. 'Goodbye William! And I promise I won't leave it so long until I see you again.'

'You make sure of that!'

Ryan waved goodbye, and set off on his way. He decided that he would go to a cafe on the beach front and have some lunch there. Despite it getting close to the middle of the day, the town was still quiet and peaceful. There were a few people about, and he could still hear the waves and the seagulls, and occasionally the train whistle in the distance.

It didn't take him long to get to the cafe. He went inside, where Irene was behind the counter, with her usual broad smile on her face. 'Good afternoon Ryan, what can I do you for?'

'Oh, just the usual. I think I'll sit outside today.'

'I'll bring it out to you.'

Ryan went outside and sat at one of the tables, where he had a good view of the sea. It was peaceful and calm, and in the distance, towards the horizon, he could see a ship slowly making its way along. He thought that, one day, he might like to take a trip on a ship. He considered it to be a very relaxing way to travel. Far better than being cramped up in a car, or squashed up against fellow passengers on the train.

Irene brought his lunch out to him - which consisted of a thick ploughman's sandwich, an apple, and a glass of cool lemonade. As he started to tuck in, he saw Kate and her sister, Pippa, walking towards the cafe. When they saw him they waved, and he waved back.

'Do you mind if we join you?' asked Kate.

'No, not at all. Please, sit down!'

They did so. 'So,' said Pippa, 'You been up to anything exciting recently?'

'No, not really. Just the usual stuff, you know. Taking things easy. How about yourself?'

'Pretty much the same.'

Kate then said, 'You really must go round and see William at some point. I think it's been an age since you last came over.'

'Well, I've just come from your place as a matter of fact.'

'Oh really, when I just happened to be out, eh? Now, what were you two talking about?'

'Ah, now that would be telling!'

At that moment Irene stepped outside and asked, 'Is there anything that I can get you two ladies?'

'Yes,' said Kate, 'We'll have two lemonades please.'

'Coming right up!'

Kate then turned back to Ryan and said, 'You must come round for dinner some time. How are you fixed for tomorrow night?'

'I believe I'm free.'

'Well, that's settled then, we'll see you tomorrow.'

'I'm looking forward to it.'

Irene came out with the girls drinks, and once she was gone Pippa asked, 'So, what are you planning to do for the rest of the day?'

'I'm not too sure to be honest. I don't have any real plans at the moment. How about yourself?'

'Oh, I think I'll just go home and read in the garden for a bit.'

'That sounds nice.'

Once Ryan had finished his lunch and Kate and Pippa had finished their drinks they made their goodbyes. Kate and Pippa headed off back into town, and Ryan decided that he would take a walk along the beach. When he got there he took off his shoes and socks. The sand here was pristine and soft. There weren't any sharp stones in it at all, and it was very pleasant to walk in.

He walked right up to the sea, and allowed it to wash over his feet. The water was pleasantly warm. As he walked along the beach he saw a few people about, including a family with two young children, a boy and a girl, who were building sandcastles.

He then turned away from the sea and walked towards the wall of the promenade. He sat down with his back against it, and looked out towards the sea.

He was happy here. Everything felt right. Everything felt perfect. Here he didn't have any worries, or a care in the world.

Then he remembered the dream that he had had last night, or, rather, he remembered the feeling that the dream had left him with. A horrible sense of fear. But a fear of what? What could he possibly have to be afraid of?

He decided to try and put it out of his mind. Why try and ruin a perfect day?

He then stretched out on the sand, and closed his eyes. He focussed on the sound of the waves, now much closer than when he had heard them in his bed. Here they seemed to have a hypnotic, calming effect. He then slowly started to drift off to sleep.

He slept without dreaming, and woke up feeling refreshed. The sun was now closer to the horizon, as the evening arrived. He brushed the sand off of his feet, put his shoes and socks back on, and decided to go and get some dinner from somewhere.

He felt like having some fish and chips, and so he made his way to the fish and chip restaurant, which was a little way along the beach front.

When he got there he ordered a large portion of haddock and chips with mushy peas, and again decided to sit at a table outside.

On the table next to him was a couple that he knew, Tom and Sarah. He waved at them then and said, 'Hi!'

'Oh, hi Ryan,' replied Tom. 'You alright?'

'Yeah, I'm good thanks. How's things with you?'

'Couldn't be better.'

Ryan then turned to Sarah and asked, 'And how's you?'

'I'm great!'

Tom and Sarah had only recently got together. In fact, they both had only been in the town for a little while. They had moved in next door to each other, and had just seemed to hit it off. Ryan was happy for them, he felt that they looked like a really good couple.

'So,' said Ryan, 'What have you two been up to today?'

'Oh,' replied Tom, 'Not much. Just hanging out and relaxing. We went to the cinema earlier and watched a film there.'

'Oh, right. What did you go and see?'

Sarah replied, "'Sleepless in Seattle.'" I love that film.'

'Yeah, it is a good one.'

The waitress came out with Ryan's meal, and he let Tom and Sarah return to theirs. Ryan loved the fish and chips that they did here. They tasted delicious, especially with the tartare sauce that they used, and the portions were very generous. By the time he had finished he was stuffed.

The sun was now starting to set on the horizon, out to sea. The whole sky was turning red, and the few clouds that were there started to look like they were on fire. He left the restaurant and walked up to the wall that was at the edge of the promenade. The beach was now deserted, but he could still see the sandcastles that the family had been making earlier. The seagulls were starting to quieten down, as the whole town started to bring the day to a close.

He then decided that it was time to return home. He walked slowly back, as there was no need to tire himself out. It wasn't as if he was having to rush back for anything.

When he got home he watched TV for a little bit - nothing too heavy, just a few sitcoms. Then he got ready for bed.

As he got into bed he left the window open a little bit. The breeze that was coming in was still pleasant.

He felt that today had been a perfect day. He was feeling totally calm and relaxed. There wasn't anything that was bothering him or worrying him. He had a vague feeling that there might have been something wrong when he had woken up that morning, but that feeling very quickly left him.

No, there was nothing wrong at all. Everything was well and good with the world, and there was nothing more that he could ask for. He was perfectly content and happy.

He felt that he was as happy as could have possibly been.

Everything was good.

Everything was perfect.

He closed his eyes, and slept a deep and dreamless sleep.

He awoke the next day to the same sound of seagulls, and the sound of the sea in the distance. The sun was once again shining brightly into his room. He looked at his clock - 7.30am again. He then looked at his calendar - it was Sunday 3rd September. He always loved September - it always felt like a new year to him.

He twinged slightly as he thought that thought. It had a feeling of de ja vue about it. He then tried to think about what might happen next, as you do when you get de ja vue, but the feeling quickly passed.

He looked out of the window, and once again only saw a few white clouds high up in the sky. It looked like it was going to be another perfect day again.

Today he only had one thing on - dinner with William and Kate in the evening. But until then he day was completely free. He decided that today he would take a trip on the steam train.

He had always had a liking for steam trains. One of his favourite shows when he was very little was 'Thomas the Tank Engine'. And he had had a couple of train sets as a kid, one of which had a model of Mallard, which was his favourite steam train as it was the fastest. But, even as a kid, he wasn't terribly fond of electric trains. Whilst they could go a lot faster than steam trains, they created a different atmosphere. You don't get the same sounds and smells with an electric train as you do with a good old fashioned steam train. To him, he associated electric trains with uncomfortable commutes into work, but steam trains with magical, relaxing journeys to places unknown. When getting on a steam train he always felt that there was a little sense of adventure.

When he arrived at the station the train was at the platform, steam coming out of it already, as it was preparing to depart. He got on board, and took a seat by a window, which was wide open. Shortly before the train was due to depart a girl came and stood opposite him and asked, 'Is this seat taken?'

'No, not at all. Please do join me!'

'Thanks!' She then sat down in the seat opposite Ryan.

She was a very striking girl. She appeared to be in her early twenties, and had short red hair - very red hair. Her skin was very pale, and she had sparkly blue eyes. She was wearing blue jeans, and a red cotton cardigan with a dark green t-shirt underneath.

'Hi,' she said, 'I'm Lisa.' She offered her hand.

Ryan took it and told her his name. He then asked her, 'Have you ever been on this train before?'

'No, this is my first time. I only arrived in town yesterday.'

'Well, I'm sure you'll love it. It sticks very closely to the coast, and ends at this little village with a tea shop that does a great cream tea.'

'Sounds great. I don't suppose you could show me around when we get there?'

'Sure, I'd love to!'

'So, have you been in this town for long?'

'Erm, yeah, I've been here for a while...' He then trailed off. He knew that he had been here for a while, a very long while. But he couldn't put a figure on just how long he had been here for. On the one hand he knew that he had been here for a very long time, but on the other hand he felt that he had only been here since yesterday. He started to feel very disconcerted.

Lisa broke his thoughts and said, 'It's lovely weather today, isn't it?'

'Yes, we often get good weather here. We're very lucky. Plus it's the best time of the year, weather wise, don't you think? Not too hot, not too cold. Just right.'

Lisa smiled and said, 'Yes, absolutely.' Ryan felt that Lisa had a very pretty smile. Yes, today was going to be another good day.

Shortly after that the train slowly started to leave the station. They were quite near the front of the train, and so could hear the engine clearly, including the very loud whistle as it left the station. Before long it was chugging along quite speedily down the track.

As it went along a pleasant breeze was blowing in through the window. It wasn't so strong that it was taking away Ryan's breath, or making his eyes uncomfortable, but it was strong enough to help keep the carriage feeling cool. Also coming in through the window was the smell of the engine as it burnt its coal. Ryan found this to be a pleasant smell, which reminded him of his childhood, and the various times that he had been able to travel on a steam train, which was normally when he was on holiday with his family.

Lisa was also looking out of the window, as the scenery passed them by. It didn't take them long to leave the town, and out of the window to the right of the train was a view of the sea, with a deserted beach between the train track and the sea. To the left of the train there were unspoilt green fields going by. 'You're right,' said Lisa, 'This is a lovely trip. The whole area around here is wonderful.'

'I know, I love living here. This is absolutely my most perfect place to live. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.' Lisa smiled at him.

The train only took about thirty minutes to reach its destination. As they disembarked they found themselves in a village not unlike the town that they had just left, but one that was noticeably smaller and older. The buildings here all had a Tudor style to them, and the streets were all cobbled, and there wasn't a car in sight. It was as though they had travelled back in time.

'Come on then,' said Lisa, 'Show me where this famous tea shop is!'

'Oh no,' said Ryan, 'Don't say that! We don't want it getting famous. If too many people find out about it, it'll become overrun and it won't be the same anymore.'

'Yes, you're right. So, show me this perfectly ordinary and not famous at all tea shop!'

'Right this way!'

Ryan led her down a few streets and it was only a few minutes before they arrived at the tea shop. They went inside, and were shown by a waitress to a table that was out the back on the patio, under a shelter. From their table they could see an immaculately kept garden, with a large hedge surrounding it, and large trees in each corner. Beyond the hedge they had a view of the sea in the distance.

There were quite a few other people in the tea shop, and evidently most of them had come from the train. It appeared that the tea shop certainly was famous, but it was thankfully far from becoming overrun.

They placed their order, and then looked out to the garden again. 'This place is unspoilt,' said Lisa. 'And not just this tea shop, the whole area is. It's like a little bit of paradise.'

'Yes, I suppose it is...' This got Ryan thinking. Yes, it certainly was a like a little bit of paradise. He was sure that there had to be something wrong with the area, at least one slight flaw. But as he racked his brain he struggled to find one. Everything just seemed to be so right here. Absolutely everything. The weather was always perfect, or so it seemed. The atmosphere was always calm, peaceful, and relaxing. Everywhere you went there was the sound of the sea in the distance. There was always a pleasant breeze blowing. Even the people in the area seemed perfect. They were always smiling, always happy to see you, always had the time to sit down and talk with you. They were all so nice, there wasn't a single bad person amongst them.

Then something else struck him. He wasn't able to remember the last time that he had heard the siren of an emergency vehicle. Back when he had been living in London (How long ago was that? Five years ago? One year ago? Last month? Last week? Yesterday?) it seemed like the only sound he could ever hear was a siren as an emergency vehicle was rushing off somewhere. But since he had been here he couldn't remember hearing a single one, or of seeing one anywhere. In fact, he was fairly certain that he hadn't even seen a police or fire station anywhere. He certainly couldn't remember anything about any crimes being committed, not even fairly minor ones. He couldn't even remember there even having been any instances of cars being parked where they shouldn't be.

This all seemed a little odd to Ryan, but he put it down to the atmosphere of the place having a positive influence on everyone. He decided not to dwell on it anymore - who had need of the emergency services when there were no emergencies for them to service?

Ryan was brought out of his thoughts by the waitress bringing them their order. 'Oh,' said Lisa, 'This looks great!'

'Trust me, it tastes even better than it looks.' They then got stuck in, and Lisa agreed with him absolutely on this point.

Once they had finished they had a look around the town. It had a lot of old shops in it, including a lot of old second hand bookshops. Lisa apparently had quite a love for books. In one bookshop she found a copy of a book called 'The Worst Witch' by Jill Murphy. 'Oh look!' she

said as she found it, 'I used to love this when I was a little girl. And this copy has the original cover design. Did you ever read them at all?'

'I think we read them occasionally back in primary school, but I can't really remember them that well.'

'Oh, OK... So, what did you like when you were little?'

'Well, I was very much into "Thomas the Tank Engine", so much so that I wore out my old Betamax tape of it that my dad had recorded all of the episodes on. I also loved "Sooty" as well. I used to have my own Sooty glove puppet that I took with me everywhere, and if I ever lost it I would cry and say that I wouldn't be able to go to sleep without it!'

'Ahhhh.' Lisa smiled at him, and he smiled back.

They eventually made their way back to the station, where the train was waiting to take them back. They got on board, and a short while later the train departed.

Once they were on their way Ryan asked Lisa, 'So, what are your plans for this evening?'

'Oh, I don't really have anything on. I'm still settling in and getting used to everything.'

'Well, if you don't have any plans I'm going to be having some dinner with some friends. You'd be more than welcome to join us, and I know they'd like to meet you. They seem to know just about everyone in the town.'

'OK, yes, why not? It sounds lovely.'

Ryan then gave her the address (5 Windsor Avenue), and the directions to get there.

Once they arrived back in town they went their separate ways, agreeing to meet up at William's and Kate's house later. Ryan went back to his house, where he spent most of the rest of the afternoon reading in his garden.

He was glad to have met Lisa today, she seemed like a really nice girl. There was something different about her, something that marked her apart from everyone else in the area. But it wasn't a bad thing, although he couldn't quite place his finger on it. Still, that didn't matter. He had made a nice new friend today, and one could never have too many of those. He was really looking forward to seeing her again this evening, and he knew that William and Kate wouldn't mind him bringing her around. They always seemed to have enough food to feed an army, and so were always happy to have another mouth at the table.

It was already getting towards sunset as Ryan started to make his way towards William's and Kate's house. Even though it was the evening, he could still walk around comfortably in a t-shirt outside. As ever, the air was cool and pleasant.

Just as he was approaching their house he saw Lisa walking towards it from the opposite direction. He waved at her, and she waved back. As he approached her he said, 'So, I see you found the place OK.'

'Yeah, everything's easy to find around here it seems.'

'OK then, let's go in.'

They walked up to the door and Ryan rang the doorbell. It was Kate who answered it, saying, 'Hi Ryan!'

'Hi! I hope you don't mind that I brought a friend with me.'

'Oh, not at all. As usual William's made far too much food and so there's plenty for everyone.'

'Great. This is Lisa, and she's new in town.'

'Pleased to meet you Lisa!'

'Likewise,' Lisa said, as she shook Kate's hand.

'Well, stop standing around out there and come on inside!'

They stepped inside, where the house was filled with the smell of home cooking. Ryan said, 'It smells like William's outdone himself again.'

'Yes,' said Lisa, 'It smells wonderful.'

They went through to the dining room, which already had four place settings. Ryan thought that this was a little odd, but he didn't dwell on it. He just presumed that William and Kate were used to extra people turning up, and so he put it out of his mind.

'So,' said Ryan, 'Been up to anything exciting today?'

'Oh, you know, just the usual things. Bit of this, bit of that. How about you?'

'Well, Lisa and I met on the train, and I showed her the tea shop where we had a cream tea.'

'Oh, that sounds lovely.'

Ryan left Lisa and Kate in the dining room to chat amongst themselves, as he went into the kitchen to see William. He had several pots on the stove, and he was wearing an apron with a large Union Jack on it as he was rushing about the kitchen.

'Oh, hi Ryan. Here, stir this sauce for me, will you?'

'No worries. Wow, it looks like you've been working on this all day!'

'Oh no, it's just something that I rustled up quickly. It's no big deal. I see you brought a friend with you. She's a pretty girl.'

'Yeah, I met her on the train today, her name's Lisa.'

William stopped what he was doing, and looked right at Ryan. 'Lisa you say... Now, where have I heard that name before...?' There was a long period of silence whilst William was deep in thought. He then said, 'I'm sure I've heard that name somewhere before, but I just can't think where... Oh well, I'm sure it'll come to me eventually. How's that sauce doing?' He then resumed his frantic cooking.

But his reaction to Lisa's name made Ryan feel really uneasy. He knew that there was something odd about Lisa, something different, and it would appear that William might somehow be aware of it, and this concerned Ryan. Was there something going on here that he ought to know about?

A short while later William was ready to serve up, and so Ryan took his place in the dining room. Lisa and Kate were chatting amongst each other as though they were old friends. Ryan took the seat next to Lisa, and opposite Kate.

William brought in the first course, which was a sort of soup served with rolls and butter. Ryan tried to work out what sort of soup it was. It was a sort of brownish green colour, but he couldn't tell what was in it. However, he hardly felt that mattered too much because it was delicious, and it wasn't long before he had drained his bowl, as had the others.

Lisa then said, 'That was fantastic, William. You're a really good cook.'

'Well, I learnt it all from my grandmother, Grannie Lizzie. She had such a big house, as big as a palace, and she was always cooking for everyone. That was actually one of her recipes, as is the main course.'

'Oh, what's that?'

'Ah, that's a surprise! But, don't worry, you won't have to wait long for it now.' He then got up and started to collect everyone's bowls to take them into the kitchen.

Once he was gone Lisa said to Kate, 'You're very lucky to have him. I wish I had someone around the house who could like that for me every day.'

'Yes,' said Ryan, 'He is very good. That's why I'm always coming round here!'

Kate smiled. 'I do appreciate it, just as long as I keep out of his way. Whenever he's cooking he normally won't let me anywhere near the kitchen. That's strictly his domain.'

Shortly after that William brought out the main course, which was a roast of some kind, complete with more roast potatoes than Ryan had ever seen. But then, he felt, one could never have too many roast potatoes. He remembered his mother's roast potatoes, which she did every Sunday without fail. There had always been a mock fight between him and his father about who

would get to the seconds first, and his dad would joke about counting all of them to make sure he got his fair share.

This memory jolted Ryan. He can't remember the last time that he had actually seen his parents. Was it a year ago, or was it only last week? He knew that he wouldn't have just said goodbye to them without saying anything, but when had that been? Where were his parents now, and what were they doing? Ryan didn't have any answers to these questions, and this worried him.

William brought him back by saying, 'So, Ryan, what do you think of it?'

'Of what... oh, the food! Oh, well, as ever you've surpassed yourself. Your Grannie Lizzie certainly taught you well.'

'I concur,' said Lisa. 'If you keep doing this I'll be around for dinner every day!'

It took them no time at all for them to clear their plates, and all of the roast potatoes got consumed, which at the start almost seemed that it wouldn't have seemed possible. But Ryan was feeling pleasantly satisfied. He was full, but not overloaded.

Lisa then said, 'I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to manage dessert. I'm fit to burst right now. What delight are you going to treat us to next?'

'Only ice cream,' said William. 'I didn't have time to put anything more elaborate together.'

'Ice cream will be absolutely fine!'

Ryan agreed. Ice cream was just about the only thing that he would be able to manage about now, and it seemed to be about the best thing that he could have about now.

William started to clear the table, and this time Kate helped him. As they left the room Lisa said to Ryan, 'They're really nice people.'

'Yes, they are.'

'How long have you known them for?'

'Well, let's see...' Ryan paused to think, but once again he was stuck. When had he first met William and Kate? He felt like he had known them for ages, but he still couldn't place when it was that they had first met. He presumed that it would have shortly before he moved to this town, but when had that been? He was utterly at a loss.

Before he had a chance to give Lisa an answer William and Kate came back in, both carrying two bowls of ice cream and two spoons. In each of the bowls was a very generous serving of vanilla ice cream. They set them down in front of everyone, and they then proceeded to consume all of them. As ever, they tasted delicious, with their coolness going down Ryan's throat.

One they were done with the ice cream William took the bowls into the kitchen, and Kate took Ryan and Lisa outside. It was now fully dark outside, and as tonight was a new moon there was no moonlight in the sky. Because the area had so few streetlights there was very little in the way of light pollution, and so this resulted in the sky being full of stars, which Ryan looked up at in wonder. He couldn't remember ever having seen so many stars in the sky at once.

Right across the middle of the sky he could see a large band of stars that were clearly the Milky Way. Looking around he could see some familiar constellations - the Plough, Orion, Pegasus, and Cassiopeia. Directly overhead he could see what surely had to be Jupiter. It was very bright in the sky, and he could make out its very distinctive colours. He felt in awe as he looked at it. And right nearby to it he saw what looked like a red star, but he quickly realised that this must be Mars.

'Wow,' said Lisa, 'It's such a clear night!'

'Yes, it is,' said Kate. 'You'll get used to nights like these around here.'

William then came outside and joined them. 'I see you're admiring the stars.'

'Yes,' said Lisa, 'There's so many of them.'

'Indeed. Tell me, do you think that out there, amongst all of those stars, there might be another planet like ours, and that there might be intelligent life out there similar to us.'

'I'm not sure...' said Lisa, feeling a little uneasy.

Ryan then said, 'I think there probably is. I mean, think about it. The universe is vast, and the Earth is absolutely tiny in comparison to it. There's so much of the universe that we're not able to see, and much of that we'll never get to see. Given all of that, would it really make sense for all of this to just be here solely for our benefit?'

'You have a good point,' said William, 'But, if that's so, then tell me this. If we're not alone in the universe, if there is intelligent life out there, then why haven't we seen any of it? Why hasn't ET called us to say hello?'

'Well, that depends on what you class as intelligent life. Does intelligent life have to be life capable of creating technology that can send transmissions out amongst the stars?'

'An alien race would have to be intelligent to be able to that.'

'Indeed they would, but is that the only evidence of intelligence? I don't think it is. You have to look at our own world. Not every part of the world has developed the same technology as we have. In the Amazon rainforest there are still tribes that are living in the same way that they've done for thousands of years. And yet these people are no less intelligent than we are. They just haven't developed the same technology that we have, presumably because they had no driving need to develop any such technology. Now, suppose that there are whole worlds out there full of

similar people. People who are just as intelligent as we are, maybe even more intelligent than we are, who simply haven't had the need to develop their technology to the same heights that we've developed our technology.'

Lisa smiled at him and said, 'You make a really good point.' Then all four of them looked back up at the stars.

Eventually, Ryan and Lisa took their leave of William and Kate. Even though Lisa's home was in the opposite direction to Ryan's, he offered to walk her home.

'They're really nice people,' said Lisa.

'Yeah, they are. So, do you know what you're going to be doing tomorrow yet?'

'No, I'm not sure...' There was a long pause, where Lisa seemed to be thinking. She then said, 'I tell you what, why don't I come by your place tomorrow? There's something that I'd like to show you.'

'Oh yes, what?'

'I can't tell you, it's a surprise. Just go home, have a good night, and I'll reveal all tomorrow.'

Ryan felt a little uneasy about this - he wasn't a huge fan of surprises.

Lisa appeared to detect his unease and said, 'Don't worry, it won't be anything bad, I can assure you.' She smiled at him.

This helped Ryan feel better about it, and so he said, 'OK, I'll see you at my place tomorrow. What time will you be round?'

'About nine o'clock.'

'That's fine, I'll see you then.'

That night, Ryan lay awake in bed, his window once again open, a gentle breeze entering the room, and the sound of the sea in the distance. Today had been another good day - on the whole. There were some parts that were troubling, specifically the parts where he found himself struggling to remember things. He still didn't know how long he had been in this town for, or how long he had known William and Kate for, or when the last time he saw his parents was. He found this a little troubling - he didn't like not being able to remember things.

But the sound of the waves helped to calm him with its hypnotic power. Here he could relax and not worry about a thing. Everything was good here. Everything was perfect. How could he possibly want for anything more?

And, on top of that, today he had met Lisa. There was no doubt about the fact that this was the first day that they had met. And there was also no doubt that she was really nice. He wondered what it was she wanted to show him tomorrow.

He closed his eyes, and focussed on the sound of the waves, as he slowly drifted off to a peaceful, dreamless, sleep.

The next day he awoke in a similar manner to the previous two. There was the sound of seagulls in the air, and the pleasant breeze was still there. He looked at his clock, and saw that it was 7.30am again. He then looked at his calendar. It was Monday 3rd September. He always liked September, it always felt like the start of the year.

He then sat up with a start, and stared intently at his calendar. It definitely said that today was Monday 3rd September. There was no doubt about that. But yesterday he could have sworn that it said that it was Sunday 3rd September, and the day before that it had been Saturday 3rd September. The days of the week were still changing, but it was still 3rd September. How could that possibly be?

He then thought for a bit. Ever since he had been in this town (however long that was) it always felt that it was 3rd September. Always the same date. Always the same feeling of this being the most wonderful time of the year for him.

This made him feel really uneasy. Something wasn't right here. Something wasn't adding up, and he felt that this was more than just his calendar.

He got up, and continued with his morning routine, mainly because there was nothing else for him to do.

He looked out of his window, and once again there were only a few high white clouds in the sky. Again, for as long as he had been in this town there were only ever a few high white clouds in the sky. The weather here was always perfect. The temperature was always just right. There was always a pleasant gentle breeze blowing. He couldn't remember a single time that it had rained here, and yet there was no sign of a drought. All of the grass was green, and all of the trees and flowers and other plants in the area all looked healthy. But how could that possibly be? It just didn't make sense.

This sense of unease stayed with him, right until Lisa turned up. He thought about telling her what he had noticed, that everything did not seem quite right with the world, but he chose against it. He thought that if he did tell her then she might think that he had gone crazy, but he was now starting to worry that he had, indeed, gone crazy.

When Lisa rang his doorbell he was pleased to see her. She was standing on his doorstep, wearing what looked like the same clothes as yesterday, but still perfectly clean, and she was smiling at him. She asked, 'You ready to go?'

He smiled back and said, 'Yes.' Her smile seemed to help calm him down. For some reason she helped him to feel calm. He couldn't explain why, but he felt that he could trust her absolutely.

He then asked her, 'So, can you tell me where we're going yet?'

'No! It's still a surprise. You're just going to have to be patient and wait.'

He stepped outside, and she took his arm in hers. This didn't feel strange or odd at all. It felt perfectly right, even though he had only met her yesterday.

She led him through the town. They went past William's and Kate's house. William was sitting outside again, and he gave them a wave as they went past. Ryan waved back at him, but neither of them said anything.

They went past Lisa's house, and the houses that belonged to Tom and Sarah. They went down to the promenade, and past the cafe, where Irene also gave them a wave, which Ryan returned.

During all of this neither Ryan or Lisa said a word. Ryan was deep in thought. He was so confused that he didn't have a clue what was going on anymore. Everything felt strange, like it wasn't meant to be. In fact, he started to feel that everything was wrong.

Everything, that was, apart from Lisa. She was the one thing that felt right at the moment. He felt that he could trust her completely. He didn't know why he could trust her, what it was about her that made her so trustworthy, but, nonetheless, that trust was still there.

Once they had reached the end of the promenade, then went on a little further, and then turned to the right, where there was a large, open field, with a large hill on the other side. Lisa led them directly to that hill. Ryan somehow knew that the hill was going to be their final destination.

Once they reached then hill, rather than going up it, which Ryan thought they were going to do, they went around it. Ryan had never been to this part of the town before and so he didn't know what to expect. Once they were on the other side of the hill he saw that there was the entrance to a cave that led into the hill. He couldn't see anything in the cave as it was pitch black inside.

He turned to Lisa and asked her, 'Why have you brought me here?'

'I believe that, if you think about it, you already know.'

'No, I don't. I really have no idea.' Ryan started to feel afraid - as afraid as he had felt in the dream that he had three nights ago.

'Yes, Ryan, you do. Do you really think this is how the world should be? Do you really think that all of this is normal? What's the date today?'

'3rd September.'

'And what was it yesterday?'

Ryan paused. He knew that the sensible answer to give would be 2nd September. But he also knew that yesterday his calendar had clearly said that it was 3rd September.

'Ryan, what was the date yesterday?'

Ryan felt he had to be honest, and so he said, '3rd September.'

'And the day before that?'

'3rd September...'

'How can it possibly be 3rd September three days in a row?'

Ryan had no answer for this.

Lisa then went on and said, 'And that's not all that's wrong. Look at this weather. It's always perfect. And it's always been perfect here for as long as you can remember. And just how long have you been here, Ryan? How long have you been living in this town?'

Again, Ryan knew that he should be capable of giving a sensible answer to this question, but, in truth, he didn't have a clue how long he had been here. On one hand he felt like he had been living here forever, and the other hand he felt like he had only been living here for a few days. Once again, he felt that he had to be honest with Lisa, and so he just said, 'I don't know...'

'And how much money do you have?'

Ryan hadn't thought about that. Just how much money did he have? Nothing came to mind.

Lisa went on, 'When you went to the cafe for lunch yesterday, how much did you pay for your meal? Or at the fish and chip restaurant in the evening? Or when we went for the cream tea in the tea shop? How much did you pay for your train ticket?'

Again, Ryan thought long and hard, but he found that he had no memory of paying for anything. But he knew that couldn't possibly be right. He couldn't just be getting everything for free. He must have paid somehow. And yet he knew that he hadn't. The idea of having to pay for things hadn't entered his mind, but, also, no one seemed to have been troubling him for any money. Irene had waved at them as they passed the cafe this morning, and she wouldn't have been doing that if he had just done a runner without paying the other day.

Lisa then said, 'You haven't been paying for anything, have you? It's almost as if money doesn't matter anymore. What do you do for a living, how do you support yourself?'

Ryan had vague memories of working in London a long time ago (or, at least, what felt like a long time ago). Now, he didn't know what it was that he did. What it was that allowed him to live here and do anything he liked during the day. He looked at Lisa, and the only thing he could say was, 'I don't know.'

'And then there are your friends. Think about their names. You have a friend called William, who's married to Kate, who has a sister called Pippa. William has a father called Charles, and a grandmother called Lizzie. And, on top of that, he lives in Windsor Avenue. Doesn't any of that mean anything to you?'

Ryan thought for a moment, but he couldn't see anything odd in those names, and so he just said, 'No, those names all seem perfectly fine to me.'

'I see... Well, trust me when I say they're not. But that aside, you have to admit that everything else is odd - the perfect weather, the no need for money, the fact that you can't remember how long you've been here for. When was the last time you saw your parents?'

Ryan knew that he couldn't remember this. How can anyone possibly forget when the last time they saw their parents was? He knew that Lisa was right, that something was indeed wrong here. He said, 'I don't know. I really don't know. I know that I should know, but I don't. Lisa, do you know what's happening here?'

There was a pause, and then Lisa said, 'I think I might. But if you want to find out, you're going to have to come with me and leave this place behind.'

'Come with you where?'

'Into the cave.'

'What's in the cave?'

'The cave is a doorway that will lead you from this world, to somewhere else. Now, I don't know exactly where that somewhere else will be, but I do know that going there is the only way that you'll be able to find the answers that you need.'

Ryan thought for a moment, and then he said, 'But I don't want to leave here. I like it here. I'm happy here. I don't have anything to worry about when I'm here.'

'Yes, but all of this is a lie. It's not real, Ryan. You know that this is not how the world is supposed to be. It might be how you want the world to be, but it isn't. You can't live your life in a fantasy. If you want to know the truth, if you want to know what reality is, you'll have to come with me.'

'What if I don't want to go? What if I don't come with you?'

'I can't make you come with me. You have to decide for yourself if you want to leave this place. But I hope you will come with me, Ryan. The road ahead won't be an easy one, but I

believe, truly believe, that it is a road that you have to take. And I believe that, by the time you get to the end of it, you'll be glad that you went.'

'I need to think about this.'

'Of course, take all of the time that you need.'

Ryan walked back around the hill, leaving Lisa by the entrance to the cave. Once he was on the other side of the hill he could see the town and the sea again. Even from here he could hear the sound of the waves crashing on the beach. This place was idyllic, and there was no doubt that he was happy here. This world was perfect, and he really didn't want to leave it.

But he also knew that this world couldn't be real. He didn't know how it came to be, but he knew that it could not be real. It couldn't be 3rd September every day. He couldn't get by in life just doing what he wanted to and not having a job or any form of income. He would just go to a restaurant or a cafe, have anything that he wanted, and then just leave without paying. Whilst living in a world like that might be nice, he knew that a real world couldn't work like that.

But this world was so peaceful. Nothing bad seemed to happen here. The weather was always perfect. He could just relax and be happy here. And was there anything wrong in that? was there anything wrong in him wanting to be happy? What should he have to leave this place when he could be happy here?

But would he be happy here? If this place wasn't real, then that probably meant that the people in it weren't real either. That people like William and Kate weren't real. They were all really nice people, but they weren't real people. Did he really want to live the rest of his life in a fantasy world populated with fantasy people? Was that really a way to live?

There was also the question of the things that he wasn't able to remember, like how long he had been here for, and when the last time he saw his parents was. Would he be able to live without having the answers to those questions, and possibly having further questions arise that he would have the answers to?

Ryan was really reluctant to leave this place, this magical impossible place that was able to make him feel so happy and contented. But he knew that it would be wrong of him to stay here. He knew that this place wasn't real, and nor were the people in it. He knew that he wouldn't be able to stay here, knowing that everything was a lie. He knew that he had to leave, and to find out the answers as to why and how he ended up here in the first place.

Whilst he was now aware that everything about him wasn't real, there was still the question of Lisa. She seemed to be acutely aware that things were not as they seemed here. She seemed to know the truth of the matter, or, at the very least, part of the truth. But Ryan wasn't sure if she herself was real. Was she a part of this fantasy world, only someone who knew a bit more about

it? Or was she as real as she was, and, if so, how did she come to be here, and how did she seem to know things about him?

Ryan was resolved, it was now time to leave this place. He took one final look at the town, and focussed for a last time on the sound of the waves. He took a deep breath, turned around, and walked back to Lisa.

When they had arrived at the hill it was the middle of the morning, and everything about them had been bright and sunny. As he walked back to Lisa, with each step he took the world seemed to get darker. The sounds of the town, and of the sea in particular, were also slowly fading away with each step. By the time he got back to Lisa everything about them was silent, and all around them was black, all excepts the hill. The world was gone, all apart from their exit from it.

'OK,' he said, 'I'm ready to leave. I'm really scared, and I don't know what's going on here, but I know that it wouldn't be right for me to stay here. I want answers. I want to know what it was that led me here in the first place, and how I can get back to reality. Can you promise me that we'll find the truth in that cave?'

'Ryan, I'm afraid that I'm not able to make any promises. To be completely honest with you, I don't know what exactly we'll find in that cave. All I do know is that it is the start of the path out of this world, and back to the world that you came from. I don't know how long the path is, or what we'll find along the way. But what I can promise you is that I'll stick by you. I'll stay with you for as long as the path goes, until we reach the end of it. To use a cliché, I'll be with you every step of the way. You won't have to do any of this alone. So, are you ready to go?'

There was a brief moment of silence, and then Ryan said, 'Yes, I'm ready. Let's go.'

Lisa went up to his side, and took his hand in hers. They then both turned to face the entrance of the cave. Ryan looked at it with trepidation. It was just a large black hole in a green hill, which itself was now surrounded by blackness.

It was at this moment that an odd thought occurred to him. When he was younger, about 9 years old or so, he remembered watching a children's show called 'Knightmare'. The show featured children going on quests, mainly in dungeons. Whenever they moved from one room to another, or one area to another, they normally did so through portals, which were entirely black. The entrance to this cave felt like it was going to be such a portal.

The show also had a phrase that was often said by Treguard, who helped to guide the children. He felt that the phrase was particularly suited to now, and so he said it out loud, 'The only way is onwards, there is no turning back.'

'Indeed,' said Lisa. 'Let's go.'

They then started to slowly walk towards the cave. Ryan gripped Lisa's hand tightly as they got close to the entrance to the cave. He never particularly liked being surrounded by darkness, but he felt that he could trust her.

When went past the threshold of the cave he expected to find himself walking on rocks, but he knew that wasn't the case. He wasn't sure what it was he was walking on. It was firm, but it also felt soft. Their footsteps didn't make any sound.

They were now fully inside the cave. Ryan couldn't see anything in the distance, and he had no sense of how far away the walls of the cave were. He was even beginning to suspect that there were no walls to the cave.

He started to turn his head to look behind him, but then Lisa said, 'No, don't look back. That world is gone now, there's nothing there. Keep looking in front of you. Keep looking forward. That's where your future lies now. That is where you'll find the answers that you're looking for.'

They kept on walking at a steady pace. Ryan had no idea how far it would be before they got to where it was that they needed to go. But he knew that if he just kept putting one foot in front of the other he would eventually get to wherever it was that they needed to be.

Ryan quickly lost all sense of time. He had no idea if they had been walking for only a few minutes, or for several hours. He just kept on going, placing his trust fully in Lisa. He knew that he just had to keep on going, one foot in front of the other, always going onwards, there was no turning back.

Eventually, he could see a light in the distance. It was a bright golden colour. It was only very small at first, but it gradually got bigger, as though it were the end of a tunnel that they were walking down.

They quickened their pace towards it. As they got closer to it, Ryan could see some branches covering the exit to the tunnel, and some foliage on the other side of what looked like a path.

They ran down the last part of the tunnel, and passed by the branches at the end. They found themselves in some woodland. It was clear overhead, and they were on a path that went through the woodland.

'Where are we?' asked Ryan. 'Are we back in the real world? Am I back home?'

'I'm not sure,' said Lisa. 'I think we should choose a direction and walk down it until we find something.'

Ryan looked about them. The path went to the left and the right. Either way looked just as good as the other. He looked behind them, and there was now no trace of the tunnel that they had just walked down. There was just a wall of rock there.

Ryan knew that he had to choose one of the two directions, but he didn't know how to choose. In the end he decided to place his hand in his pocket, and he took out a coin. He was almost surprised when he did this, as he was sure that there hadn't been a coin in there before. The coin that he took out was a two shilling coin, minted in 1966. When he was a kid these were still being used as 10 pence coins, before they were redesigned with a smaller size. 'Oh,' he said, as he took it out, 'Where did this come from?'

'I don't know,' said Lisa. 'But I think it'd be a good idea if you hold onto it. If it's turned up now it might hold some significance.'

'OK. Now, let's choose which way we're going to go. Heads, we go left, and tails we go right, agreed?'

'Agreed!'

He tossed the coin up into the air, caught it, and placed it on the back of his left hand. He removed his right hand, and the coin had come up tails. 'Tails it is,' said Ryan, 'So it's off to the right.'

Ryan put the coin back in his pocket, and they both turned to the right. They started to walk down the path, at a rather sedate pace. Ryan thought that this new place, wherever it was, wasn't too bad. This woodland seemed to be just as peaceful as the town that he had just left behind him. A few birds could be heard in the trees, and, once again, there was a pleasant gentle breeze in the air that Ryan liked and was getting used to.

'Is any of this familiar to you?' asked Ryan. 'I don't recognise any of this, I don't think I've ever been somewhere quite like this.'

'I think I might have an idea of where we might be...'

'Oh, right, where?'

'Erm, it's probably best that I don't say, not at least until I'm sure.'

Ryan found this slightly annoying. He wanted to know where they were, and he wanted to know now. But he didn't want to get annoyed with Lisa and so he decided not to push her too hard. He said, 'OK, do you know how it will be?'

'If I'm right, not too long.'

They continued to walk down the path. Before too long, it started to swing round to the left. Once they had fully turned the corner, Ryan looked up, and he was utterly gobsmacked.

In the distance they could see a large town of some description. But rising up from the centre of that town was a building far larger than any other building that Ryan had ever seen. Its design also seemed to be really old fashioned, like the sort of designs you'd find in the middle ages. But the most striking aspect of the tower was its height. Ryan estimated that it was probably

somewhere in the region of 3,000 feet tall - an absolutely ridiculous height. Ryan almost felt sick just looking at it,

At the top of the tower there was a large flag flying. Its design was a bright yellow equilateral triangle on a dark red background.

Ryan turned to Lisa and asked, 'Now do you know where we are, because I've never heard of any building like this before, and I've never seen a flag like that.'

'Yes,' said Lisa, 'I know where we are, and I don't think you're going to like it.'

'Well, it's quite clear that we're not in Kansas anymore, so I suggest that you just tell me.'

'OK, but, please, don't get mad. We're not back at what you would call "home". We're not even on Earth any more. This is a planet known as Pyna. In some respects it's quite similar to Earth, such as its atmosphere is similar to the Earth's, and so we can breathe easily enough, and it's of a similar size and mass, and so the strength of the gravity is roughly the same. But in many respects it's very much not like the Earth. Whilst the world is of a similar age to the Earth, it's not as technologically advanced. Last night you were talking about the possibility of there being other worlds out there with people just as intelligent as people on Earth, but who don't have the same technology. Well, this is one such world. You won't find cars, trains, planes, TV's, computers, telephones, mobile or otherwise, or anything like that in this world. And even if it did ever get the technology to be able to send out transmissions into the universe, it would take a long time for them to be received on Earth, because Pyna is on the other side of the galaxy to the Earth.'

Ryan had a little difficulty taking all of this in. He was expecting to get home, to be able to get some answers as to why he was away from home in the first place. But instead he found himself here. 'What do you mean we're on the other side of the galaxy?! How on Earth did we get, well, so far away from the Earth?! We only walked down a tunnel! Was there some kind of wormhole in that tunnel that we didn't know about?'

'I don't know exactly how we got here, but we are here nonetheless. We can't go back to where we were, and so we're just going to have to go on.'

'Is this place even real? If nothing else it feels less real than where we were before. At least that place had the decency to masquerade as the Earth!'

There was a pause, where Lisa appeared to be thinking about how best to answer Ryan, and then she said, 'There is a real place called Pyna. It is a real and a solid a place as the Earth is. Whether this is the real Pyna, or a facsimile of it like where you were before being a facsimile of the Earth, I don't know. And there's no way for me to know, at least not yet.'

'And what are we even doing here? You said that if I went down this path I'd get home and get some answers. Instead, we've ended up here! Why are we here? Who brought us here?'

'I don't know who, or what, brought us here, or precisely why we're here. But what we should do is explore the local area, see what we can see, and see if there's anything for us to do here. There's probably some task for us to perform here, and once we've done that we'll be able to move on from this place.'

Ryan felt that this was starting to turn into a very bad episode of 'Quantum Leap', only he hoped that, unlike the lead character in that, he would eventually get home. He then said, 'Who are you, by the way? You seem to know an awful lot, but, at the same time, you also seem to have some quite shocking gaps in your knowledge. You seemed to know that the cave in the hill was the way out of the place that I was in before, but you didn't have a clue where it would take us, or what exactly it is that we have to do in order to get home!'

'I know that this must all be very confusing for you, and I wish that I did have all the answers for you, I truly do. Please, trust me when I say that I am trying to help you. And I'm not going to go back on my promise to you - I'm not going to abandon you, and I will be with you every step of the way. I'll help you find out what you're supposed to do here, and I'll help you do whatever it turns out to be.' She took hold of his hands and looked deep into his eyes. 'You won't be alone in this. We'll get through it all together.'

Ryan looked back into her eyes, and he could see that she was being honest with him. He wasn't happy that he was so far away from home, and so far away from the answers that he sought, but he could see that she was doing her best to help him. 'OK,' he said, 'So, we're here, on Pyna. What are we here for? And what on Pyna is that?!' He turned and pointed to the tower.

'That building is known simply as the Citadel. The flag flying at the top is the flag of Triceria, one of the countries on Pyna. Triceria is ruled by a council of three, with each member of the council being no more powerful than the other two - that's what the triangle represents. The red represents all of the blood spilt by Tricerians in the wars that they've had, mainly with their neighbours, Allana.'

'Nice neighbourhood. Have you been here before?'

'Yes, I've been here a few times before.'

'Would you be able to tell me what happened when you've been here before?'

'I wish I could but it's a long story. A very long story...'

'OK then. So, I guess that whatever it is that we're supposed to be doing here we're going to have to do somewhere in there.'

'Yes, probably...'

'Well, time's a-wasting. The sooner we get there, the sooner we can get on with it, and the sooner we can move on from this place.'

'OK, let's go.'

They then started walking towards the town, and the citadel. Ryan felt that, at the very least, they had some purpose now, and they weren't just going to wandering around aimlessly. Although, once they got to the town, he wasn't sure exactly what it was they would be doing. But he would follow Lisa's lead, and, all things being well, their task should hopefully become clear to them before too long.

They walked towards the town quickly, and in silence. As they got closer the tower became more and more imposing. Why anyone wanted to build a tower as tall as that was beyond Ryan. It must have taken an enormous amount of time to build, and it must have cost an awful lot of money, or whatever it was on Pyna that people used to buy things.

He then started to think about the people themselves. Would they, indeed, even be 'people' as Ryan understood them. These 'people' would be aliens to him - bone fide aliens. For all he knew they could have six legs, four arms, and three giant eyes on tentacles. Or no legs, no arms, and one eye in the middle of their head. And if either of those cases were correct, or any of the many other possibilities that didn't look human, then that could leave him in an awkward situation. But then he rationalised the fact that Lisa had been here before, and she at least looked human, and so it was most likely that the people of this world would also look human, which would at least help him to blend in.

But then he realised that blending in wouldn't be as easy as that. Even if these people looked human, they wouldn't be actual humans, and they certainly wouldn't be English like he was. They would have their own language which he wouldn't be able to understand, and they would be almost certainly dressed differently. What would they make of him and Lisa, in their strange clothes and speaking some strange language?

Well, on the language front he presumed that they'd be OK. As Lisa had been here before she was probably able to speak their language, and so she would at least be able to do the talking for them.

Before too long, they could see the gates to the city, and it wasn't too much longer before they had arrived at the gates. There were two guards in front of the gates. Ryan could see that he was right that the people of this world did at least look human. He couldn't be certain of the dress yet, but it looked like he and Lisa would stand out. These two guards were dressed in armour

reminiscent of medieval times on Earth, in keeping with the designs of the building, and so he presumed that all of the ordinary citizens in the town would also be in medieval dress.

As they approached the gates the guards approached them and said, 'Halt! Who goes there?' This took Ryan aback. Not because they had issued a challenge, but because they had issued that challenge in English. How could they possibly be speaking in English?! This was an alien world, with alien people on it. They should be talking an alien language!

Whilst all of this was going through Ryan's mind, Lisa answered the guards, saying, 'We're travellers from a nearby village, come to do some business in the city.'

'Where're your permits?'

Lisa put her hand in her pockets, and took out some papers. She gave them to the guard, who studied them closer. He then looked closely at Lisa's face, and then at Ryan's. Ryan tried to smile at the guard, as best he could. He didn't want to look suspicious, but then he thought that smiling at the guard probably wouldn't have been the best way to try and achieve that aim.

The guard then looked at the papers again, and then he turned round to the tower to the side of the gates, and shouted out, 'Let 'em in!' The gates then slowly opened, as the guard gave the papers back to Lisa. 'Be careful when you're in town miss. I'm sure you're aware of the dangers that a pretty girl like you can face in a town like this.'

'Yes, I'm perfectly aware.'

'And, if I may be so bold, I'm free when I come off shift later, and so if you would like someone to help show you around the town...'

'I'll be fine, thank you. I've been here before and I know where I'm going. And if I should get into any difficulties, I've got Ryan here to protect me, haven't I Ryan?'

'Er, yes.'

'Oh, right, are you two a couple then?'

'Oh no,' Lisa said, 'Nothing like that.'

'I see...!' The guard then looked at Ryan and said, 'If you happen to be free later I'd be happy to show you around the place if you like...'

'Er, no, you're alright...'

'That's fine. Don't worry about it.' He stood aside to allow them to pass. They went through the gate, and entered the town.

Once they were a good distance away from the gate Ryan said, 'Right, OK, more questions. Did that guard just hit on me after just hitting on you? Also, they were speaking English. Why were they speaking English? And they let us in without any trouble or hard questioning. What

was on those papers you gave him? And how did you even come to have those papers in the first place? And did that guard just hit on me?!

'OK, and... breathe! One thing at a time. No, they weren't speaking English. They were speaking a language called Kritent. And no, Kritent is not a language that just happens to sound exactly like English. It's a very unique and complex language, that doesn't actually sound like any language on Earth. But you heard it translated into English. I've seen something like this happening before. Sometimes, when people travel between worlds, they've been able to acquire a way to understand the language of the other world, and to converse with the people in it. I'm not sure how it happens, just like I don't know how exactly we reached Pyna from the place that we were in before.

'As for the papers, they appeared in my pockets at the same time as your coin appeared in yours. They said that we are Tricerian traders, and they have illustrations of what we look like. Very good illustrations, I must say. Here, have a look.' Lisa got out the papers and handed them over to Ryan.

Ryan looked at them and saw that the pictures were indeed very lifelike. He imagined that as the technology in this world wasn't very advanced, instead of people taking photos for identification purposes, they probably just got very talented artists to do them instead, an idea that he was impressed with.

He looked at the papers further, and saw that he was able to read them perfectly easily - the translation powers that he'd acquired clearly worked with the written word as well as the spoken. He saw that his name was indeed recorded on the papers as Ryan, but that Lisa's name was recorded as Liana. 'Why doesn't it have your real name on here?'

'My real name is quite well known in this world. If these papers were to have my real name on them then we could find ourselves in a spot of bother. So, remember, whilst we're here, you must refer to me as Liana, and not as Lisa.' She took the papers back from Ryan.

'Who came up with these papers?'

Lisa shrugged her shoulders and said, 'I'm not sure. But they're here, so it's probably best that we don't question them and just get on with things.

'And, in answer to your other question from earlier, yes, that guard did just hit on you. The people of this world aren't quite as hung up on sexuality as the people on Earth are. Homosexuality and bisexuality have long been accepted on this world as being perfectly normal. Men can even marry other men here, and women can marry other women, and nobody thinks anything else of it.'

Ryan thought that another of his theories about alien races might be right - even without the same sort of technology that humans have on the Earth, they can still be just as intelligent, and sometimes even more intelligent than humans.

'So,' he said, 'Where to now? Do those papers give any indication as to where we're supposed to go?'

'I'm afraid not, they just say that we're general traders. I suggest that we just take a look around and see what we can see.'

'Very well then, let's go.'

The town was fairly bustling, with quite a lot of people going about their business. As they walked through the town Ryan saw quite a few colourful people about. Whilst some people were in what he would call traditional medieval dress, there were all sorts of variety of dress about. There wasn't anyone who was dressed in the same style that he and Lisa were dressed, but the clothes that they were wearing were no more different from what everyone else was wearing. He felt confident that no one would take issue with them about the clothes that they were wearing.

As they were walking along a man walked past them, wearing a long green dress and nothing on his feet. He looked at Ryan and Lisa and said, 'Morning!'

Ryan replied with, 'Good morning...' The man kept on smiling, and went on his way. Ryan turned to Lisa and said, 'This place certainly does seem to be very enlightened.'

'Yes, in some ways it is.'

They kept on walking, but there was nothing in the town that stood out for them. Nothing that seemed to call out to them to get involved. Nothing in particular for them to do.

'Now what?' asked Ryan. 'We can't just keep wandering about aimlessly forever.'

'True,' said Lisa. 'Let's find a tavern and sit down for a bit. I don't know about you, but I'm feeling a little hungry.'

'Yeah, I am feeling a little peckish, actually.'

They walked for a little while, before they came across an old tavern in a side street. Once they were inside they could see that, whilst the town outside was quite busy, in here things were fairly quiet. There were a few other people inside, who were mainly busy eating meals quietly, and there were plenty of spare tables. Ryan and Lisa went and sat at one of them.

Ryan had a good look around the tavern. It was the sort of place that would have fitted in quite well in the English countryside. He just hoped that the food tasted as good as the food that he remembered eating at pubs in the English countryside.

Before long a waitress came over to see them. She was wearing a long white dress, had long brown curly hair, and had breasts so large that Ryan was sure that they must be giving her some sort of balance problem. 'Hi there! What can I get you two?'

'We'll just have two of whatever's today's special is. And two ales to wash them down with.'

'Coming right up!' She went off to fetch their orders.

Ryan turned to Lisa and asked, 'Why did you just ask for the specials? You don't even know what they are.'

'Trust me, when you come to places like this it's always best to just ask for whatever the special is. It normally means that it's fresh.'

'Oh, right.' All of a sudden Ryan was starting to lose his appetite.

In no time at all the waitress came back with two tankards of ale and plonked them on the table. She then went back to the kitchen, and then returned with two large bowls of some kind of stew, and two large chunks of bread to go with them. 'Enjoy your meal!' she said, before returning to the bar.

Ryan looked at the food and the ale for a little while. The ale looked like it was dirty, and the stew was a dark brown colour. Although, that said, it didn't smell too bad - its aroma certainly wasn't vomit inducing.

The cutlery was already on the table. He took the spoon, and stirred the stew with it for a little while. Then he scooped up a less lumpy part of the stew, and put it into his mouth. He moved it around his mouth for a while. It had a spicy, meaty taste to it. He then swallowed it.

'How is it?' asked Lisa.

'It's OK,' said Ryan, 'But I think the chef here could do with taking some lessons from Grannie Lizzie.'

Lisa then tasted a little of hers. 'Oh, this isn't too bad. I've had far worse before in places like this.'

They then proceeded to eat the rest of the meal. The bread was a little stale, and the ale was very weak, but overall Ryan was able to satisfy his hunger for the time being.

Once they were done the waitress came back and asked them, 'Would you be wanting any pudding?'

Lisa replied, 'No, that will be all, thank you. How much do we owe you?'

'That'll be two gold and two copper.'

Lisa put her hand in her pockets, and produced two gold coins and four copper coins (rather than two), which she gave to the waitress.

'Thank you very much! Come again!' The waitress then returned to the bar.

Ryan then said to Lisa, 'I take it people tip here as well.'

'Yes, that's right.'

'And I suppose you just happened to acquire some money in your pockets as we arrived in this world?'

'Yeah, something like that.'

At that moment, some soldiers came into the tavern. They looked around the room at everyone, and then their eyes settled on Ryan and Lisa. 'You two!' said one of them, as they came over. 'Would you happen to be looking for any work?'

Ryan was about to say that they weren't, but then Lisa said, 'What sort of work are you talking about?'

'It's up at the Citadel. We need as many able bodies as we can to do some urgent repairs on the building. Are you interested or not?'

'Count us in. Where do we report?'

'You can come with us now, if you're ready.'

'Yes, that's fine. Lead the way.'

'Follow me.'

Ryan and Lisa got up and followed the soldiers out of the tavern. They then started to walk through the town, with Ryan and Lisa walking a little behind the soldiers.

Ryan whispered to Lisa, 'Why did you say that we were looking for work?'

'The soldiers are always looking for people to do repair work on the Citadel. A building that big always needs a lot of work done on it. The work involved in keeping it in a good condition makes painting the Forth Bridge look easy. We didn't have anything better to be doing, and we need to try and find what it is that we're supposed to do. If there is anything here for us, then going inside the Citadel would be a good way to go about trying to find it.'

Ryan nodded to show his understanding.

It was quite a long way to the Citadel. One advantage about the building being so big is that you were always able to see it whilst you were in the town, and so when you were heading towards it you could always see how far away from it you were. The path the soldiers took them on was long and winding. They went along some main streets, then turned into some side streets, and even a few alleyways. There were even some paths that they took them on where there was only room for them to walk in single file. Their route also took them alongside, over, and, in one case, even under various canals. The canals themselves seemed to be fairly busy, with boats of various sizes travelling along them. And Ryan didn't see even one upturned shopping trolley in them.

Eventually, they could see that they were now getting very close to the Citadel, as it now occupied all of the sky to the left of them. As he looked up at the Citadel he turned to Lisa and asked, 'I know that this place is nowhere near as technologically advanced as Earth is, but please tell me that they've invented some form of lift system?'

'Oh yes, they've invented a form of lift.'

'Oh, that's good. For a moment there I thought we were going to have to climb a load of stairs.'

'I only said that they had invented a form of lift. I didn't say that it had been installed in the Citadel.'

'You are joking, aren't you?' Lisa just looked at him and smiled. 'Please tell me that you're joking.' Lisa still just smiled. 'You're not joking, are you?'

'Fraid not. Still, look on the bright side. If they do send us up to one of the higher floors, the exercise will do you good!'

'Are you trying to say I'm fat?'

'Well, not fat exactly, but I have been feeling this slight gravitational pull coming from your direction!'

'Oi! That's just mean!'

'I'm sorry, but it was just too easy.'

Ryan just smiled back at her. At the very least it looked like she was going to be a very pleasant companion to have on this journey of his.

Once they had arrived at the Citadel the guards went up to a table nearby, and picked up two small blue disks, each about 5cm in diameter. Both of them had three small parallel groves in the centre of them. The guards gave one each to Ryan and Lisa. Their leader said, 'These are your passes. They may only be valid for today, but make sure that you hand them back in at this table at the end of the day, otherwise you won't get paid. Now, what are your names?'

Lisa answered with, 'I'm Liana, and this is Ryan.'

The guard got out a piece of paper, and what looked like a pencil, as he wrote down their names. Then he said, 'Right, you're to each take one of these bags, and then report to the 282nd floor. You'll receive further instructions there.'

He handed each of them a bag, which Ryan thought weighed a tonne, and then directed them towards the entrance. They showed their passes to the guard that was on duty, and then they went inside.

There were clear signs pointing to where the stairs leading up were, and then they proceeded to climb. 'The 282nd floor,' said Ryan, 'That sounds pretty high.'

'It is.'

'Erm, how many floors does the Citadel have?'

'300.'

'Oh, right...'

As they climbed each floor they went past a window that was next to the stairwell. With each floor Ryan looked out of the window, and saw themselves getting progressively higher.

He asked Lisa, 'Why did they choose to build the Citadel as big as this? Surely no one needs a building this big, especially one without lifts.'

'The Tricerians built it mainly as a status symbol, to show that they were now a major power in the world. When it was originally built it didn't have much in the way of a functional purpose, but it was visible for miles around. Triceria has always had a long rivalry with its neighbour, Allana, and the Tricerians hoped that the Allanans would see their great citadel and tremble.'

'And did they?'

'No. They were aware of the huge amount of resources a building like this would take to both build and maintain. They could see that it would end up being a huge drain on Triceria, which indeed it has. Which is why Allana is now the richer and more powerful country of the two. The Tricerians feel like they have no choice but to try and maintain the Citadel. To scale any of it down, or to allow any parts of it to fall into disrepair would appear to them to be a symbol of weakness, which is now how the Citadel is viewed by other nations.'

'You said that it didn't have much of a function when it was built, but what is it used for now?'

'Now it gets used for all sorts of things. All of the various departments of the Tricerian government are based in the building. The Council of Three who rule Triceria all live within the Citadel and never leave it. Various families of the Tricerian aristocracy live in the building. The Tricerian army is housed and trained here. And yet there is still much of the building that is left empty. It has been said that there have been occasions where ordinary citizens have broken into the citadel and squatted in one of the empty rooms for a time. Whilst the soldiers do patrol the various corridors of the building, Triceria has nowhere near enough soldiers to be able to patrol all of it. It has been said that because no one has ever explored the whole building it still holds many secrets that remain to be discovered.'

'How old is the Citadel?'

'Construction started somewhere around 500 years ago. It reached its present height about 200 years ago. But building on the Citadel has never been considered to be completed. There is always some building work going on, and as soon as one part is completed there's a previous part

that needs some maintenance work done on it. Despite the huge drain the Citadel has been on Tricerian resources, it is amazing that they've been able to carry on working on the building for as long as they have.'

They continued to climb the stairs, which seemed very dull and anonymous. Each flight of steps looked just like the last flight. The only things that were changing were the floor numbers that they passed, and the view from the windows, as they got ever higher.

By the 30th floor Ryan said, 'Can we take a break for a bit, I'm exhausted! I have no idea how on Earth I'm going to make it all the way to the 282nd floor!'

They stopped, but Lisa said, 'It's probably best that we don't take a break, at least not yet. We've still got a very long climb ahead of us, and if we take too long over it by the time we get to the 282nd floor it'll be too late for us to do anything, and we'll just be sent straight back down. And the soldiers don't take too kindly to people they recruit to work on the building who take too long to get to where they're supposed to be going. Come on, let's move on. We'll take a short break once we get to the 50th floor. You might find that there's a nice surprise there...

'Oh, and remember, you're not on Earth, you're on Pyna, so try and avoid saying things like "how on Earth." You don't want the locals to hear you saying that!'

'Right, OK, sorry.'

Reluctantly, Ryan started to climb the stairs again, with Lisa by his side. He wondered what this surprise was going to be. But he didn't get his hopes up. He remembered once that he was walking with a friend across London to a meeting of a book club. They were in some strange corner of north London at night, and his friend said that they would show them something awesome that was nearby. Ryan was curious as to what this awesome thing could possibly be. It turned out that all it was the cafe that they were heading to in the first place, which slightly annoyed Ryan. He suspected that Lisa's surprise would probably just be something like the view from the window or something that was equally as expected.

His legs were started to ache as each floor went past them. He marked off the milestones in his head - the 30th floor, the 35th floor, the 40th floor. His legs started to feel as though they had lead weights in them, and the bag that the soldier had given them seemed to be getting heavier. However, he noticed that Lisa didn't seem to be having any difficulty at all. Despite her slender build she still looked like she had only been out for a gentle stroll in the country, rather than an arduous climb up a building far bigger than any other.

He started to slow down, but he decided that he would be determined to keep on going, at least to the 50th floor. Even if there wasn't much of a surprise waiting for them on the 50th floor, Lisa had at the very least promised that they would be able to take a break. But even after

that he knew that they still had a long way to go - 232 floors to be precise. He had no idea how he could possibly survive climbing all of them.

Each floor now seemed like a milestone in itself. By the time he got to the 45th floor he found that he really did not want to go on any further. His body just did not want to go on any more. He supposed that this moment must have similar to what marathon runners often refer to as the wall, and all you have to do is just push through it - there's no other option. And so Ryan pushed on, through the wall, and before he knew it he was on the 46th floor - just four more before the break.

He kept on going, one step at a time, and one floor at a time. The 47th, 48th, and 49th floor went past. He was almost there, just a few more steps to go...

Then the 50th floor came into sight. This floor looked different to all of the other floors that they had just climbed up. They were all boring and monotonous, but this one seemed wider and brighter. There were many more people about on this floor.

As they reached the 50th floor they saw a table with what looked like a large steaming cauldron on it, and a large fat balding man with a thick bushy moustache standing behind it. Lisa led them towards the table, where the man greeted them with a smile.

'Ah!' he said, 'I take it you're newly recruited workers?'

'Yes that's right,' said Lisa. 'We're to report to the 282nd floor.'

'I hear they're quite a bit of difficulty on that floor - very few people are able to make the climb all the way up there.'

'Well, we've been having a bit of difficulty so far, but we're doing alright, aren't we Ryan?'

'Yes...' said Ryan, completely out of breathe. He was still amazed that Lisa didn't seem to be the least bit tired.

The man then said, 'Well, you can take a short break here, and have some of my broth. I can guarantee that with this inside of you you'll find it a lot easier to make it up to the 282nd floor.' He lifted a ladle out of the cauldron, and used it to fill two large cups. He handed one each to Lisa and Ryan, and then they went to the left and sat down on a bench.

'Drink up,' said Lisa. 'Trust me, you'll need it.'

The liquid in the cup had a milky, powdery quality to it. Ryan did as Lisa said, and started to drink it. As soon as the liquid passed his lips Ryan suddenly started to feel more alive. He could feel the warmth of the liquid filling up his body, and reaching all the way down to his legs, making them feel alive again.

'Wow!' he said. 'What's in this?'

'I'm not sure exactly, but I think it's something that's concocted from something that's similar to the potatoes of your world. Your legs should now have the strength to take you up many more floors, hopefully all the way up to the 282nd floor. Now, was this a surprise worth waiting for?'

Ryan had to admit that it was. He hadn't felt as alive as this for quite a while. He now felt like he had the strength to sprint up a thousand floors, and not just climb another 232.

Once they had finished their broth they handed their cups back to the man, and then turn to face the stairs again. They quickly began to resume their climb.

This time Ryan didn't feel as if the stairs were taking the strength out of his legs. Earlier, even the first few floors were starting to tire him. Now, they had gone up a further five floors, and his legs felt as strong as ever.

The floors were now starting to zip past. In no time at all they had reached the 60th floor, and then the 70th and the 80th. Ryan was amazed that he now had such stamina, after what he had been feeling 50 floors further down.

He looked out of the window and saw that they were now extremely high up - higher above the ground than he had ever been in a building back on Earth. The breeze up here was now a lot stronger, and none of the windows had any glass in them, and so there was no escaping it.

Ryan was amazed by the view. He could see the town below them, surrounded by a large wall, but beyond that wall was what looked like unspoilt countryside for miles around. He could also see a forest nearby that had a path running through it, which he presumed was the same forest where he and Lisa had arrived in Pyna.

He turned away from the window and started to climb again. He still had his strength, and they made quick work of the next twenty floors. Then, before them, came the 100th floor.

As with the 50th floor, this floor was far grander than the standard floors below them. This one had what looked like red velvet with gold trim on the walls. There weren't that many people about on this floor, and those that were here all looked like they were extremely posh, as they were wearing clothes that were similar to what aristocrats and other important people wore in the paintings from Elizabethan times that Ryan had seen.

'Come,' said Lisa, 'We can afford to take a little break.' She led them onto the floor.

It had a large hall with a tall ceiling, from which several ornate chandeliers hung down. One side of the hall was a large entrance from which they had just come. The other three walls each had a large painting on them, each one about 15 feet tall, and a large door underneath them. Lisa led Ryan to a set of benches in the middle of the room. Ryan felt distinctly out of place in this hall, but Lisa did seem in the least bit fazed.

She then said, 'The three paintings that you can see are of the three founding members of Triceria, from which the Council of Three are descended from.' She indicated the wall to the left, which had a painting of an old man with thick, bushy brown beard. 'That is Cramtonus, of the Kravern family. It was his family that owned a large fleet, which eventually became Triceria's merchant navy.' She next indicated the wall to their right, which had a painting of a slender, clean shaven young man. 'That is Triron, of the Operian family. His family owned the land that the city stands on today.' She next indicated the far wall, which had a painting of a woman who appeared to be in her twenties. 'That is Yiarna, of the Loverian family. Her family provided much of the raw materials and labour to build the city and the first part of the Citadel

'The three families have ruled Triceria ever since. Everyone in the city can trace their lineage to at least one of these three people. Whilst the general populace are allowed to inter-marry as they please, laws have been passed which forbid any heirs to the seat of the Council from marrying anyone who's directly descended from either of the other two families.'

'Oh, right, does that mean that there's inbreeding going on amongst their royal families?'

'Not at all. The heirs to the council seats usually marry someone from another country, in order to avoid in breeding and being linked by blood to the other two families. They keep the three families separate like this because if they were to inter-marry then it might be seen as two of the families uniting against the third family, and Triceria was founded on power being shared equally between the three families.'

'Of course, in practice, this power sharing doesn't always necessarily happen. In order for any law to be passed, or any decision to be made, it requires at least two of the council members to agree on it. On several occasions two of the council members have clubbed together in order to shut the third member out, thus effectively denying them their voice. This has often led to tensions within Triceria, and for many people to call for an alternative form of government.'

'What's behind the doors?'

'On this floor it's the staff offices of the Council members, staffed mainly with people dealing with any letters that ordinary citizens write to the Council members. The Council members themselves would never normally venture this far down into the building.'

Ryan continued to look round the room. If the Citadel was this elaborately decked out on the 100th floor, which was used mainly for writing letters, he wondered what the upper floors of the building must be like.

They then got up from the bench and returned to the stairs. Ryan was still full of energy. He asked Lisa, 'There wasn't anything like drugs in that broth we drank, was there?'

'No, it's nothing like that. Nothing that would be deemed an illegal drug on your world. It's just that some of the foodstuffs here have properties that would be unheard of on Earth.'

They proceeded to climb again, which Ryan was now finding to be fairly easy going. He quickly glanced out of the window at every floor that they passed, seeing themselves getting ever higher. He wondered how the building survived against strong winds, particularly towards the top. Evidently, it did survive impressively well otherwise the building wouldn't be as old as it is, and so it must have been extremely well designed and built, even if it did need to be constantly maintained.

In what seemed no time at all they reached the 150th floor - the halfway point of the building. Unlike the elaborate hall that had greeted them back down on the 100th floor, there was nothing anything near as elaborate on this floor. Instead there was just a long, grey corridor leading away from the stairwell. 'Come,' said Lisa, 'Let's have a look down here.'

They then walked down the corridor, which had a number of anonymous wooden doors leading off from it. At the end of the corridor, which was about 50 feet long, there was a stone archway, and a small set of spiral steps just beyond the archway. Lisa led Ryan up the steps, which opened up onto what was a viewing platform, with commanding views over the surrounding area.

'Isn't it beautiful?' asked Lisa.

'Yes, it is,' said Ryan. But he was not starting to feel a little uneasy, a little queasy. There was something about being this high up that was making him start to feel very uncomfortable, and he didn't like it. He couldn't quite make out what it was exactly that was making him feel this discomfort, he just knew that he didn't particularly like being here.

'Come on,' he said, 'Let's not stick around here too long. The sooner we keep going, the sooner we'll get to the 282nd floor.'

Lisa smiled and nodded, and then they turned back down the spiral stairs, down the corridor, and back to the main stairwell.

As they continued their climb Ryan found himself dwelling on the discomfort that he had felt. He didn't think that it had anything to do with the height, he had always been good with heights. It was something else, something that he just felt incapable of placing his finger on. Whilst it continued to bug him, he just wasn't able to find an answer to what it was.

Once they were up to the 200th floor they found that the stairwell that they were on came to an end. Lisa explained, 'Not everyone is able to go beyond the 200th floor. All of the really important people are beyond this floor, and there's a separate stairwell that serves those floors.'

On the 200th floor itself was a large iron door, with guards in front of it. Lisa approached the guards and said, 'We're here to do some maintenance work up on the 282nd floor.'

The guard simply responded with, 'Passes please.'

Lisa and Ryan showed them their passes, which the guard was easily satisfied with. He handed them back to Lisa and Ryan, then turned to the other guards and said, 'Let them through!'

The iron door opened inwards, and Lisa and Ryan passed through. Once the door had closed behind them Ryan said, 'They let us in quite easily. If only important people are allowed to go beyond here, how come we've been let through so easily? We were just recruited off of the street. For all they know we could be anyone, intent on getting in to the Citadel with the intent of getting up to mischief.'

'True. However, when guards recruit people from the streets to come and do maintenance work at the Citadel they are supposed to do a number of checks to make sure that the people that they're recruiting are going to be suitable and won't be causing any trouble. But as our clothes and our faces were fairly clean, they probably just assumed that we'd be OK - trouble makers in this town generally aren't well dressed and clean. They were probably also in a hurry. The various units of guards get paid a commission on the people that they recruit. The more people that they recruit, and the better the work that those people do, the higher their commission. The passes that were given to us indicate which unit recruited us. The guards are often so keen to get as many people working under commission for them that they often forget, or simply don't bother with, the various checks that they have to perform. That said, there normally isn't much in the way of mischief that someone could do and get away with once their past the 200th floor. Everything up here is fairly well guarded, and a person would be hard pressed to be able to move around the corridors without eventually being caught.'

'Has anyone ever managed to break in this far and get away with it?'

There was a pause before Lisa said, 'Yes, it has been done.'

'And can you tell me more about it?'

'No. Now, come on, we have to keep going!'

She started to walk off. As she did Ryan called out, 'Oh come on, you can't leave me hanging on a cliff-hanger like that! You've got to tell me more about it!' She said nothing, and Ryan started to run after her. He then said, 'I know! I was you, wasn't it?'

'I'm not saying a word!'

'It was! You've broken in before!'

'I'm not confirming anything!' She had a cheeky smile on her face. 'Now, come on, we're almost there. There's not far to go now.'

The design of the 200th floor was quite different to the other floors. Whereas all of those floors had predominantly been made from stone, it appeared that these floors were made primarily from metal, something like iron, or maybe even steel. The technology of this world may not be as far advanced as the technology back on Earth, but it certainly seemed that they must have had some decent industry if they were capable of making steel.

The main hall on the 200th floor itself was quite sparse, and there was no one else about. There were several doors leading off from this hall, but Lisa headed straight on to the other side of the hall, where Ryan could see the start of the next set of stairs that they had to climb.

This set of stairs was fairly similar to the previous set that they had been climbing. It too had windows looking out at every floor. Only they were now on the other side of the building, and outside of these windows they could see the vast shadow that the Citadel made. Ryan looked down out of a window, and saw that at the bottom of the citadel on this side wasn't part of a town, but a deep chasm. It was so deep and they were so far up that he couldn't see just how deep it was, but it looked like it was at least a thousand feet in itself.

During their previous climb the stairwell had been fairly deserted. This was now no longer the case. Lisa and Ryan now often had to step aside as some soldiers were coming up or going down the stairs. Occasionally one of them would stop them and demand to see their passes, and let them go on their way once they had inspected them. Ryan could see that security was obviously a lot tighter on these higher floors.

Before long they found themselves on the 250th floor, just 32 floors away from their target. Amazingly, Ryan still felt like his legs were still strong. He couldn't believe how weak he had been feeling all the way back down on the 30th floor. The broth that he had had back on the 50th floor clearly was some very strong stuff.

There wasn't anything especially interesting for them to see on the 250th floor. There was another iron door that was guarded, but Lisa just led them past the guards. Once they were out of earshot of them she said to Ryan, 'No one knows what goes on the 250th floor, only that it is only accessible to the most important people in Tricerian society.'

They continued their climb, and, although Ryan wasn't feeling particularly tired, he was glad that it was almost over, as it was starting to get a little monotonous. He was also a little apprehensive as to what work they would be asked to do once they actually got to the 282nd floor.

They quickly made their way up the last few floors, and eventually emerged out on the 282nd floor. Lisa led them off the floor, and down a short corridor. At the end there was a wooden door that was wide open, and in a room inside there were a number of guards overseeing the

work of several people. They saw Lisa and Ryan enter the room, and one of them approached them. 'You here to work?'

'Yes,' said Lisa, 'Here are our passes.' She handed the guard her pass, and Ryan did the same.

The guard inspected them, and then handed them back. He then said, 'What are your names?'

'I'm Liana and this is Ryan.'

'Very well, pass those bags to me.' They did as he said. He opened them, and they each contained a number of tools. Some of these looked recognisable to Ryan, like a hammer and a wrench, but some of the others looked very strange to him and he couldn't figure out what they could be used for.

The guard then said, 'Right, we haven't got much for you to do in here specifically. We're replacing the windows in this room, but it's a complicated task and the men we have in here are skilled in the work. But we do need some people to run some errands for us. Seeming as you've been able to make it all the way up to the 282nd floor without any problems, this shouldn't be too difficult for you. Now, are you up for that?'

'Absolutely,' said Lisa.

Ryan thought that it was a little odd that the guard was impressed that they had made it all the way up to the 282nd floor. Whilst he himself had been pretty shattered by the time he had got to the 30th floor, and getting up to the 50th floor had been a struggle for him, the broth that he had had on the 50th floor had given him all of the energy that he needed to get up here, and then some. He felt that the broth must surely have been offered to anyone else who was attempting to climb the tower, and so there was no reason why the guard should have been particularly impressed with him and Lisa. However, he decided that it was probably best if he didn't say anything, and just got on with things.

The guard then said, 'Right, you'll have to stick together when you run these errands - casual labourers aren't permitted to go wandering about the Citadel on their own, but we tolerate two casuals travelling with each other. But, be warned, if you are caught wandering about by yourselves, you will be expelled from the building. Do you understand?'

Ryan and Lisa both said, 'Yes,' in unison.

'Very well, the first task I have for you is to take a letter to the guard on the viewing platform. He'll then give you further instructions.'

'OK,' said Ryan, 'Give us the letter and we'll be on our way.'

'Hold your horses there, son! I haven't written it yet!' The other guards all chuckled.

The guard then walked over to a table, where he quickly wrote the letter, which Ryan felt was more of a brief note than a letter. He then handed it to Ryan, who put it safely in his pocket. The

guard then said, 'Whatever you do, do not open or read that letter. Reading the private correspondence of the Tricerian army is a very serious offence. Right, now, be off with you.'

Ryan and Lisa turned around, and made their way back to the stairwell. Ryan then said, 'Well, this isn't too bad. I thought that they might have given us something backbreaking to do. I don't mind carrying a few letters around.'

'Yes,' said Lisa, 'We do appear to have got off quite lightly. Plus it will give us an opportunity to see some other parts of the building. Come on, let's go.'

They proceeded to climb the stairs again, and in no time at all they were on the 285th floor. Here there was another observation platform, similar to the one that they had briefly stopped at during their climb up the Citadel. Standing out on the platform was a single guard, who appeared to be keeping an eye on things in the distance.

As they approached the guard he turned around to look at them. Ryan took the letter out of his pocket, offered it to the guard and said, 'Hi, we're working in the building today. We've been asked to pass this letter to you.'

'Very well,' said the guard, 'Hand it over.' Ryan did what he was told.

The guard read the note, smiled, and then stepped aside. There was a table on the platform, with some paper and writing implements, and he then started to write his own letter. He then handed this letter to Ryan and said, 'I need you to take this to the Head Guard on the 262nd floor. Go straight there, and don't delay.'

'Yes sir,' said Ryan.

Just as they were about to leave, Ryan looked up, and he saw a large stone ledge jutting out from the Citadel into open space. Once he and Lisa were back inside he asked her, 'Why do they have a ledge sticking out into nowhere?'

'Oh, that's what they use for executions.'

'Executions!'

'Yes. Here they don't hang or behead anyone. They just bring them up to the top of the Citadel, and then throw them off the ledge. It's quite an efficient way of killing someone - it's always successful, and as they land in the chasm there's no mess for them to clear up. Not that I approve of capital punishment though. In fact I'm absolutely against it. But if the state is going to insist on executing someone, there are far worse ways that they could go about it.'

'Have you ever seen anyone thrown off of the ledge?'

Lisa fell silent for a moment, as though she were remembering something, and then said, 'Well, in a manner of speaking...'

'What do you mean by "in a manner of speaking"?!'

Lisa just said, 'Come on, we're wasting time. We've got a letter to deliver.' She then proceeded to lead them down the stairs.

Ryan was starting to have mixed feelings about this world. On the one hand it seemed quite civilised and enlightened in some respects, such as their attitude towards homosexuality and bisexuality. But, on the other hand, they did seem to be very wrong. Executing people seemed bad enough, but to do it by throwing off of an extremely tall building just felt extremely barbaric and wrong. It may be successful, and not leave any mess for them to clean up, but it must be horrible for the person being executed. It was an awful long way down, and it must take a long time for them to hit the bottom, and the landing of course wouldn't be the least bit pleasant. He wondered what was at the bottom of the chasm, and what became of the bodies that landed there. He also just how many people were executed in this manner, and just what Lisa had meant by what she said about whether or not she had witnessed any executions.

He decided that it was probably best if he didn't press the issue, and so he didn't say anything more about it. He just walked down the stairs silently until they got to the 262nd floor.

Once they were on the 262nd floor they saw that there were quite a few people about. They appeared to be building something in the middle of the room, but didn't have a clue as to what it could be. It looked a little like a giant horse, but Ryan was far from certain if that is what it was meant to be, and he had even less of a clue as to what its purpose might be.

There were quite a few guards about the room, but on a raised platform at the far end he saw three guards looking over everything. He presumed that they must be the ones in charge. Two of these guards were female, and the armour that they were wearing was quite different to what the men were wearing. But, unfortunately for Ryan, they were fully covered up, and nothing like the female warriors that he had often seen portrayed in the fantasy literature that he read.

Ryan and Lisa approached the platform, and Ryan went up to the male guard and, taking out the letter from his pocket, he said, 'I was asked to give this to the Head Guard on this floor.'

The guard just looked at him, and then one of the female guards said, 'I'm the Head Guard on this floor! Come here!'

Ryan suddenly felt incredibly guilty for just assuming that it was the man that was in charge. He approached the real Head Guard, and handed her the letter. She opened it, looked at it, looked at Ryan, looked at the letter again, and then looked long and hard at Ryan. She then said, 'Wait here.'

She then walked off to a room out the back. Whilst she was gone the other female guard walked up to Ryan and said, 'Don't feel too bad. You're not the first person to make that mistake.'

'Yeah, but I feel really bad about it.'

'Try not to. So, have you been working in the Citadel for long.'

'No, this is my first day.'

'Oh right.' The guard smiled at him, and Ryan thought that she was really pretty. 'When I'm off shift later I could show you around if you like...'

Ryan had to admit that he liked the thought of this, and then his mind started to wander onto what she might have on under her armour.

Lisa then said, 'That's very kind, but I'm afraid we're busy.'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' said the guard. 'Are you two...?'

'No, we're not!' said Ryan. 'And I think I might like to have someone show me about the place.' He looked at the guard and smiled, and she smiled back.

Just then the Head Guard came back, and she now had another letter in her hand. She handed it to Ryan and said, 'Here, take this to the guard on the 275th floor.' Ryan took the letter, and then looked back to the other female guard. The Head Guard then said, 'Immediately!'

Lisa tugged his arm, and started to lead him away. Ryan turned back to look at the other female guard, who smiled and winked at him.

Once they had left the room and were back on the stairwell he said to Lisa, 'What did you do that for?!'

'Because we're not here for you to flirt! We're here to find out what it is you're supposed to do in this world.'

'But I was just trying to make a friend! For all we know she might have had something to do with what we're supposed to be doing here.'

'No, she doesn't.'

'How do you know that?'

'I just do. Now, come on, loverboy!'

'Oi, don't call me loverboy!'

'I will if you don't flirt with anyone else!'

'I was not flirting!'

'Yeah, yeah...'

She then led them back up the stairs towards the 275th floor, whilst Ryan made sure that the image of the guard who was now his new friend was burned into his mind. He hoped that he would get to see her again at some point before they left this place.

Before long they arrived on the 275th floor. Here there were only a few workers, who looked like they were replacing one of the doors. There was only one guard here, and so there was no

doubt about who he was supposed to hand the letter to. He approached the guard and said, 'Hi, I have a letter for you.'

The guard took the letter, read it, and then said, 'Wait there a minute.' He then took out a piece of paper from his pocket, and then proceeded to write another letter on it. Ryan was now getting used to this pattern, although he was curious as to just what it was that was being written in all of these letters that he and Lisa were taking about the place.

When the guard had finished writing his letter he handed it to Ryan and said, 'Here, I need you to take this up to the 290th floor. When you arrive on the floor, take the first door on your right. Walk down the corridor, and then go to the third door on your left. Knock on the door three times, and then wait for someone to call you in. You then give the letter to the guard in there. Now, have you got all that?'

'Yes, absolutely,' said Ryan.

'Well, be on your way then.'

Ryan then turned round, and then he and Lisa went back to the stairwell. He then asked Lisa, 'Do you have any idea how many more of these letters we're going to have to cart around?'

'None at all I'm afraid.'

'What, no more letters?'

'No, no idea as to how many more.'

'Oh right... Do you think we'll get any more for the 262nd floor?' Ryan said with a smile.

'Absolutely not! Seriously, you're a typical boy, aren't you?' It was clear by the smile on her face that Lisa wasn't actually annoyed with him.

'Well, you know, I can't help it, I was born that way.'

'Come on, let's get up to the 290th floor...' They then proceeded to climb the stairs again.

Once they were on the 290th floor they took the first door on the right as the guard had instructed, and then they went up to the third door on the left. Ryan then knocked on the door three times loudly.

No answer came from within.

Ryan looked at Lisa and whispered, 'Do you think I should knock again?'

'Erm... no. Just wait here for a bit. I'm sure they must have heard you.'

They stood for a bit, but still no answer came. Ryan then said, 'Are you sure they heard me?'

'Well, unless they're deaf I can't see how they could not have heard you.'

'Hmm, should I try knocking again? I'm not sure... I'm going to knock again... I think... Oh, I don't know. What do you think we should do?'

'What are you looking at me for?'

'Well, you're the one that's been here before, I thought you might know what's going on here!'

'I'm sorry to disappoint you but the convention of knocking on doors is a pretty universal one. You knock on a door, and then someone usually lets you in.'

'Maybe there's isn't anyone in... Yes, that's it, that's why no one's answered! But then why would we be sent here?'

'I don't know!'

At this point they looked back to their left, and they saw a woman walking down the corridor. She was wearing a very elaborate red dress, and she wore her long blonde hair up. She approached Ryan and Lisa and asked, 'Who are you two, and what are you doing here?'

It was Lisa who answered with, 'We're casual workers who have been hired for the day, and we were instructed to deliver a letter to this room.'

'To this room?' the woman said, pointing at the door. 'Are you quite sure?'

Ryan said, 'Yes, the guard's instructions were quite clear.'

'I see,' said the woman. 'Give me the letter.'

'But I was told to deliver it -'

'Just give me the letter!'

Lisa whispered in Ryan's ear, 'Trust me, do as she says.'

Ryan handed over the letter to the woman who opened the letter and read it. 'I see,' she said. She then looked at Ryan and said, 'Open the door.'

Ryan looked at Lisa, who just nodded at him. He turned to the door, and opened it. He had been expected to see some sort of office inside, or a meeting room with a big table with lots of people around it. Instead, what he saw was unmistakably a toilet.

Ryan looked back at the woman, who said, 'You've been had. Here, take a look at this letter.'

Ryan took the letter and read it. It said, 'Hi! It's another pass the casual worker game! The current score is 4. Keep it going, let's see how long this one lasts!'

Ryan looked back up at the woman, who said, 'The guards often play this game. They try to see how long they can get a casual worker to wander about the building delivering letters before they realise what's going on. I recognise this guard's handwriting, and he's done this sort of thing before. The problem is, it only really works if there's someone on the toilet at the time the casual worker is sent to knock on the door.'

'You were lucky that the score only got to 4. I once heard that some poor sod was sent up and down the Citadel for a whole week before one of the senior guards took pity on him and told him what was going on. It can be a very cruel game sometimes.'

Ryan felt like a fool. He felt that he should have seen this one coming. Still, he had to chuckle when he thought about what would have happened if there had been someone on the toilet at the time when he had knocked. He imagined just how flustered they would have been.

Ryan then said, 'OK, so... what should we do now? We were sent up here to work. Is there anything useful that we could be doing?'

The woman looked at them for a bit, and then she said, 'Hmm, I'm not sure. Probably not to be honest. To be fair, these days they only tend to use the casual workers to carry goods and supplies up the stairs. Once they've been delivered there's usually not much left for them to do. That's why the guards invented this silly game of theirs. It helps to keep them amused at the worker's expense. But I think I might have some use for you. Follow me...'

She then led Ryan and Lisa away from the corridor, and back to the stairwell. They were already quite high up on the 290th floor, and so Ryan was surprised when the woman led them up even higher. For a brief moment Ryan thought that they were going to be taken all the way up to the 300th floor, but instead they only went as high as the 295th floor, where the woman led them down a corridor and into a side room.

'Wait here. I'll be back shortly.' She then left the room.

The room itself looked like a study, with what looked like a great antique desk dominating the room. The room also seemed to be filled with various other antiques, including a very large clock ticking away over an ancient fireplace.

Ryan walked over towards one of the windows and looked out. Here he could see the town below them, and the countryside beyond the walls, much as he had done much further down the Citadel. But here, in the distance, he was able to see another large town. He turned to Lisa and asked, 'Is that Allana?'

'No,' said Lisa, 'Allana is much further away. That town is called Ranaia I believe, and is part of the realm of Triceria. A rather reluctant part, I have to say. They have often resented Triceria having dominion over them, and for them the sight of the Citadel looking over them is a sign of oppression. They often look up at the Citadel, and the flag that flies from the very top, and curse it. Only in private, mind. They would never say anything like that out loud in public, or within earshot of a guard. That sort of thing is stamped on by the authorities.'

Ryan thought that in some ways this world could very much be like parts of Earth. Whilst opposing the authorities was perfectly acceptable in Britain, where he was from, because the UK was a free country, he was perfectly aware that there were parts of the world where people didn't enjoy such freedoms, and the situation with Ranaia reminded him of them.

'So,' said Ryan, 'This is the 295th floor, and this room looks quite grand, and so I guess that this is an important part of the Citadel.'

'Yes, it is. Do you have any idea who that woman was?'

'I haven't a clue, and you know that.'

'Yes, of course. Well, that was Homaia Kravern, one of the Council of Three.'

'She's one of the ruler's of Triceria?'

'Yes, that's correct. She's a direct descendant of Cramtonus Kravern. When female heirs to a Council seat they keep their family name rather than take that of their husbands. We are in her private quarters. This part of the building had been chosen especially by one of her ancestors, Trianum Kravern, who married a woman called Siana who came from Ranaia. He wanted them to live in a part of the building that looked out on Ranaia so that she could see her home from here.'

'Was she forced to marry him against her will?'

'No, not at all. Whilst historically, Ranaia has been opposed to the rule of Triceria, not all in Ranaia are opposed to it. The marriage between Trianum and Siana was a marriage of love. Of course, a member of the Council marrying a citizen of Ranaia didn't do any harm to the relations with Ranaia, and during Trianum's time on the council things were good for Ranaia.'

'So, what do you think Homaia has in store for us?'

'I really don't know, but it is a great privilege to be asked to work for her. Because the Council generally always stay within the Citadel, it's very rare for any of them to be seen in public, let alone an ordinary person actually meeting them. For the general populace the Council are seen as being rulers who live up in the sky, and who generally don't bother coming down to their level to see how life is for the ordinary citizens over which they rule.'

Just then, the door opened, and another girl walked in. She appeared to be quite young, Ryan estimated that she must have only been about 18 years old. She had long blonde hair, and milky white skin. She was wearing a long blue dress. She looked at Ryan and Lisa and asked, 'Are you the two casual workers that my mother brought here?'

'Yes,' said Lisa.

'I see. I don't know why she bothered. I can usually manage everything that I have to do perfectly well by myself, not that there's much for me to do in this place. What are your names?'

Lisa answered, 'I'm Liana, and this is Ryan.'

'Very well, I take it you know who I am?'

'You must be Celia, heir to the Kravern seat on the Council.'

'Yes, that is I. Come, there is something that you can do for me. Follow me, but make sure that you are really, really quiet.'

She led them out of the room, and along the floor until they reached another stairwell, although not one that Ryan and Lisa had used before. They started to descend this stairwell, down to the 257th floor. Unlike the other stairwells above the 250th floor, this one was deserted - no soldiers or other workers passed them in either direction on the stairwell.

The 257th floor looked quite deserted. Whilst it was grandly decorated, it looked like its decorations were quite old, as though this floor had last been touched hundreds of years ago. Celia led them down a corridor, and then they went through one of the doors on the left. Behind this was another corridor, and Celia led them to the fourth door on the left.

She then turned to Ryan and Lisa and said, 'I have some urgent business in this room. I need you two to keep watch for me. Keep an eye on this corridor, and the corridor that we just came from. If you see someone approaching, knock on this door three times, and then go and hide. But, whatever you do, do not come inside this room - that is very important. The work I'm doing in this room, and what it is can not be allowed to get out, not to anyone, not even my mother. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' said Lisa.

'Very well. I don't know how long I will be, but if you can do this for me I will suitably reward you.'

'You can count on us,' said Ryan.

'Good. I will see you both later.' And with that, Celia went into the room.

Ryan then turned to Lisa and asked, 'Well, that's a little bit odd. This place is positively teeming with guards, why could she have got some of them to guard these corridors for her?'

'I'm not sure,' said Lisa, 'But I have my suspicions.'

'Would you care to share what they are?'

'It's probably best that I don't, just in case I'm wrong. But if I am right, then I believe that we are in exactly the right place that we need to be in.'

Ryan then had a look at the corridor that they were in. There were doors at either end of it - one that they had walked through with Celia, and one at the other end. He went to the door at the other end and opened it. There was another long corridor on the other side.

He then turned to Lisa and said, 'I suggest that we split up, with one of us looking out over each of these corridors.'

'That seems sensible. You stay here, I'll take the other corridor. If you see someone coming, knock on Celia's door, and then come and get me and we'll find somewhere to hide.'

'Sounds like a plan!'

And with that, Lisa left him to guard the other corridor.

Ryan realised that this was now the first time that they had been apart since they had started this journey. Only he had no idea where this journey was taking them. It was already about as surreal as it could have been. Not only had they arrived on an alien world after having done little more than walk through a corridor, but within that alien world they were now guarding a couple of corridors on behalf of one of the heirs to a Council seat. He figured that the three families were some kind of royal families, and Celia was effectively a princess.

Royal families. That got Ryan thinking. He knew Britain had a royal family. Everyone did. And yet the thought of that now felt a little strange to him. He tried to think about who they were, but their names were all a blur to him. He could just about remember their faces, but he couldn't put any names to them. He knew they had a queen, and she was now a very old lady. And he knew that her heir had two sons, the eldest of which had got married not so long ago to a very pretty girl. He remembered that they all got a day off work because of the wedding. Whilst the bride was very pretty, he remembered that a lot of people were making remarks about her sister, although he himself personally preferred the bride. But, for the life of him, he just could remember what any of their names were, and that just did not make sense. He thought that their names would somehow be familiar to him, but they still just would not come to his mind.

This was really quite worrying for him. He knew that this wasn't the only simple thing that he had failed to remember. Part of the reason that he chose to come on this journey with Lisa was to get some answers to questions to which he knew he should have the answers, but which now completely escaped him.

He was worried that he was going mad. That he was going completely stark raving mad. What else would he start to forget? Would he forget his own name, and who he was? He knew that he was Ryan, or at least he thought he was. He had no memory of ever being anyone else. Yes, he was definitely Ryan, and he was definitely 30 years old, and he was definitely from a city called London, in a country called England, which was part of the United Kingdom, which was on some islands that were off of a continent called Europe, that was on a planet called Earth which orbited a star called the Sun, that was in what was called the Solar System, that itself moved around a galaxy called the Milky Way, which was part of what was known as the Universe. All of that he felt fairly confident about.

He could remember his childhood - watching 'Thomas the Tank Engine' and 'Sooty', and reading books like 'The Worst Witch'. He could remember going to school. He could remember the friends that he had. He could remember going on holiday with his family, digging holes to Australia and building sandcastles on the beach. He could remember his older brother, and what a pain in the arse he was, but that he still loved him really. He could remember all of that, but he

couldn't remember when it was he last saw them. It was like the last few years of his life were a blur.

He could remember having a job in an office, although doing what he wasn't quite sure. He could remember commuting into London, and being annoyed about how crowded and unreliable all of the trains were. But he couldn't remember who his friends were, and what it was he did when he wasn't at work.

That life now seemed like a world away. In fact, it was a world away. Or probably a lot further than that, as, according to Lisa, he was now on the other side of the galaxy on a planet called Pyna. And he still didn't know what it was that he was supposed to be doing here. He wished he had some idea, because he was feeling pretty lost right now.

But at the very least he felt glad that he had Lisa by his side. She was incredibly nice, and at least seemed to have some idea as to what was going on. If it hadn't been for her he would have been stuck in that fantasy world, where it was always 3rd September and it never rained.

But then, would that have been so bad? True, he now knew that the world there wasn't real, and nor were the people, but he only became aware of that when Lisa came along and told him. If she hadn't had done that then he would have been blissfully unaware. And if he hadn't been made aware of the strangeness of that world then he could have lived there quite happily for as long as he wanted to.

And yet, whilst that world did seem idyllic and perfect, he felt that, all of the oddness aside, there was still something about it that wasn't perfect. That if he were to create his own perfect world then there would have been something else in it. But quite what that something else was he couldn't bring to his mind.

Whilst he could have been quite happy in that world, he knew that deep down it was probably best that he did, in fact, leave it. In the long run it probably wouldn't have done him any good to keep on living in some kind of fantasy world. He needed to find out what the answers were to the questions that he had in his mind. He needed to know how he came to be in that world. And he needed to know more about his own life, his life of the past few years, the life that he wasn't able to remember. And, right now, following Lisa seemed to be the only way that he stood any chance of finding any of those answers.

But at this precise moment in time all he had to concern himself with was keeping an eye on this corridor for Celia. He didn't know what she could possibly be doing in that room, or why the guards couldn't be looking after her. He just knew that he had to do what it was that was being asked of him.

He looked up and down the corridor, but it was pretty deserted. The whole place was eerily quiet. He figured that this must be part of the building that was rarely used and hadn't been touched for a while. There must have been quite a few places like this in the building. Someone could probably spend a lifetime exploring all the nooks and crannies of the building, and still only thoroughly cover a small portion of it.

Whilst it was certainly a vast and impressive building, he thought that it must be quite depressing for anyone who had to live in it the whole time. Much of the floors did look pretty similar to each other, and it must get boring to be inside the same building for any great length of time. As far as he could see there were no real chances to properly go outside. There were a few observation platforms, but, as far as he knew, there weren't any gardens. Even if there was some sort of garden somewhere on these upper floors that he hadn't seen yet, he suspected that any plants in it would struggle to grow properly at this altitude. He thought that if he lived here he would probably get extremely bored living up here in a sheltered world in the clouds, whilst the real world went on below them. He wondered if the Council of Three ever had any real contact with the real world.

It would appear that sometimes they did - Lisa had said that they normally married people from other towns in order to keep the blood of their families separate, and so they had to have some contact with those towns. But did they ever venture from the Citadel and travel to those towns, or were people from those towns brought to them here in the Citadel? If that was the case, then he imagined that being brought to this building must have been quite an intimidating experience for those people. He wondered what would make them come here. Would they be coming here willingly, or would there have been some kind of persuasion to make them come here, whether they liked it or not?

The corridor that he was in was still fairly silent. The only sound that he could hear was that of the wind outside. He wondered if it was always windy up here, and he supposed that it must be. He thought that such a wind would drive him crazy if he had to live here all of the time.

Then there was another sound that he could hear. It was very faint at first, but was getting closer. The sound was undeniably the sound of footsteps marching towards his position. He backed off towards the door that he had come through, being sure that he would be out of sight if anyone appeared at the end of the corridor from the direction of where the footsteps were coming from. Soon it became perfectly clear that the footsteps were coming straight towards where he was standing. He then saw, in the distance, coming around the corner, what were quite clearly two soldiers coming down the corridor.

He darted through the door that he had come through, and went towards Celia's door. He knocked on it three times quickly, and then went down the corridor to the door that Lisa had gone through. Just before he got to the door, however, Lisa herself came through it. 'What are you doing here?!' she asked.

'There were soldiers coming down my corridor. I knocked on Celia's door and came for you.'

'There are soldiers coming this way as well! Quick, we've got to hide.'

They started to try and open the other doors in the corridor that they were in, but all of them were locked.

The soldiers were almost upon them. Ryan knew that they only had one option. He went towards Celia's door.

'No!' said Lisa, 'We can't go in there! We were expressly told not to!'

'Yes, and we were also told to hide, and we've nowhere else to go. I'm making an executive decision...' He then opened the door to Celia's room (which, surprisingly he felt, wasn't locked).

He and Lisa quickly went inside and closed the door behind them. They then looked inside the room, which turned out to be a bedroom - again, something that Ryan wasn't expecting to see.

Celia was sitting on the bed, her hair out of place. She said, 'What are you two doing in here?! I told you not to come in!'

'We had no choice,' said Ryan. 'There are soldiers coming from both directions, and there was nowhere else to hide.' At this point Ryan started to wonder just what Celia had been doing in this room - what it was that was so secret that no one could ever know what it was.

Lisa then said, 'If the soldiers end up coming in here, wouldn't be a good idea if we hid?'

'Yes,' said Celia, 'But...'

'What about in that wardrobe?' suggested Ryan. 'It looks a bit small, but I reckon that Lisa and I could just about fit in there.'

As he started to walk towards it Celia cried out, 'No! You can't go in there! There's no room!'

'What do you mean there's no room? It's not jammed packed with clothes is it?'

Before he had a chance to find an answer to that question, the door to the room burst open, and four guards marched in. Ryan noticed that one of them was the female guard that he had become quite taken with earlier.

One of the guards looked at Celia and said, 'I knew we'd find you in here!' He then looked at Ryan and Lisa and said, 'Who are these two, and what are they doing here? Oh, this is sick!'

'No!' said Celia, 'It's not what you think! They were just looking out for me. They haven't done anything wrong.'

'So,' said the guard, 'Where is he?'

'Where is who? I don't know who you're talking about.'

'You know perfectly well who I'm talking about.' The guard looked around the room, and then walked towards the wardrobe. 'Get out of my way!' he said to Ryan.

Ryan did as he told, as he went and stood next to Lisa. The female guard then came and stood next to him, and smiled at him. 'Good to see you again,' she whispered in his ear.

Before Ryan could say anything in reply the guard threw open the door of the wardrobe. It turned out that there weren't any clothes hanging in it at all. Instead, what there was inside was a man, who was also about 18 years old. He slowly stepped out of the wardrobe. Ryan then twigged as to what Celia had been doing in this room.

The guard then said, 'I knew I'd find you here too. This is a disgrace!'

'Yes,' said the man, 'Well, it shouldn't be, you know!'

'That's enough, you know what you're doing is wrong.'

'No, sir, the thing that you are doing is wrong.'

At this point Ryan found that he had the surprising urge to speak up. He said, 'I'm sorry, forgive me if I sound dumb. But who's been doing what here, and what is so wrong about what the other person may have been doing?'

The guard just looked at him, and then said, 'What, are you an idiot?'

'An idiot? Oh yes, that's me, just an idiot. You know, I only came into this world yesterday. So, if you wouldn't mind, would someone be able to explain this to me, in words that a simple idiot like me would be able to understand.'

There was another pause, and then the guard said, 'Very well. Now, I take it you know who Celia is, considering you were keeping watch for her.'

'Yes, I know that she's Celia Kravern, and an heir to a Council seat. That much I've got.'

'Now, this chap here,' the guard said, lifting up the man by his ear, 'is none other than Trevarn Loverian, who also happens to be an heir to a Council seat.'

'Oh, right, I see. And you two were...' Ryan did some hand gestures to try and get across what he was trying to say.

'Yes,' said Celia, 'I'm sure no one needs it spelling out.'

The guard continued, 'And, as I'm sure you're aware, it is not allowed under the laws of Triceria for two heirs to be in a relationship together. The families must be kept apart in order to prevent any of the families becoming any stronger or weaker than the others. If these two were to marry, what would happen then? The Council is made up of three members, but they would only have one heir between them.'

At this point Trevarn spoke up and said, 'Your laws are wrong and cruel! Celia and I are in love! No amount of keeping us apart is ever going to change that! The laws should be changed. Why should Triceria continued to be ruled by a Council of Three?'

The guard looked at him and said, 'What should Triceria be ruled by a Council of Three? Why, for the very reasons that we have to breathe the air, why rain falls from the sky, and fish swim in the water. That's the way it's always been, and that's the way it always has to be.'

'But why? Why do things have to be that way for Triceria? We can't change the fact that we have to breathe the air, or that rain falls from the sky, or that the fish swim in the water - none of that is within our control. But we can change how Triceria is run if we want to, because that is within our power. Celia and I don't want to rule Triceria when we're older as part of a Council of Three. We love each other and want to be with each other. We want to find a new form of governance for Triceria, one that will allow us to marry. What we're doing isn't wrong. We just fell in love, that's all. Falling in love shouldn't be a crime. We're both consenting adults from different families, there's absolutely no reason why we shouldn't be allowed to marry. Why should anyone be allowed to stop us from being happy?'

The guard thought for a bit, and then said, 'Look, it's not for me to say. All I care about is upholding the law, and the law, as it stands, says that you two can't be together. It's not right for you two to be a couple. Now, I don't have any choice but to take you to your parents. They'll decide what punishment to give you.'

Celia then said, 'Oh you know perfectly well what they'll do! They'll separate us and lock us up in separate towers, never to see each other again until we come into our inheritance, and in the meantime they'll force us to marry people from far away towns, whether we want to or not, and we most certainly will not want to. Trevarn and I are in love. We are in love now, and we will always be in love with each other.'

'Be that as it may, I have no choice in the matter. I was sent here specifically to find you. If I were to let you go, and be found out, I'll be out of a job, and then where would I be? I have a family to support, you know. I'm sorry, but there's nothing for it. You're going to have to come with me.' He turned to two of the other guards and said, 'Seize them!' They then each went up to Trevarn and Celia, and took hold of one of their arms. The leader of the guards then turned to Ryan and Lisa and said, 'We'll take the girl and the idiot too. They'll have some questions to answer. Let's go!'

The guard that was left was Ryan's friend. 'Come on. Let's follow the others. I'll make sure no harm comes to you.' She gave Ryan a smile that made him feel warm inside. They then followed the others out of the room.

Once outside the room Ryan whispered to Lisa, 'We're in a right fine mess here. All I wanted to do was go home and get some answers. Now we find ourselves in this mess.'

'Don't worry, I'm sure we'll be fine. We haven't actually done anything wrong. Celia told us to do something, and all we did was do it. We weren't to know what she was up to.'

'Yeah, but I have to agree with her point of view. Why can't she and Trevarn get married if they want to? Why should the state get in the way of their happiness?'

'I agree with you, but this isn't our country. It's not even our world. There's not much we can do.'

They were lead back up the tower. Ryan wondered just how far up they would be taken this time. It turned out that it would be very far indeed, as this time they went all of the way to the 300th floor.

There was only one room on the 300th floor, which was a large, mainly empty hall. The hall had three sides to it, with vast windows on each side with commanding views of everything around the Citadel. In the centre of the hall was a large three sided table, with a large, throne like chair on each side. All three chairs had an occupant, one of which Ryan noticed to be Homaia Kravern. The other two were elderly men, who Ryan presumed to be the other two rulers of Triceria.

They were all marched up to the table, where the Council of Three stood up to face them as they approached. The guard's leader said, 'I found Celia and Trevarn in one of the bedrooms on the 257th floor. It is as you feared, ma'am.'

Homaia looked at Celia with a look of disappointment on her face. 'Celia, how could you? You know what this means, the impact that this could have on Triceria?'

'I don't care mother. I am in love with Trevarn, and that's all there is to it. There is nothing that you can do to alter our feelings for each other.'

One of the men looked at Trevarn and said, 'Is this true?'

'Yes father,' replied Trevarn. 'I care very much for Celia, and I can't bear to be apart from her.'

Lisa whispered in Ryan's ear, 'That's Gavern Loverian. The other man is Unryrion Operian.'

Gavern then said, 'You've put me - put all of us - in a very difficult situation here. You know that relationships of a romantic nature are strictly forbidden between our families. And yet you went ahead and flouted our laws regardless.'

'I don't care about your laws father. It is about time they were changed. Celia and I should be allowed to be together. It's not right that we should be forced to be apart.'

'We're going to have to consult about this. Go and wait over there, all of you.' Gavern indicated one of the far corners of the hall, where the guards led everyone.

Once they were in the corner the female guard said to Ryan and Lisa, 'It's very said that everything is this way. I disagree with the law too, as do many of the citizens. Many of them would like to see that law changed, as well as how Triceria as a whole is ruled. They want to be given the right to vote in a government, rather than be ruled by three families that generally don't get on and have very little in common with the ordinary citizens of Triceria.'

Travern was holding onto Celia's hands, and said, 'Don't worry my love. We'll find a way to be together, no matter what, no matter how long it takes. They may take us away and lock us up in separate towers, but they can't keep us there forever. Eventually they will pass on, and we'll take up our seats on the council, and then we can change the laws as we please.'

'Yes,' said Celia, 'But how long will that be? It could be decades before that happens. I don't think that I could bear to be away from for that long.'

'I know it's going to be hard, but we may have little choice in the matter.'

After a brief time, Gavern indicated to the guards that everyone should be brought to the table again. Once they were there it was Unryrion that spoke. He said, 'We have discussed this matter carefully, and there is only one thing that can be done. As you know, keeping the power of the three families separate is one of the key constitutional founding stones of our great nation. Under no circumstances could it be permitted for you to marry. If that were to happen then you would become one family, twice the size of mine, thus weakening my family to the point that it will no longer have much in the way of influence in the affairs of Triceria. Now Gavern and Homaia agree with me that there is only one course of action that we can take. We had long suspected that there was something improper going on between you, but we had all hoped that you would have the good sense to control your urges. As you have shown that you lack this control, you will both be banished to separate towers, and you will no contact with each other whatsoever. There you will remain until you come into your inheritance. By then we hope you will have a bit more sense, and will be married to other, more suitable candidates.'

Travern said, 'You may try and separate us. You may keep us physically apart, but in our hearts we will always be together. You won't be able to keep us locked away forever, and you can't force us to marry against our will. One day, whether you like it or not, Celia and I will be together.'

'Yes, yes, you say that now. But we'll see how you feel in a few decades time. Our decision is final. Guards, take them away!'

By now Ryan had had enough of being a bystander. He completely disagreed with what was going on here. It was perfectly obvious to him that Travern and Celia were deeply in love with each other, and it just felt wrong that they were being treated in this matter. He decided that he couldn't just stand by and let this happen, and so he spoke up and said, 'Stop! What you are doing is wrong!'

Unryrion said, 'And who gave you leave to speak! And who are you, anyway?'

Homaia answered for Ryan, saying, 'He's just a casual labourer that I found wandering around. I had sent Celia to them to help her with moving some of the furniture around in our apartments. A trivial task but one that needed completing anyway. I don't know how he came to be here.'

The leader of the guards said, 'He was found in the room with Celia and Travern. I suspect that she was using them as lookouts whilst she and Travern were, well, you know...'

'Yes, thank you. I don't need you to draw a mental picture for me.'

Ryan then said, 'It doesn't matter who I am. Just listen to what I have to say. It should be blatantly obvious to you that Travern and Celia do truly and genuinely love each other. They are happy when they're with each other. What you're doing is ruining their happiness. You can't force them to marry anyone else just because you want to protect your constitution. Marriage should be for love, and nothing else. Both Travern and Celia are adults, and so if they want to marry each other then they should be allowed to. Locking them away in towers isn't going to be doing anyone any good. What sort of leaders are they going to be in the future if they're made to be unhappy? You're going to make them bitter and resentful. What is it that you're punishing them for? It's just something from your constitution from hundreds of years ago. Don't punish them for that. Times change, and you should change with them. They want things to be different, and, most importantly of all, the people of Triceria want things to be different. Why not give the people what they want? Why not consider making changes?'

Gavern then said, 'And just who do you think you are? Do you think that you can just come in here and tell us what to do? A constitution is what it is. Can you think of any occasion where any country has changed something in its constitution for something like this?'

'Well...!' Ryan thought for a moment, and then something came to him. 'Yes! Yes I can. In the country that I'm from we have a royal family. It was always said that the next in line to the throne would be the eldest son of the current monarch, even if they had a daughter that was older than their eldest son. They also said that an heir to the throne could never marry a Catholic, but, if they did they would have to renounce their claim to the throne.'

'What's a "Catholic"?'

'It's a form of religion, a branch of Christianity.'

'I have never heard of this religion.'

'I guess it hasn't reached here yet, but that's not the point. The point is that our constitution was out of date. Not that we actually has a written constitution as such, but we have various laws that effectively give us one. Now, because people felt that these laws were outdated, they changed them. And now if - ' Ryan stopped mid sentence, as something suddenly came back to him. William and Kate! Prince William and Kate Middleton! The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge! How could he have forgotten their names? Suddenly a few things were starting to make sense. There was a William and Kate in the world that he had left behind when he came to Pyna. Kate Middleton had a sister called Pippa, and his Kate also had a sister called Pippa. Both Williams had a father called Charles, and a grandmother called Elizabeth. He even saw the significance of his William and Kate living in a road called Windsor Avenue. It was obvious now that that world was somehow just a part of his imagination, with the names of people there being plucked out of his mind. He felt both relieved and a fool simultaneously.

But he knew that he didn't have any more time to dwell on that now. He had to resolve this situation first. But his sudden return of at least part of his memory gave him a confidence boost.

He carried on, 'And if our Prince William, who is second in line to our throne, should happen to have a daughter as his first child with his wife Kate, then that daughter will one day become our Queen, even if William and Kate subsequently go on to have a son. And, much later on, if any of their children ever fall in love with a Catholic and want to marry them, they wouldn't have to renounce their claim to the throne to do so. You see, we were able to recognise that our constitution was outdated. Yes, it had once served a purpose, but the world had since moved on. We recognised that, and so we changed it. No one had to suffer because of it.'

Unryrion then said, 'I'm sorry, but I have never heard of a country like this. Just who is Prince William? We would have heard of any royal family that is in existence in our world. I'm sorry, but I think you're just making all of this up. What is the name of this country that you are apparently from?'

'I am from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland!'

'Well, now I know you're making it up! Either that or you're just plain mad! There's no such country like that on Pyna!'

'There wouldn't be, because I'm not from Pyna. I'm from another world!' Part of Ryan knew that it probably wasn't best that he went on with this train of speech, but he was on a roll, and he found that he couldn't stop himself. He went on to say, 'I am from a planet on the other side of this galaxy. I am from a planet known as Earth!'

Everyone in the room, apart from Lisa, was taken aback by this. 'Earth?' said Gavern, a hint of fear in his voice. 'Are you really from the Earth?'

'Yes, I am!'

Homaia asked, 'How can you prove it? Do you have something from your world that you can show us?'

Ryan thought for a moment, and then he remembered the coin that he had in his pocket. He took it out and handed it over to Homaia. He said, 'That's an old coin that we don't use any more. It's about 50 years old. But, on one side of it, you'll see a picture of our queen, Queen Elizabeth II.'

Homaia studied the coin, which she passed to Gavern, who in turn passed it on to Unryrion. He then passed the coin back to Ryan, and said, 'You would appear to be telling the truth. The coin certainly appears to be a genuine coin, as best as I can tell. The coin certainly looks as if it were struck 50 years ago. And our legends that we have about the Earth certainly speak of a Queen Elizabeth II. They also said that one day a man from the Earth would arrive in Triceria, and that the man would be able to provide the answer to a question that no one on Pyna would be able to provide. If you can provide the answer to this question - and we will have the means to confirm whether or not your answer is correct - you will convince us that you are speaking the truth. The question is thus: Where can one find Paris? Now, no one on Pyna has heard of "Paris", we know not what or who "Paris" is. Are you able to tell us?'

Ryan thought that this was a rather odd question. It was an obvious question that most of the people on Earth would be able to provide the correct answer for. But then he thought that if you were on an alien world and wanted to test whether or not someone who claimed to be from Earth actually was from there, it probably was a fairly good question. Although it was a bit strange to have it included as part of a legend.

He said, 'Yes, I know the answer to your question. For anyone on Earth it is an easy question. I can tell you that Paris is a city, a very famous city on my world. As to where you can find it, you can find it in a country called France, where it is the capital city.'

Unryrion nodded and said, 'Very well, if that is your answer, then we shall go and test it. Come with us.' Unryrion then led everyone - the Council, Ryan, Lisa, Travern, Celia, and the guards, down to the 299th floor. This floor had one long corridor with many doors coming off of it. But at the end of the corridor was a large black box. It was about five feet high, two feet wide, and one foot deep. The box sat on a large ornate table. In the centre of the side of the box that faced the corridor was an impression of a hand.

The party approached the box. Unryrion turned to Ryan and said, 'Place your hand on the box. It will ask you the question, and you will then provide the answer. If you are correct, legend says that the box will open. However, if you are wrong and you are lying to us, legend says that death will be instant. Do you understand.'

'Yes, absolutely.'

'Very well. Then please, go ahead.'

Ryan walked up to the box, and then placed his hand in the impression. It fitted the impression perfectly, as though it had been made specifically with his hand in mind. As he did so, a bright white light emanated from the box.

Then a loud, booming voice could be heard, which filled the whole room. It asked, 'Where can one find Paris?'

Ryan just said, calmly and quietly, 'France.'

The light intensified to the point that everyone had to cover their eyes. Ryan did the same, but kept his hand on the box.

Then the light started to die down, and everyone could open their eyes again. When they did, they saw that the front of the box was on a hinge that could not have been detected before, and that the box was now open. Ryan removed his hand from the impression, and opened the door to the box fully.

Inside was a large golden key.

As they all looked at the key the voice of the box said, much more quietly than it had spoken before, 'Citizen of Earth, you are far from home. You have come a long way, but you still have far to go. Take this key with you. You will know when you find the lock that it fits, and what you should do when you find that lock.' And, with that, the voice fell silent.

Ryan took the key from out of the box, and placed it in his pocket. He then turned and faced the others.

'Well,' said Unryrion, 'There is no doubt whatsoever. You are indeed from Earth. This really is quite something.' He then kneeled before Ryan, as did all of the other Pynarians in the room.

'Please,' said Ryan, 'There is no need to kneel before me. Please, stand up. I'm really not that important.'

They did as he asked, but, as they stood up, Celia said, 'But of course you are important.'

'No, I'm really not. Back on Earth I'm just an ordinary guy.'

'But you are here on Pyna. To the best of our knowledge, no one from Earth has ever set foot on Pyna before.'

'Yes, well, that may be true. But there really isn't anything special about me.'

Then the guard that had taken a liking to Ryan said, 'That's not true. Every individual, throughout the multiverse, is special in their own way. You're you, and you're the only you there is, ever was, and will be.'

Ryan smiled at the guard, and nodded, and the guard smiled back at him.

'So,' said Gavern, 'What are we to do now? We still have the issue of Travern and Celia to resolve.'

Ryan said, 'I think you know what you should do. I think Triceria is due for a change.'

Gavern thought for a moment, and then he turned to Travern and asked, 'Do you really love Celia?'

'Yes, I do father, I truly do.'

'This isn't just a passing phase? It's not just an infatuation? You truly love her, with every fibre of your being? You're prepared to do anything for her, even die for her? You're prepared to do whatever it takes to make her happy?'

'Yes, I am.'

Gavern nodded, and then turned to Homaia. She looked at Celia and asked, 'You do love him, don't you?'

'Yes mother.' Celia turned to look into Travern's eyes. 'I really do.'

Homaia then turned to Gavern and Unryrion and said, 'I think, for the sake of our children's happiness, and the happiness of the people of Triceria, we need to consider a few changes to how things are done in our realm.' Gavern and Unryrion nodded their agreement.

Travern then turned to Ryan and asked, 'So, what will you do now? Will you go back to the Earth, or will you stay here a while longer?'

'I really don't know. I'm not even sure how I can get back to the Earth. Lisa, do you have any ideas?'

Once again, the Pynarians were all taken aback by what Ryan had just said, although he couldn't understand why. He looked at them, bemused, and then he turned to Lisa.

She whispered to him, 'Ryan, I said you shouldn't use my real name here, remember.'

'Oh, yeah, sorry...' Ryan felt like he had put his foot in it, but he couldn't quite understand what was so bad about using Lisa's real name, or why the Pynarians should react to it in the way that they did.

Gavern turned to Lisa, and asked, 'Are you really Lisa? Are you really here?'

'Yes, I am Lisa, and yes, I am really here.'

'What is it that brings you back here?'

'I came here with Ryan. I'm helping him with something.'

Unryrion then said, 'Well, this is truly a great day indeed. Not only have we had a visitor from the Earth who has managed to open the box, but we have also been honoured by a visit from the great Lisa. I have a feeling that today will become a day that we will remember for all time. Tell me, Lisa, whilst you are here are there any words of wisdom that you can give to us?'

'You don't need me to give you any more words of wisdom. You have had all the wisdom that you need today from Ryan. I'm not here to do any great deeds this time. I'm only making a passing visit to Pyna. Ryan and I should start to look for a way for us to leave, as we still have a long journey ahead of us before we finally get to where it is that we need to be.'

'Very well. So, do you have any ideas on how you will leave Pyna?'

'I'm not too sure, but I think it's best that we first leave the Citadel. I don't particularly fancy climbing down all of those stairs again. Do you know if there is a quick way out of here?'

'Of course, and yes, there is a quicker way to get out, and quite a fun way too I might add.' Unryrion turned to the guard that was Ryan's friend, 'You can take them to the chute.'

'Yes, of course,' said the guard.

Gavern then said, 'Well, I guess this is goodbye then.' He went and shook Ryan's and Lisa's hands. 'I wish you good luck and good speed on your journey.'

Homaia then came up to them and said, 'Thank you for opening our eyes. We've been living in the past for too long. But I have a feeling that there are going to be some great changes in store for Triceria.'

Unryrion then said, 'Take good care of that key. It has been here, in that box, for centuries. No one here even knew what was in the box, let alone have any idea what lock that key is meant to fit. But I have confidence that you will find out what it is you are meant to do with it.'

Travern and Celia then both turned to Ryan, and Travern said, 'That you for what you have done for us.'

'It was nothing,' said Ryan. 'Now, you make sure you look after this one!' Ryan pointed at Celia.

'Don't worry, I will.' Travern then looked back into Celia's eyes, their happiness clear to see on both of their faces.

'Well,' said Ryan, 'I guess it's about time we were off. It's been... interesting.' He then waved at everyone that was staying behind, and then he and Lisa followed the female guard out of the corridor, and back to the stairwell.

As they went down the stairs the guard said to Ryan, 'You have done a great thing for Triceria today. Are you sure that there is nothing we can do to persuade you to stay?'

'I'm sorry, but I really have to go.'

'Are you sure there isn't anything, anything at all, that might convince you stay even one night?' She looked at him with a cheeky look in her eye.

Lisa then interjected, 'No, sorry, we can't stay even one night. We have to keep moving. We still have a very long journey ahead of us, and we really shouldn't delay it if we can help it.'

Whilst Ryan was tempted to stay the night, he knew that Lisa was right. But he wasn't going to forget this guard. She was starting to make quite the impression on him. He said, 'Lisa's right, we have to keep moving. I am a long way from Earth, and I'm quite keen to get back there as soon as I can if it's possible.'

'Very well,' said the guard, 'I understand. But I won't forget you, Ryan of Earth. If you ever find yourself in Triceria again come and find me, and I will make sure that you are well looked after.'

'You can count on it,' said Ryan. 'By the way, I haven't caught your name at all?'

'It's Sophiran.'

'Very well, Sophiran. I look forward to the day when we meet again.'

'As do I.'

Sophiran led them down to the 297th floor. They went down a corridor, and turned left at the end. There was a low opening in the wall, and a chute going down from it. Sophiran explained, 'This chute goes all the way down to the ground. I know the idea of sliding down nearly 300 floors sounds pretty terrifying, but it is perfectly safe. I have heard that it's actually quite fun.'

Ryan then said, 'So you haven't actually been down it yourself?'

'Good heavens, no. Going down the chute to the ground is not for the likes of me. I've spent my entire life in the Citadel. No, the chute is only for the most important people in Tricerian society who wish to make a swift exit.' Sophiran then went to a nearby cupboard, and brought out two mats. 'You will need to sit on these.'

'Well, this must surely be the biggest helter skelter that I've ever been on?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Don't worry, it's an Earth thing.'

'I should very much like to see the Earth one day.'

'Well, I'm not sure if that will be possible, but if you ever are able to make the trip, I'll be happy to show you around my part of it.'

Lisa then said, 'OK Ryan, I think it's time we were off. Sophiran, thank you for taking us here, and I wish all the best for you and your people.'

'Thank you. I wish you good luck for your journey.'

Lisa took the mats from Sophiran, and gave one to Ryan. She said, 'I think you should go first. I'll be right behind you.'

Ryan took the mat and said, 'Very well then.' He took another look at Sophiran, and then turned to face the chute.

Just before he was about to place the mat at the top of the chute and sit down, Sophiran came up to him, turned him around, and kissed him. He was taken a little by surprise, dropping the mat in the process, but he kissed her back. It felt like a firework had gone off inside of him. When they broke off, they just smiled at each other, without saying another word.

He then turned around, placed the mat at the top of the chute, sat on it, and pushed himself off. As he did so he shouted out, 'Geronimo!'

He started to go down the chute at quite a pace, as it went down in a spiral. There were windows in the chute, and he could see that he was gradually descending towards the ground. He couldn't hear anything above him, but he felt sure that Lisa must be following him above. She would have to leave a big enough gap to ensure that she didn't crash into him at the bottom.

Ryan started to think back on his little adventure in Triceria and the Citadel. It was all now starting to feel a little surreal. Had he actually brought about a massive constitutional change in an entire country, pretty much by himself, with little more than a coin, some info about the royal family, and simply knowing where Paris was? But that was, indeed, what it was that he had just done, and he felt rather pleased with himself for having done it.

He wondered if he would ever return to this place, to see what changes would come about. He hoped that Tavern and Celia would live a long and happy life with each other. He also hoped that Triceria would have a smooth and peaceful transition regarding the way that it was governed, and that the people of Triceria would be happy.

He was now going at quite a speed, but the gradient of the chute was starting to decrease slightly, so he wouldn't end up going too fast. But the windows on his right hand side were still whizzing past him. He could see the town below getting closer and bigger, and it was still bright daylight outside.

But then suddenly there was a window where it wasn't daylight at all. It only flashed past him, but it looked like a black, night sky, full of stars. This gave Ryan a jolt, but as the next few windows went by, all showing the town in daylight again, he believed that he must have just imagined it. But then another night sky window went past. It was undeniable - he had definitely seen it.

There were three more day windows, and then another night window. This pattern continued for a little while - three day windows followed by a night window. Then it was two day windows

for every night window, and not long after that they were alternating.

Ryan was now starting to feel really confused, but then part of his mind told him that he should be expecting weird things like this to be happening by now. He decided that the only thing he could do was sit back, enjoy the ride, and see where it took him.

The pattern now started to go in the other direction. There was now only one day window for every two night windows, and not long after that there was only one day window for every three night windows. This continued for a little while, and then the day windows disappeared altogether, and outside was only night.

He tried to look down whenever a window came up, to see if he could tell how far away he was from the ground, but he couldn't see anything. All he could see was an inky black sky with stars in it. There was no sign of any ground, at least, none that he could see.

The speed that he was going at began to slow down. Then, the path of the chute stopped going around in a spiral and started to level off. He looked ahead of him and saw what looked like the end of the chute coming up. At the end there was like, and what looked like a metal floor. He braced himself to come out of the chute.

He shot out the end of the chute and landed on a metal surface. He skidded along the ground for a bit, before coming to a halt just short of a metal wall. He lay still for a bit, whilst he gathered himself together. He thought to himself that that had been quite a ride, but one that he would be quite glad not to repeat anytime soon.

He then realised that he had better get out of the way quickly because Lisa would be coming out of the chute as well any minute now, and he wouldn't want her crashing into him. He quickly got up, and looked around for the mat that he had been sitting on, but he couldn't see any sign of it, which he thought was a bit odd.

There was no immediate sign of Lisa, and so he started to take a better look around his surroundings. He found that he was in a curved corridor, and that the building he was in appeared to be made entirely of metal. There were two constant sounds around him. One was a low humming noise, and one was a slight whooshing noise. He was soon able to find an explanation for the whooshing noise - there were ventilation shafts all along the corridor, with air coming out of all of them. But he was at a loss to explain what was causing the humming noise.

Along the outer curve of the corridor there were windows, each of them showing an inky black night sky. He walked up to the window to see if he could somehow ascertain where there were, but what he saw surprised him. When he looked down from the window he couldn't see any sign of a surface - the blackness and the stars went all the way down. In fact, they went all the

way in all directions, as far as the eye could see. Then he figured out where he must be, or, at the very least, what this 'building' was.

'No way...' he said to himself as it dawned on him. There was no doubt about it. Somehow, he didn't know how, he was in outer space. He then realised that going down that chute must have transported him here, in much the same way as walking through the tunnel from the cave entrance transported him and Lisa to Pyna.

But where was Lisa now? Surely she couldn't have been that far behind him? He turned round to look back at the exit to the chute - and then he got a shock. It wasn't there anymore! All there was now where it had been was more of the wall that was all the way down the corridor.

Now Ryan was afraid. It was nerve-wracking enough when he had suddenly arrived somewhere completely different, as he had felt when he was first in Pyna and realised that it wasn't Earth. But at least then he had Lisa with him, who knew a little bit of what was going on and was able to help guide him. Now he was completely alone.

What had happened to her? She had promised him that she would stand by him every step of the way. Surely she wouldn't have just abandoned him? Had she even got into the chute? Was she still in the Citadel? Or had she come down the chute and ended up somewhere completely different?

Ryan didn't have the answers to these questions, and he knew there was no possibility of him getting the answers by just standing around. The exit to the chute had gone, nothing was going to change that. There was no point in him just standing around here doing nothing, and so he decided that the best thing for him to do was to go off and explore his new surroundings.

Again, he had a choice of two directions to go in - left or right. Either way looked identical. Once again he decided to take out his coin and toss it. Heads, he would go left, and tails, he would go right.

He took out his coin, threw it up into the air, caught it, and turned it over onto the back of his left hand. He removed his right hand, and saw that the coin had come up heads, and so he turned to the left.

He remembered when he had first tossed the coin back on Pyna, when it had come up tails, taking them to the right, and towards the Citadel. He wondered what would have happened if it had come up heads instead, and they had gone to the left. Where would they have ended up then, and what would have happened to them?

He started to walk down the corridor. After the first bend it started to straighten out, and it seemed to go on for a very long time. He had no idea where he was going. He had no sense of what direction the ship was headed in, and so he didn't know if he was moving towards the front

of the ship, or the rear. However, he knew that he had to keep on moving in one direction, and then hopefully he would find someone who might be able to tell him what was going on here.

Then a horrifying thought struck him. In numerous sci-fi films and TV shows he had seen the concept of suspended animation, where people who were travelling on very long journeys were put into a deep sleep for the duration of the journey. What if they had that on this ship, and there wouldn't be anyone awake for him to talk to? What if he was effectively the only person up and about on this ship? What would he do then?

Then it occurred to him that all of the lights were on in the corridor. If the crew were in some kind of suspended animation, then why would they waste power in having all of the lights on if there wasn't anyone about to make use of them? He therefore came to the conclusion that there had to be other people up and about on the ship somewhere. It was just a matter of finding them.

He quickened his pace. Now the sound of his hurried footsteps joined the sounds of the ventilation and the humming sound, both of which were unchanging. In the distance he could see what looked like a door, and he hurried towards it.

As he started to run he noticed that he felt lighter than he normally did. Running felt a lot easier. He didn't think that this had anything to do with the broth from the 50th floor of the Citadel, the effects of which he thought must surely be wearing off by now. But he quickly figured out what must be causing it. If this was a spaceship in space, but he was able to walk and run on the ground, there must be some sort of artificial gravity at work on the ship. Only it must be operating at a strength that was slightly below what the strength of gravity was on Earth. He presumed that it must take a lot of energy to generate gravity, and so whoever ran this ship must be running it at a level that's enough for people to walk along comfortably, without being too much of a drain on resources.

In no time at all he reached the door, which, in true Star Trek style, opened to the side automatically with a satisfying whooshing sound. He passed through, where he saw another corridor, but this time one that was a lot shorter and had a sharp turn to the left at the end. He went down the corridor and turned to the left, where he was confronted by another door. He passed through this, and then he found what it was that he had been looking for.

He had entered a room that he could only refer to as the Bridge, once again relying on a Star Trek reference. In the room were five people, all of which had quickly turned to look at him, and were stunned by his appearance. The five people were all wearing the same silvery figure-hugging outfit. There were three women and two men in the crew. One of the men, who was sitting in the centre of the room and so was therefore presumably the Captain, had thinning brown hair

and looked like he was in his fifties. The other man was stood at the back of the room, and was much younger, Ryan estimated that he was in his early twenties. He was slender and had short dark hair.

The three women, who were sat in a row at the front, pretty much covered all the bases where hair colours were concerned. One was blonde, one was brunette, and one was a red head (with very red hair). The brunette looked like she was in her late thirties, the red head was somewhere in her twenties, and the blonde looked like she was still a teenager, but somewhere in her late teens.

Ryan only had a moment to take all of this in. Because within a moment of him entering the room the Captain asked, 'Who the devil are you?!

'Er...' said Ryan, not quite sure how best to answer the Captain. 'Hi! I'm Ryan, please to meet you!' He gave them all a smile - he wanted to try and reassure them that he was harmless, and wasn't in any way a threat.

The Captain then asked him, 'Where have you been hiding?'

'Well, um, I haven't been hiding anywhere. You see, I've only just got here.'

'Don't talk nonsense! How could you have possibly just got here? We've been in flight for over a year now, you must have been hiding somewhere.'

'I, erm, could have just teleported here...' Ryan wasn't quite sure why he said this, but he didn't know what else he could say. And, in a way, what he was implying was close enough to the truth.

The Captain was not pleased with this, 'Don't be ridiculous! This isn't Star Trek you know! Teleportation has been proven to be impossible. Now, I'm going to ask you one last time, where have you been hiding? You must have been hiding somewhere - you can't just have popped up out of thin air.'

Ryan didn't know how to answer this. There wasn't any way that he could tell them the full truth and have them believe him. He just stood there in silence whilst he tried to think of an answer.

Before he could the Captain said, 'John, seize him please.' John, who was evidently the other man on the Bridge, came and held Ryan by the arms, but not very tightly. Clearly, seizing people was a task that John was neither prepared for or expecting to have to do. The Captain continued, 'I don't know who you are, where you've been hiding, or even how you got aboard in the first place, but one way or another I'm going to get to the bottom of this. Jane, hail the Columbia please.'

Jane turned out to be the red head. She pressed a button on the console in front of her. She then said, 'Columbia, Columbia, this is Challenger. Please respond. Over.'

A moment later a voice on the other end responded with, 'Challenger, Challenger, this is Columbia. We read you. Please go ahead. Over.'

The Captain then spoke, saying, 'Columbia, this is Captain Roberts. You're not going to believe this, but we've just had a man appear from nowhere on our Bridge. He says his name is Ryan, but refuses to tell us where's he's been hiding all of this time. Did you get all that? Over.'

'Captain Roberts, this is Captain Cole. Now, this is indeed very odd. You see, we were just about to contact you. We've just had someone turn up on our Bridge. It's a girl, red head, pretty, somewhere in her twenties. Says her name is Lisa -'

'Lisa!' Ryan exclaimed. He was relieved to find out that she was somewhere here as well, and not stuck back on Pyna or teleported off to some other far flung world.

Captain Cole continued, 'As I was saying, her name is Lisa. She claims that she teleported here from some planet called Pyna on the other side of the galaxy! Obviously, it sounds utterly ridiculous. But she must have come from somewhere. Could she and your chap really have been able to keep themselves hidden for so long, and, if so, why are they showing themselves now? Over.'

Captain Roberts replied, 'Yes, you have a point. I don't know where this one could have been hiding all of this time. But teleportation itself is impossible, let alone teleporting across the galaxy! Even if teleportation could be made to work, it would never be able to work over those distances. Light alone would take a hundred thousand years to make the journey, let alone the energy derived from matter. But, whatever the truth is about how they got here and how long they have been here for, the fact of the matter is that they are here, and we need to decide what it is that we should do with them. Do you have any suggestions? Over.'

'Well, first we should ensure that they aren't armed. Then we should make sure that someone keeps an eye of them at all times. But after that I'm really not sure. I think they we'll have little choice but to bring them with us. You can send your chap over to us at some point before we get to Jupiter, and we'll let the authorities decide what they want to do with them there. Over.'

'I believe you're right, although I'm not happy about having an extra mouth to feed. Make sure we give them minimum survival rations only. Over.'

'Copy that. Over and out.'

Captain Roberts turned back to Ryan and said, 'I don't know who you are or what you're doing here, but, one way or another I will find out. John, frisk him to make sure he hasn't got any weapons on him.'

John did as he was instructed, although Ryan felt that he didn't do a particularly thorough job. Not that he was complaining, and he knew perfectly well that he didn't have any concealed weapons on him. Once he was done he said, 'All clear.'

'Very well,' said the Captain. 'Now, if you're going to be with us for a while I can't just have you lying around, using up our food, water, and air. You're going to have to make yourself useful.' He then turned to the blonde girl and said, 'Lucy, I want you to take him to the Garden. Show him how we maintain things there. And keep an eye on him at all times. If he gets into any mischief call for us and we'll come down straight away. I'll come and see him later and give him a proper interrogation. We will get to the bottom of this, mark my word.'

Lucy nodded to confirm her understanding, and she got up and walked towards Ryan. She was smiling as she approached him. She said, 'Come this way,' and then she led him to a door on the opposite side of the Bridge to the one that he had come through.

Once through the door they went through a short corridor identical to the one on the other side, and then through another door into a longer corridor. This corridor also had windows down one side, only on this side they could see something other than stars. Outside of these windows they could see another ship, and Ryan was amazed by how big it was. He presumed that the other ship was the Columbia.

As they walked down the corridor Ryan thought he'd take the opportunity to ask Lucy some questions. He also noticed that she was a very small and petite girl as he towered over her. 'So, how many of you are there on this ship?'

'Don't you already know?'

'No, I've only just got here.'

'Right, you teleported here, from the other side of the galaxy, is that right?'

'Er, yeah, something like that.'

'Then, tell me this. If you teleported here from the other side of the galaxy, why are you dressed like you're going to a Second Elizabethan Era theme night? And why choose the later part of that era? The sixties were far cooler.'

'I'm not dressed up like anything, these are my normal clothes.'

'Do you seriously expect me to believe that?'

'Yes. Where I'm originally from, everyone dresses like this.'

'Oh, so you're not originally from the other side of the galaxy then? So, where are you from?'

'Earth.'

'Oh really, you're from Earth are you? Well, I'm glad we cleared that one up, I was starting to get confused there for a minute.'

Ryan realised what he had just said, and then said, 'You're all from Earth, aren't you?'

'Yeah. Every human being is from Earth, and we don't have any aliens here. You're not very bright, are you?'

'Now, there's no need for that, I'm new here, remember?'

'Hmm... So, Mr Earthling, whereabouts on Earth are you from?'

It was at this point that Ryan finally noticed that everyone who had spoken so far had done so in an English accent, and so he presumed that he was on some sort of British ship. He then said, 'I'm actually from London.'

'Are you having me on? You're from London, and you're telling me that everyone there dresses like that?'

'Well, er, um...!' Ryan wasn't quite sure how to respond to this. He then decided to ask (knowing that it would make him look a little foolish), 'Erm, I don't suppose you could tell me what the date is?'

'Yeah, OK, it's 3rd September.'

'Ah, yes, it would be. But what about the year?'

'What about the year?'

'Could you tell me what year it is?'

'You mean you don't know?'

'No I don't. I keep telling you, I'm new here.'

'Well, what year do you think it is?'

'Well, it's clearly sometime in the future.' As soon as the word 'future' had left Ryan's mouth he realised how stupid it sounded. He then continued, 'Well, erm, you see, the future from my perspective... Look, OK, I haven't just travelled in space, I've also travelled in time.'

'Oh, what, so you're a time traveller now? What are you, a Time Lord? Where's your TARDIS?'

'TARDIS? So you know "Doctor Who"? Is that still on?'

'Yeah, of course. It gets a new series every year.'

'How many Doctor's have they had now?'

'We're on the 302nd, Charles Hartnell.'

'Hartnell? Is he related to William Hartnell?'

'Yeah, he's a direct descendent. He's not terribly good, at least I don't think he is. I always thought that Tom Baker III was the best.'

'Oh right...'

'But his companion's alright.'

'And who's that?'

'Philip Jones, played by John Salmon. The show's changed a lot since they got married.'

'The Doctor married his companion?!'

'Yeah, men can marry each other now, Mr Stuck in the Past 'Time Traveller.'

'It's not that that shocked me, I'm all for men marrying each other. I was just surprised that the Doctor married his companion, or even got married at all! It was bad enough when he had that thing with Rose, and then there was all that debacle about whether or not he and River Song ever actually got married.'

'Rose? River Song? You really are behind the times! What year are you from, mate?'

'2011. We just had "The Wedding of River Song". The Doctor made everyone believe he was dead.'

'Wow, you are a long way behind! Just you wait until you get to the next series! You are not going to BELIEVE what they did with that show! That series went down in history as the best ever! No one saw what was coming!'

'So, you know what happens next? Do you know what the Doctor's name is?'

'Yeah.'

'Go on, tell me!'

'Nope, sorry, spoilers!'

'Oh, suit yourself then.'

'So, are you really from 2011?'

'Yep, that's me. Mr 2011. What year is it here.'

'You're as long way from home, it's 3011.'

'Damn... I missed the millennium. Again.' Ryan had slept right through midnight on 1st January 2000, having been seriously ill with the flu at the time.

'You really are something else, you know that?'

'Yeah. Anyway, getting back to my earlier question, how many people are there on this ship?'

'There's only the five of us.'

'Five? Isn't this ship a little big for the five of you?'

'Not really. Not when you take into account all of the supplies that we have to bring. All of the plants to generate our oxygen. The gravity generators. Water cleaning systems. Food production units. And the fusion generator to power them all and to give us our thrust. It takes a hell of a lot of resources to get anywhere in the solar system, you know.'

'And where are you headed to?'

'We're going to Titania, the largest moon around Uranus. And please, no jokes about Uranus, we have heard them all before. They weren't funny the first time, and they won't be funny now.'

'I wasn't even going to think about it. So, what about the other ship. They mentioned something about handing us to the authorities at Jupiter? Is that where they're going to?'

'Yes. They're going to Ganymede specifically. I'm so jealous of them. They'll get to where they're going sooner, and once they're there they'll get to see Jupiter up close every day. Whereas we'll be travelling on to Uranus, which is quite dull to look at. It's all just one colour. We don't even get to pass Saturn on the way. And life on Titania is a lot harder than on Ganymede. Communications with Earth take even longer, the Sun's a lot smaller, and so is Titania itself, and they run the artificial gravity at an even lower level there.'

'Sounds like you'd rather not go. Why did you choose to go to Uranus?'

'I didn't get any choice. I went through the school system like everyone else, got assigned to the Space Corp, and after a few years training there I was assigned to this ship to go out and work on Titania.'

'And how long will you be there for?'

'It's a one way trip. It takes a lot of resources to get human beings out to the Outer Worlds, and it would take a lot to bring them back again, and so they don't bother. We just stay out there for the rest of our lives.'

'That sounds sad. You mean you'll never get to see the Earth again?'

'Only on a TV screen.'

'Is it a similar story for everyone else?'

'Yes, no one gets to chose their own careers any more. The authorities assesses everyone's strengths and weaknesses, and then determines what work they would be best suited for, which in turn determines where you get to live.'

'And what work will you be doing once you get to Titania?'

'Nothing that important. Just admin and comms work. The others will mainly be involved in the extraction of materials from the Uranian atmosphere and sending them back to Earth.'

'And what about families? What happens to any kids that are born out there?'

'Oh, people who get sent out to the Outer Worlds aren't allowed to have any children. They can't be brought up properly there, and it takes too much to send them and their families back to Earth. And so no one is allowed to have a child beyond Mars.'

'But didn't anyone consult you on this before they sent you all the way out here?'

'Nope. No one ever asks us what we want.'

'So, they just decided for you that you could never have any children?'

'That's about it.'

'But what about your human rights? Doesn't everyone have the right to a family life?'

'Not any more, I'm afraid. After the global population reached ten billion governments throughout the world took action to keep it from growing any further. You have to get permission to have children now. Even when we started to colonise the Moon and Mars, and therefore had more worlds to grow in, they still insisted that people have to be given permission before they can have kids. That permission is automatically revoked permanently for anyone who's sent out to the Outer Worlds.'

'So, what, did they sterilise you before they sent you out here?'

'No! Of course not! Who do you think we are, barbarians?!'

'Sorry, no. It's just that this all seems a little odd to me, you understand?'

'Yeah, I get it... So, anyway, you're seriously from 2011?'

'That's right.'

'So just how did you get here?'

'I'm not too sure to be honest. I woke up one day in this idyllic world, with no idea how I got there. Then Lisa came along, and she took me through this tunnel, and we ended up on this planet called Pyna. Then we brought about a big constitutional change, brought a couple of lovers together, then went down a giant slide, and then we ended up here! It's all quite simple really.'

'Is it really. I only followed about half of that. I probably would have found it easier to believe if you had just told me that you came here in a blue box that's bigger on the inside than it is on the out... So, do you have anything from 2011 that you can show me, something that might be able to convince me?'

Ryan thought for a moment, and then he thought of his coin. He took it out of his pocket and said, 'I do have this. It's a bit old, from the sixties - the 1960's. I'm not quite sure how I came to have it. It just turned up in my pocket when I arrived on Pyna. We don't use these coins in 2011 anymore, it got replaced with something a bit smaller.'

Lucy took the coin in her hand and looked at it in amazement. 'I've never held a coin before. I've seen them in museums, but I've never actually held one before.'

'You mean you don't have coins here? Oh, of course, you probably all have electronic money now. I guess you just have to wave a plastic card at something when you go shopping.'

'No, we don't have money any more. It's an outdated concept. Everything went socialist after the complete collapse of the banking industry back in - well, I guess you've still got that to look forward to, if you ever get back to the dark ages!'

'The dark ages? I'll have you know that 2011 is not in the dark ages!'

'Oh, yes, of course, you still had a plentiful amount of electricity back then. The lights in your homes never went out. Thanks for producing all that carbon dioxide for us, by the way. Didn't they tell you to think about the world you leave for your children?'

'But I don't have any children.'

'Well, maybe not yet you don't.' Lucy then started to laugh. 'I've just had a crazy thought! I could be you great great great great great great granddaughter or something!'

'Yeah, maybe!' Ryan actually thought that the odds of that were actually quite small, but he decided not to say anything. Besides, if he and Lucy were somehow related, he knew that meant that some of the thoughts that he was having about her were even more naughty than he had hoped they would have been.

Lucy looked in more detail at the coin, and then she said, 'That's Queen Elizabeth II, isn't it?'

'Yes, that's Grannie Lizzie.'

'You what?'

'Oh, long story, it doesn't matter right now. Do you still have the British royal family in 3011?'

'Yeah, although they're the only one that's left. They married into all of the other ones whose countries didn't turn into republics.'

'So, who's on the throne now?'

'King Henry XIII. King Henry the Unlucky some people call him. But he's done alright for himself.'

'Has he had as many wives as Henry VIII?'

'No, he hasn't had any.'

'Ah, so he's an eligible bachelor then.'

'No, he has a husband.'

'Oh, right.'

Lucy gave Ryan his coin back. Then they came to a stop. 'Well, history boy, we're here now. This is the Garden.' She opened a door that was on their left. Inside was indeed a large garden, with a vast lighting array above it. Most of the plants were green fern like plants, but in the distance Ryan thought he could see a vegetable garden.

Lucy said, 'This is where we produce all of our oxygen. We also produce some of our food here as well. Most of the food we eat comes in concentrated packets, but it's good to add some real, proper food to that every once in a while. There's not really much for us to do here in the garden. Everything pretty much grows by itself here. The computer knows when to turn the lights on and off, when to water the plants, and by how much. We have to harvest the vegetables

ourselves, but that's not too bad. What we do have to do is just check to make sure that everything's in working order - that the lights are working, that the soil's moist but not soaking, that sort of thing. To be honest, if the Captain is wanting to put you to work until we get to Jupiter I have no idea what he's going to get you to do. There's barely enough work to keep us occupied. It's generally really boring on this ship. Come on, let's get on with it.'

They started to walk up and down the aisle's, looking at the plants and the lights and the soil. Ryan could see what Lucy meant by things being boring on the ship.

He then said, 'So, Lucy. I get that you're not allowed to have kids, but what about a boyfriend? Surely people out here are allowed to have relationships?'

'Yeah, of course. Just as long as we don't have kids we can pretty much do as we like.'

'And what about you? Do you have a boyfriend?'

'No... I... er... I've never had a boyfriend.'

'Is there anyone you think you might be interested in?'

'Have you seen the men on this ship - both of them. I wouldn't go out with the Captain if you paid me, and John is completely besotted with Jane, and he's not my type anyway. So, no, there's no one.'

'Do you think you might meet anyone by the time you get to Titania?'

'I hardly think so. All the men there at the moment are ancient.'

'So, in other words, there's no one special in your life?'

There was a long period of silence, and then Lucy just said, 'Let's just get on with this. I don't want to talk about my personal life, if that's all the same to you.'

'If that's what you want.'

They carried on checking all of the plants. Ryan felt a little sad for Lucy. Her life was being completely controlled by the authorities. He was sure that they felt that they were doing the right thing by their citizens, but they were probably unaware just what impact their decisions were having on people. What sort of life was it where people were sent out to the outer reaches of the solar system, never to return, with no prospect of finding a partner, and, if they do, no possibility of having any children.

He didn't think that he could live a life like this. He wanted to have children one day. For him that was something that was really important. As he thought about that he came across another blank spot in his mind. He felt that there was something that he should be able to remember, some memory that was just outside of his conscious thoughts, but which he just couldn't quite reach. He tried to think really hard about it, but he just couldn't bring it to his mind.

It took them quite a while to go through all of the plants, and they didn't speak much more. He sensed that their earlier conversation had left Lucy feeling sad. He wished that there was something that he could do or say to help her feel better, but he didn't have a clue as to what he could possibly do. This world was just as alien to him as Pyna was. It all just seemed so strange to him.

It also felt wrong. The fact that Lucy couldn't find a partner, settle down, and have children, felt just as wrong to him as Travern not being allowed to marry Celia had felt. But he knew that there wasn't much that he could do to bring about change here. Back in Triceria he had been able to speak to the Council of Three directly, and the fact that he was from Earth seemed to have some special sway with them. But he wasn't going to be to do the same thing here. Here, the authorities were all the way back on Earth, and he himself wasn't anything particularly special here. OK, he did come from a time that was a thousand years ago, but, even he was able to prove that and convince everyone that he was from 2011, it wouldn't be enough to persuade anyone here that he was right. If anything, that might see him as being backward and living in the past, which, effectively, he had been.

Once they had gone through all of the plants Lucy said, 'Well, there's not much more that we can do here. I suppose I could show you some more of the ship if you're up for that?'

'Yeah, sure, it's not like I'm planning on doing anything else right now.'

'OK then.'

They left the garden via a door on the other side to the one that they had come in, and she took him down the corridor a little way, and then into a door on their right. Lucy said, 'These are where our sleeping quarters and personal rooms are. I'm not quite sure where you'll end up sleeping. This ship was only designed for five people, and so it only has five beds. You'll probably end up having to sleep on the floor somewhere.'

'Oh, right...' Ryan was starting to feel a little sleepy by now - he hadn't slept since before Pyna - and he didn't like the idea of having to sleep on the metal floor. And he didn't like the idea of being here for any great period of time. He had the feeling that he would just be getting in the way the whole time.

'Here, I'll show you my room.' Lucy went through one of the doors on the left. Normally Ryan would have been ecstatic at the idea of going into the bedroom of an attractive teenage girl, but for some reason he wasn't feeling that ecstasy now.

He was expecting the room to look really space aged and futuristic, but, in many respects it looked (to him) quite normal. There was a large TV screen built into the wall, but, apart from that (and the view of outer space through the window), it wouldn't have looked out of place back

in his own time. The bed looked comfortable enough, and there was an easy chair on the other side of the room. There were cupboards and shelves with lots of books on them, and a computer keyboard that wasn't connected to anything. Ryan presumed that it used some sort of Wi-Fi connection to control what was on the screen. Overall, the place looked rather cosy.

Lucy said, 'You can lie down on my bed for a minute if you like. I'm just going to quickly check some of my personal messages.'

'OK,' said Ryan, as he got onto the bed. He was right, it was very comfortable.

Lucy picked up the keyboard, and went and sat in a office like chair near the TV screen. She pressed a few buttons, and then an image of a man appeared on the screen. It was a recorded message, and he said, 'Hi Lucy, hope all's well with you today. Just thought I'd leave you this message to say "hi". Everything's well here on the Columbia. Just the same old boring stuff. Anyway, I don't really have anything else to say right now, I'll call you this evening and we can have a proper chat. See you later!' The man waved at the camera, and then the image disappeared.

Lucy then went on to do a few other things on the screen, but Ryan wasn't really able to follow them. His eyes were starting to feel really heavy. This was the first chance that he had had to properly rest since he started on this journey with Lisa. He couldn't hold back the tiredness any more, and he closed his eyes. Within moments, he was asleep.

In his sleep he dreamed. He found himself standing on top of a large hill. All around him the landscape looked as though it were on fire. The fire went on as far as the eye could see, right to the horizons. The sky was completely black, as embers from the fires went up into the clouds.

He then heard a deep, menacing, masculine voice say, 'Ryan. Do you hear me, Ryan? This is all down to you Ryan! This is all down to you.'

'What?' he called out. 'What do you mean?'

'You know what I mean. This is all down to you, and you know why, Ryan. You know why.'

'No, I don't. I have no idea what you're talking about. Who are you? What is this place?'

'You know where you are, you know who I am, you know why you are here, Ryan. Do not try to deny it. This is all your fault, Ryan. Everything is your fault, and you know it. You've only yourself to blame. You know why you are in this place, and I will make sure that you never leave it.'

'I don't know who you are!'

The voice laughed out loud. It appeared to be coming from all directions. 'Oh, Ryan! Ryan, Ryan, Ryan. You know perfectly well who I am! We will meet, face to face, for the first time

soon, in the next world. Enjoy your time on the Challenger whilst you can. Because when you leave it, I will be waiting for you. You will not be able to escape me. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. I am waiting for you, and it is inevitable that we will meet. It is as certain as the fact that night follows day, and I am the night.

'Sleep well, little Ryan. Sleep well, and look forward to our meeting, Ryan! Look forward to our meeting Ryan! Look forward to meeting me at last!' The voice laughed out loud again, and lightning streaked across the sky in all directions, followed by a booming thunder.

Ryan woke with a start, and he cried out. 'Are you OK?' said a female voice to his left. He slowly came to, and found his bearings. He saw the TV screen at the end of the room, and the view of space outside of the window. For a moment he thought that he was going to wake up in his bed in London, and find out that the whole thing from the town with William, to Pyna, and the Challenger, had been a dream. But he now saw that was not the case. He could hear the now familiar hum of the Challenger, accompanied by the sound of the ventilation. He knew that he was in Lucy's room on the ship, and that only the fiery landscape had been a dream.

He turned to his left, and saw Lucy looking at him. She looked concerned. She said, 'That must have been quite a nasty dream that you were having.'

'It was. How long was I asleep for?'

'Three hours.'

'Three hours?!' To Ryan it had only felt like five minutes. He couldn't believe that he had been asleep for a whole three hours.

He found that he was in a cold sweat, and that he was actually trembling. He found that he didn't want to leave the bed, at least, not just yet. He wanted to try and find some meaning to the dream that he had just had. Even though it was about as unreal as a dream could be, in some respects it had felt absolutely real. It had felt like he was actually having a conversation with someone. But as to who it was he had absolutely no idea. He had said that Ryan would have known who it was, but Ryan didn't have a clue. He also didn't have a clue as to what that landscape was, or why everything to do with it was all his fault.

But the thing that worried him most of all was the insistence of the voice's owner that they would meet soon. That they would meet as soon as Ryan left the Challenger and went on to the next world. Ryan didn't like the idea of meeting this person. They had felt like they were full of darkness and evil, and would therefore be the last person that Ryan, or, indeed, anybody, would like to meet. He had a feeling that the owner of the voice wouldn't have anything nice in store for Ryan when they did get to meet.

And so Ryan found himself in a quandary. On the one hand he wanted to move on from this place, and all the other places that he found himself in, so that this whole thing could soon be over and he would have all of the answers that he needed and he could get back to the 'real' world, whatever that was. But, on the other hand, he knew that as soon as he moved on from this world, as soon as he left the Challenger, he would find himself having to confront the owner of that voice, and that was not a prospect that he was looking forward to.

Lucy looked at him and asked, 'Are you OK?'

'To be honest, no.'

'Gee, that dream must have really shook you up. Are you really from the year 2011? There isn't something else going on here that I should know about, is there?'

'Yes, I really am from a thousand years ago, and there's nothing else that you need to know about. At least, I hope there's not.'

'Oh dear, that doesn't sound very good. What is it?'

'I really don't know myself.'

'I think you should tell just how much you do know. You're starting to scare me now.'

The last thing that Ryan wanted to do was to scare Lucy, but he also felt uneasy about telling her what had happened in his dream. But he knew that if he kept silent, and kept on acting weird about his dream, all that he would be doing would be scaring Lucy, and so he decided that it was probably for the best that he did tell her just what had happened in his dream. And so he proceeded to do so, leaving out none of the detail.

Once he was done Lucy said, 'Whoa! That was quite some dream you had there. And you really have no idea what it meant, or who the owner of that voice was?'

'None whatsoever.'

'OK then... Well, I think the best way to look at it is this. For now, you are on this ship, the Challenger, and you don't have anything to worry about here. Here, you are perfectly safe. It will be several months before we arrive at Jupiter, and there's nowhere else for you to go until then, and so that should give you plenty of time to figure everything out.'

Ryan felt like he wanted to explain that their distance from Jupiter might have nothing to do with how long he had on this ship before he moved on to the next world. He had arrived here in the middle of its flight, and if he had done that it was more than likely that he would somehow end up leaving the ship long before it got to Jupiter.

But he didn't say that. And he knew that he would likely be here for a little while at least. When they had arrived on Pyna Lisa had said that there was something that they would have to do before they left that world. That 'something' would appear to have been getting involved with

Tricerian politics, and bringing about a change to them which would allow Travern and Celia to get married. That, and collecting the key from the box. And so he knew that there was probably something that he had to do on this ship before he would leave it for the next world, and, therefore, he would have some forewarning before he left for that world and faced whatever it was that he was due to face in that world. He suspected that whatever it was that he had to do in this world would have something to do with the key that he acquired from the last world, but he couldn't be certain of that.

Coming back out of his thoughts, he turned to Lucy, and just smiled and nodded his head. She smiled back at him, and that helped to make him feel a little better.

'Come on,' said Lucy. 'You can't stay here the whole time. We'd best go back up to the Bridge. You know the girl that appeared on the other ship, don't you?'

'Lisa? Yeah, we've been travelling together, but we somehow got split up when we arrived here.'

'Well, let's go back to the Bridge. I'll have a word with Captain Roberts - we should be able to arrange it for you and Lisa to be able to talk to each other. It probably won't be a private conversation - both Captain Roberts and Captain Cole are likely to want to listen in to what you both have to say to each other - but it will be better than nothing. Shall we do that?'

'Yes, let's. It'll be good to be able to talk with Lisa. She might have some idea as to what's going on here. She might even be able to provide me with an explanation my dream. She seems to be quite good at knowing about stuff like that.'

'Alright then, let's go.'

Ryan got up off of the bed, straightened himself out, and then Lucy led him out of her room, and back towards the Bridge. They walked along in silence all of the way there.

Ryan spent most of this time looking out of the window, out into space. He saw far more stars than he would have expected. Whenever he saw photos of planets and asteroids within their solar system, the background was always just plain black. But it made sense that they should be able to see a load of stars there. He now realised that when they took photos like that they either must just leave the background stars out of the picture, or the cameras simply weren't sensitive enough to record the light that they emitted. He was amazed at just how many stars he could see. It was far more than he had been able to see from William's garden shortly before he set out on this journey. He could clearly make out the band that was the Milky Way, but there were so many stars that were visible here that he wasn't able to make out any of the constellations.

He asked Lucy, 'This is quite an incredible view. Do you find yourself looking at it often.'

'Oh, yeah, but then there's not really much else for us to look at. It's not that it changes that much. It's rotated a little since we left Earth, but not that much. We haven't even had a good comet to look at. You kind of get bored of looking at it after a while.'

Ryan could see how that could be. If you were to look at the same thing every day you were bound to get fed up of it eventually. But that didn't stop this view from being any less beautiful, particularly as it was still fairly new to him.

They continued on to the Bridge. When they arrived on it things were pretty much the same as they had been when they had left it. Ryan wondered what it was that they did all day here. When they entered the Bridge the Captain turned to them and said, 'Ah, you're back. Lucy, how is our guest settling in?'

'He's fine, sir.'

'I don't suppose you've been able to elicit any information as to how he came to be on board my ship and just what it is that he's doing here?'

'No sir.' Ryan figured that Lucy probably would have felt a little awkward if she had repeated anything that Ryan had told her. If she started saying that he was a time traveller from the year 2011 the others would have quite rightly started to think that she was probably mad.

She went on and said, 'Sir, do we know anything more about the girl that turned up on the Colombia?'

'No, and she's not being very talkative on their side. She's being co-operative and is doing as she's told, but she hasn't said anything about who they are or why they are here.'

'Sir, would it be a good idea if we were to allow them to talk to each other?'

There was a pause, and then the Captain said, 'No, I most certainly do not think that it would be a good idea! They might start discussing whatever their secret plan is with each other. We can't possibly allow that to happen!'

'I didn't mean a private conversation, sir. Of course, I would expect both you and Captain Cole to listen in on what they had to say. If we allow them to talk to each other they might be able to convince each other to start talking to us, to reveal what they are doing here. I can't see how it could do much harm. The way I see it, we have about as much to gain as they do.'

'I'm not sure...' said the Captain. Ryan wasn't sure either. He didn't know what Lucy was trying to do here. He was fairly sure that she knew that he and Lisa didn't have any sort of secret plan that they were up to, that they didn't have any great secrets to reveal. If the Captains did allow them to speak with each other they might find themselves being bitterly disappointed at what they heard.

The Captain continued, 'I'll have a word with Captain Cole and see what he thinks. Take him outside whilst I do so.'

'Yes sir.'

Lucy led Ryan out of the Bridge again. Once they were outside he said, 'Thanks for that. Do you think they'll allow me and Lisa to speak to each other?'

'Yeah, I think so. Captain Roberts may come across as all strict and authoritative, but he's a reasonable guy. He's not usually like this, and I think you can understand why. It is very odd that you and Lisa just appeared on board our ships from out of thin air, and so they're right to feel suspicious about it all. I don't think that you two are up to anything evil, I'm getting a good feeling from you. But he's not to know that. If you are allowed to speak to Lisa I'm sure he won't uncover any evidence of an evil plan, because I don't think there is any evil plan to uncover. But it might help to convince him that you and Lisa are harmless, and that we should try and do all that we can to try and help you, if, indeed, there is anything that we are able to do to help.'

'OK, yes, that makes sense, thanks.'

They waited outside for a little while. Ryan felt like he was a naughty schoolchild who had been sent to wait outside of the Headmaster's office whilst they decided what to do with him. There had been a few occasions during his school life where that had actually happened, although he'd never actually done anything too naughty during his school days.

Before long John popped his head out of the door and said, 'You can come back in now.'

They went back on board the Bridge, and stood before the Captain. He said, 'I've spoken to Captain Cole, and we've decided that we will allow you and Lisa to speak to each other. We will all be here to listen to what you have to say, and we will be recording it. We'll also only allow it to be an audio channel only. You two had better not try anything funny. I've done work in code breaking before, so don't try talking to each other using any coded messages. I'll be able to detect them a mile off. Do you understand all that I just said.'

'Yes sir,' said Ryan.

'Very well. Captain Cole is just fetching Lisa now.' They heard a loud beep coming from one of the consoles. 'Ah, that will be him now. Jane, if you'll do the honours.'

Jane pressed a button on the console in front of her, and then they heard the voice of Captain Cole say, 'Challenger, Challenger, this is Colombia. Do you read me? Over.'

Captain Rogers responded, 'Colombia, Colombia, this is Challenger. We read you loud and clear. We have Ryan here with us. Do you have Lisa there? Over.'

'Confirmed, we have Lisa here with us now. We're ready to start when you are. Awaiting your word. Over.'

'Very well. Stand by.' Captain Roberts then turned to Ryan and said, 'You can start whenever you're ready. Oh, and you don't have to say "Over" whenever you're done speaking. That's just a thing that we do. It's a two way channel, and so you two can speak to each other normally. And remember, we are all listening, and so I don't want to hear of any funny business. In your own time...'

Ryan turned to face the front of the ship, and said, 'Lisa. Are you there? Can you hear me?'

'Yes, I can hear you Ryan. How are you?'

'Not too bad, considering. I'm a little tired, but other than that, I'm OK. How are you?'

'I'm good thanks. They're treating me well over here. I have a lovely guy called Patrick who's looking after me. Is someone keeping an eye on you over there?'

'Yes, there's a girl called Lucy here who's been taking care of me. I can't complain about how they're treating me.' Ryan decided that he should be fully honest in what he said, even if what he said would have sounded fantastical to the two crews. He then said, 'Lisa, do you have any idea how we came to be here?'

'Not exactly. I think it would have been a similar thing to before, when we went through the tunnel to Pyna. By the time that we left the Citadel we had done what we had been sent to Pyna to do, and so we were brought here.'

'But why were we separated? You said you'd be by my side throughout all of this?'

'And I will, Ryan. I don't know why we were separated. Maybe one of us needs to be on each ship. It certainly wasn't my idea for us to be separated like this. But I will still be by your side. I'm only over here on the next ship, not far at all. In a manner of speaking, I guess I am still by your side.'

Ryan smiled, 'I guess so. Lisa, look, I have something to tell you. I'm not able to make sense of it, but I think you probably will. I shut my eyes for a little while earlier. I then fell asleep for a few hours. Whilst I was asleep I had this really scary dream.' He then went on to explain the dream in detail. Once he had done so he asked, 'Do you have any idea what it means? Do you have any idea who that voice belongs to?'

There was a long moment of silence. When no answer came, Ryan asked, 'Lisa, are you still there?'

'Yes Ryan, I'm still here. I'm... not quite sure what it all means. I can only suggest that you try not to worry about it. Worrying about it isn't going to do any good. I'll try and do all that I can to get back to you, to be by your side again. But until then you should just try to remain calm. Try not to dwell on it. No harm can come to you whilst you are over there. You're not in any danger. You'll be OK.'

Ryan then said, 'Lisa, what's going on? I don't like this journey anymore. I never really liked it to start with. I don't know where I am, or what I'm doing, or how I even came to be here. I don't even know if any of this is even real. It all feels like a really bad episode of "Life on Mars" or "Ashes to Ashes". I keep half expecting DCI Hunt to make an appearance. But instead I get strange voices making threats to me in my dreams.

'Lisa, I'm hearing voices. That's usually a sign of insanity. Am I going insane Lisa? Am I already insane?' Tears started to well up in his eyes. 'I'm scared, Lisa. I'm really, really, scared.' A tear started to flow down his cheek. 'I don't know what to do, and I just want this to all be over. I want to be back home, safe and sound, with my memory intact. I just want to be out of here and back to reality, my reality, wherever and whatever that might be. Please, Lisa, help me. Help me Lisa. Help me...' He started to sob.

Lisa then said, 'Ryan, Ryan! Please don't cry. It pains me to hear you cry. I know that you're confused, and that your upset, and that's all perfectly understandable. This is all very confusing for you. I get that. But you won't have to go through this alone. I am still here, and I am going to help you get through this. You just have to stay calm, and stay strong. I'm sure that together we will be able to find all of the answers that you seek. You won't have to go through all of this alone. The answers are out there, and I'm sure that they will be coming soon. Stay strong for me Ryan, do you think you can do that?'

Ryan wiped away the tears, and said, 'Yes, I think I can.'

'OK, good. I'm sure you'll be fine. If the crew of the Challenger are anything like the crew of the Columbia, you don't have anything to worry about here. They all seem like lovely people, who will look after us. We'll soon see what it is that we're here to do - how it is that we're able to help. Once we find out what that is we'll be one step closer to getting all of the answers that you seek, and to getting you back home. I know you're worried about what the next world might bring, but try not to. I know it's a terrifying prospect, but worrying about it won't do any good. If you want all of this to be over, if you want to find the answers that you seek, then you will have to go there sooner or later. And hopefully I'll be reunited with you by then. Try not to be afraid, Ryan. Everything will work out in the end, I'm sure of it.'

'Yes, thank you. I'll hopefully get to see you again soon?'

'Yes, I hope so too.'

Captain Roberts then said, 'I think that's enough. Captain Cole, are you still there?'

Captain Cole answered, 'Yes, I'm still here. I hope you were able to follow all of that, because I'll be damned if I could.'

'To be honest, it all sounded a little strange to me. If you question Lisa about it, I'll have a word with Ryan, and then maybe it will make a little more sense. Does that sound like a plan to you?'

'Sounds good to me. Over and out.'

Jane pressed a button on the console in front of her, and they could all hear that the line was closed down. The Captain then turned to Ryan and said, 'That was quite a conversation that you had there. To be honest, I wasn't quite expecting you two to say that, but then, I don't think that anyone here really knew what to expect. Where exactly are you and Lisa from?'

Ryan answered, 'I don't know where Lisa is from herself, I don't even know if she's human. But I am from Earth, London to be precise. But I am not from this time. I was born in 1981, and the last year that I remember it being before I started on the journey that's led me here was 2011, exactly one thousand years ago.'

The Captain looked Ryan in the eyes, 'Are you being serious? Look at me and tell me that you're from a millennium in the past?'

Ryan looked deep into the Captain's eyes and said, 'Yes, I am from a millennium in the past. I am from the year 2011.'

The Captain sat back in his chair, and, after a brief pause, he said, 'I believe you. I can see in your eyes that you're telling the truth. And I believe that those tears earlier were genuine. Now, why don't you tell us everything. How did you come to be on my ship, a thousand years into your future?'

'Well, I'm not too sure, to be honest. I can't remember exactly when I left the Earth, the real world. That part of my memory is a blur. I can remember living a life in an ideal town by the sea. The people there were all lovely, the weather was always perfect, and I didn't have a care in the world there. Only, that world wasn't real, you see. That world was just a bit too perfect. I met Lisa in that world. She was the one who made me realise that that world wasn't real. But she promised to help me get back to the real world, and to help me find the answers as to what led me to that world in the first place. She started by leading me to this cave...'

Ryan then proceeded to tell the Captain and the crew of the Challenger all about what had happened on Pyna, and how, at the end, whilst trying to make his way out of the Citadel, he found himself here on the Challenger, in the year 3011.

The Captain then said, 'Wow, that's a quite a story. Either you are being honest, or you've got the most active imagination that I've ever seen. As fantastical as your story sounds, it actually sounds more plausible than the alternative. There is simply no way that I can see that you could have hidden away on this ship, and your friend hidden away on the Columbia, for so long

without detection. There's been no drain on our food and water supplies, and our oxygen levels have been consistent with having five crew members on board, and so there is absolutely no way that you could have survived if you had been hiding on the ship. And, as we all know, teleportation - at least, how we come to understand it - is impossible. Your explanation, together with the truthfulness that I see in your eyes, is the only half-way plausible explanation that we have.

'Now, tell me. You said that you could only leave Pyna after you had carried out a task there, and when you were talking to Lisa just now you two spoke of having to do something here. Do you have any idea as to what that task might be?'

'I'm afraid I don't. We didn't have any clear idea as to what precisely we were meant to do on Pyna when we were over there. It just sort of presented itself to us, and we went with it. I don't know if a similar thing will happen here. I suggest that everyone just carries on as best as they can, and we just see what happens.'

'That might sound like a good idea, but after what has happened today carrying on won't be as easy as you think. As I'm sure as Lucy has told you, this ship and the Columbia were both designed to take five crew members each. That's five crew members exactly. The food, water, and oxygen systems are all designed to provide for five crew members. But now both ships have a sixth person on board. The systems simply won't be able to cope. The oxygen levels will start to go down, we won't have enough water going through the system, and our food supplies won't last until we get to our destinations. The Columbia is only going as far as Ganymede, and, with a bit of luck, if they cut back on their rations and can somehow increase their oxygen production, they might just about make it. But there's no way that we could take you all the way with us to Titania, plus I imagine that you and Lisa wouldn't want to be permanently separated.

'So, it would be best for all concerned if you're able to find out what this task is that you're supposed to be completing. The sooner you've done that, the sooner you can be on your way, and the better it will be for our resources. But, just in case you end up having a protracted stay with us, we need to be prepared. Now, when we get to Jupiter we won't be able to slow down. In order for us to get to Uranus and Titania on schedule we'll need to use Jupiter as a gravity whip. So, what we'll need to do is keep you and Lisa on the separate ships until we start to approach Jupiter. Both ships will have to carefully manage their supplies to try and make it through. Then, shortly before we get to Jupiter, we'll have to do something that is very rarely done - we'll have to transfer you over to the Columbia, and you can land at Ganymede with them, and the authorities there can decide what to do next. Now, does that sound reasonable to you?'

'Absolutely. Do you know how much longer it will be until we get to Jupiter?'

'We're due to get there in about nine months time, so we've got a little while yet. Hopefully you should be able to find and complete your task long before then. It sounds like you were able to manage it fairly quickly on Pyna, and so hopefully you'll be able to manage it fairly quickly here too. I don't mean to sound rude, but I'm sure that you can understand that I'd prefer it if you could get off of my ship sooner rather than later.'

'I don't think you're being rude. I completely understand and agree. I'd like to move on as soon as I can.'

'Right, that's all sorted then. Now, we need to figure out what to do with you in the meantime. For starters, where are you going to sleep.'

'Well, I have an idea for that. You have five beds here, right?'

'Yes, that's correct.'

'But do you all have to use them at the same time?'

'Well, actually, no. We always have at least two people on duty at any one time.'

'Well, that's simple then. I'll simply have to rotate beds. I can sleep at different times to you, in one of the beds that aren't being used.'

'Now hang on a minute!' said John. 'My room is my own private space! No one else is allowed to go in there, and that's the way it should stay. Private space is a very special thing on a long space voyage like this. It's a precious thing that should not be given up lightly.'

The Captain said, 'I agree with John's point, but I fail to see a better option. He does have to sleep somewhere, and we can't expect him to sleep on the floor.'

Then Lucy chipped in and said, 'He can share my room. Obviously we won't share the bed at the same time, I wouldn't want to get between him and Lisa.'

Ryan then said, 'Oh, Lisa and I aren't a couple or anything, and somehow I don't think we will be.' And he genuinely thought that. Whilst he did think that Lisa was a very nice girl, for some reason he didn't feel there was much of an attraction there, which he now thought was a little odd.

Lucy responded with, 'Oh, sorry, I just assumed. Anyway, that doesn't change anything. We still won't share the bed at the same time. But you'd be welcome to sleep in it when I'm not. I'm sure that we can work something out whilst you're here.'

'Good,' said the Captain. 'That's settled then. Well, I suggest you two go back there now and sort out amongst yourselves how all of this is going to work. At the very least I think we can find some spare clothes that will fit you. You can't keep on wearing the same things day in day out whilst you're with us if you end up being here for a protracted period of time. You'll start to

stink the place out, and trust me, that's the last thing you want when you on an interplanetary voyage.'

Ryan nodded to show his understanding, and then he turned to Lucy, who led him out of the Bridge again, and then back down the corridor towards the sleeping quarters. He said, 'That was very kind of you. It's not often that a girl will offer to share her bed and her personal space like that, especially with a guy that's she's literally just met.'

'That's OK. I don't know why, but I'm getting a good feeling from you. I feel like I can trust you. I can certainly trust you a lot more than John seems able to! I think the real reason why John didn't want to share his room with you is that he's worried that you might uncover his porn collection!'

'Does he seriously have a porn collection?'

'Well, I don't actually know if he has or not, but I wouldn't blame him if he did. It can be extremely lonely in space you know.'

'I see...'

'But, seriously, I get a sense that you won't do anything to bring about any harm. You somehow feel more like a brother than just some guy, you know?'

'I think I know what you mean. And I can assure you, you're right. I'm not planning on causing any trouble whilst I'm here. I just want to help out as best I can, complete whatever task I'm supposed to be doing here, and then be on my way.'

'Do you have any idea who's setting these tasks for you?'

'None whatsoever, and I don't think Lisa knows either.'

'Well, it must be someone. You can't just be randomly hopping from place to place. This must be part of someone's design. Someone out there must be choosing where you go, and why. There has to be someone behind all of this.'

This got Ryan thinking, and he knew that Lucy was making sense. Somehow he and Lisa had been sent right across the galaxy to Pyna, and, once they had achieved something there, they had been transported to here. That surely couldn't have been done by chance. Any sort of random wormhole wouldn't just perfectly deposit them on these two ships in the middle of space. Someone must have planned it to happen like this. But that then led to another question to which he wanted to find the answer to. If this was all part of someone's design, who was that someone?

He started to worry that it might have been the owner of the voice that he had heard in his dream. It certainly seemed to know where it was that he was going to be going to next, as it said that he would see Ryan when he got there. But, somehow, Ryan didn't think the owner of that

voice was behind all of this. On Pyna he and Lisa had done something good, and he felt sure that they had been sent there to do that good thing. But he felt that the voice from his dream was evil. Everything about that voice - for the way it sounded to what it was that it actually said - came across as evil. Whilst it seemed to know what it was that was going to happen next, he didn't think that it was behind it. No, there was someone else at work here, and he didn't have a clue as to who it might be, or why it would want to do this to Ryan.

Before long, they had arrived back in Lucy's room. She immediately started to tidy the place up a bit. She said, 'I don't have much stuff with me, and so there should be plenty of room for you. I'm guessing that when you came here from Pyna you didn't have any luggage with you?'

'No, just literally the clothes on my back.'

'OK then. Well, you lie down on the bed for a bit - it might be best if you try not to fall asleep just yet - and then once I've done this I'll show you how everything works in the 31st century.'

Ryan went and lay down on the bed again, and he watched as Lucy went about tidying things up. He was still feeling really tired, but he took Lucy's advice and didn't fall asleep. He wasn't quite prepared to have another dream featuring that voice, and so he felt that sleep was probably best avoided for the time being.

Lucy had a few photos up on the wall. Apart from the clothes the people were wearing in them, they just looked like the sort of photos that any teenage girl from his time might have had on their wall. He noticed that in several of the pictures Lucy was with a guy, and he looked a little familiar. Then he realised who it was - it was the guy that had left her the video message that Lucy had been watching just before he had fallen asleep earlier. He thought to himself that the message had been from a guy on the other ship, on the Columbia. The fact that he was in pictures with Lucy meant that they must have known each other from before they both set out on this voyage. But he also knew that the Columbia was going to be ending its journey at Ganymede, whilst the Challenger was going to speed on to Titania without stopping. And so this meant that Lucy and this guy would never actually meet in person ever again. This made Ryan feel sad, as, in the pictures, both Lucy and the guy looked really happy.

Once Lucy was done with tidying the room, she came and sat down on the bed next to Ryan, bringing the wireless keyboard with her. She said, 'As I'm sure you've probably figured out, we use this to control the computer.'

'I'm surprised it's not all voice controlled.'

'Well, some people do use voice control, but it can often be unreliable. As powerful as computers are, they still have trouble understanding human speech. Plus people often find it's hard work having to use their voice all of the time. Most people prefer to use the keyboards.'

Ryan looked at the keyboard, which looked pretty much like a normal qwerty keyboard. At the top it had what were clearly video controls - he could see the symbols for 'play', 'stop', 'rewind', 'fast forward', and so on, along with some volume controls. At the bottom was what looked like a touchpad, like what is found on laptops as an alternative to a mouse. To the right of that there was another square that wasn't a key, but he wasn't sure what purpose it served.

Lucy went and pressed a button at the top of the keyboard, which was evidently the button to turn on the computer. The screen lit up immediately. Ryan was impressed that there didn't appear to be any loading times. Back in the 21st century he had often been frustrated by the fact that computers for him tended not to be useable until up to 30 mins after he turned them on, and even the best ones took a few minutes to load up. This one seemed to be responding to instructions immediately.

The screen had a message on it that said, 'Please identify yourself.' Lucy ran her thumb over the square to the right of the touchpad, and the screen changed to a menu screen.

'What did you do there?' Ryan asked. 'Is that a fingerprint reader?'

'Yes, and more. It's also an ID chip reader.'

'What's an ID chip?'

'Oh, of course. They weren't made compulsory until the 22nd century, a bit after your time. When their born everyone has an ID chip implanted into their right thumb. It only contains a unique code that identifies who the person is. ID chip readers read these codes, and then match them in databases for any information that is required. In this case the computer identified who I was, and brought up all of my settings, and give me access to all of my personal files. The keyboard also has a fingerprint reader as a second form of identification, to help prevent anyone who simply copies the code from an ID chip from gaining access to information that they shouldn't. It works quite well as there's no record of the person's fingerprint on the chip itself, it's stored in databases. It's not a completely fool proof system, but it works quite well. I heard that before they came about people where having to remember pin codes and tons of long, complicated, passwords. People weren't supposed to write down their passwords, but many people did. I don't know how you could have lived having to remember all of that.'

'It wasn't easy, I can tell you!' Whilst Ryan knew that people wouldn't like the idea of having an ID chip inserted into them, and central databases holding lots of information about them, he actually thought that this was a good idea. He could certainly see lots of uses for it which could help make life a lot easier. He felt disappointed that, if he ever did make it back home, he wouldn't see such a system come about during his lifetime.

He returned his attention to the screen. The computer seemed to be a lot more than just a computer, at least, more than what he was used to using them for. It seemed to be a main entertainment and communications hub. He could see options for music, films, TV shows, and games, as well as options for e-mails, voice messages, and video messages. There were also options for word processing and spreadsheets, plus various other options. It seemed to be a computer that did everything.

'So,' said Lucy, 'This is pretty much everything. What would you like to see first?'

'What sort of games do you have on this thing?'

'Oh loads, all sorts.' She selected the games option, and a new screen came up straight away. It was advertising a new release that was coming out soon, Final Fantasy CCCLXII. Ryan was surprised to see that series was still going - he had found Final Fantasy XIII to be a real disappointment. 'That's such a stupid name, it's hardly "final" if it's been going on for 362 games!'

'It's almost as stupid as Final Fantasy XIII-2 as far as names go.'

'Oh, they still have silly names like that, I think there was a Final Fantasy CCCLIII-4, or something like that. I don't really play them that much, but I look in on them from time to time. I personally prefer puzzle games like "Tetris".'

'You still have "Tetris"?'

'Yes, of course.' Ryan remembered when he had first played Tetris on the Game Boy back in the early nineties. He had played numerous other versions of it since then, and had never got bored of it. He was actually quite good at it.

'Let's have a look at it then.' He wondered what a 31st century Tetris might look like.

Lucy loaded it up, and started playing it. Immediately the room filled up with the familiar music that will forever be associated with Tetris, only instead of the beepy version that Ryan had first heard on the Game Boy, this version had an orchestral feel to it. The graphics weren't as massively spectacular as he had been expecting. They looked like they were in a very high definition, and were very bright and colourful. Whenever rows were removed from the field the effects used to do so looked impressive, but the whole game wouldn't have looked that much out of place back in 2011. Ryan came to the conclusion that there wasn't much you could do to improve on a classic.

'Here,' said Lucy, pausing the game, 'You have a go.' She quickly explained what the controls were, and then he took the keyboard from her. He then unpaused the game, and carried on playing it. It was as though he had found an old friend out there in space in the 31st century. He went through the early levels easily enough, and even got quite a few Tetris's in the process.

Things started to get a little tougher as the levels and the speed of the blocks increased, but he was able to keep up with it all. In fact, he made it all the way until level 28 before the field was completely full, but this was more than enough to comfortably beat Lucy's high score.

'Wow!' said Lucy, 'You're pretty good at this!'

'Well, I was practically brought up on Tetris. Have you ever heard of a Game Boy?'

'Yes, I have. I've seen them in museums. I think of the original Game Boy's there's only about five left in the solar system that still work.'

'I'm surprised that there's as many as five, but they were quite sturdy little things. I remember when they first came out, and loads of kids had them in the playground before the school banned them - kids were getting bullied over them. But they were great for kids, especially when going on holiday. I remember one day on the beach where I didn't feel like building sandcastles or anything like that, and so I just finished off this Final Fantasy game on my Game Boy instead. For a kid my age that beat reading on the beach. Talking of reading, I see on your shelves that you still have books, as in actual physical copies. I would have thought that e-readers would have completely taken over.'

'Oh, we still have e-readers. Everyone has one of those. But a great many people still prefer to have actual books. They're seen as bit of a status symbol. Plus they never, ever, break down or need recharging like e-readers do. But e-readers come into their own when it comes to free books. There's just so many of them available. I'm currently reading through all of the "Harry Potter" books.'

Ryan quickly realised what she meant. Back in 2011 there were numerous websites available where you could legally download classic books for free. That was because they were out of copyright, which only lasted for something like 75 years after the death of the author. Now he was a thousand of years in the future there would have been a great many more books that were out of copyright. All of the great books that he would have read in his time would now be out of copyright and therefore freely available. He was slightly envious of the vast choice the people in the future had. There would now be enough great classic books out there for them to read that they couldn't possibly read them all in a single lifetime.

This got Ryan thinking about what else was out of copyright. He believed that he had read somewhere that copyright on TV shows only lasted for 50 years after they were first broadcast. Back in 2011 that didn't really mean much, as there wasn't too much around in the way of classic programs from 1961 and earlier. But now that he was here in the future...

He asked Lucy, 'What TV shows do you have access to?'

'Oh, loads. There's stuff available here that goes right back to your time. Here, let me show you.' She closed down Tetris, and went back to the main menu, and then selected TV Shows. She went to an A-Z list, but it was huge, as there was a vast selection to choose from.

Ryan asked, 'Do you have "Doctor Who" on there?'

'Of course, I'll get it up for you.' She went to D in the A-Z, and then went on to select Doctor Who. And there was a vast selection there, going all the way back to the first story, 'An Unearthly Child'. Shortly before that he saw that there was a story on there called 'Marco Polo', which he knew was missing from the BBC's archives back in 2011.

He asked Lucy, 'What's under "Marco Polo"?' She quickly selected it, and there was a choice of all seven episodes, and some text giving the background to the story. It explained that whilst the original footage was missing, the soundtrack had still survived, and the images had been recreated through animation. Ryan was aware that back in 2011 they had started to do this for some of the missing episodes, and so he concluded that by now they would have done this for all of them.

Ryan thought that he could find himself spending all of his time on this computer. There was just so much material available to him. So many books, films, TV shows, and games that had been produced over the last thousand years. If he did have to stay in the future he certainly wouldn't run out of things to read, watch, or play. But then another thought came to him, and he asked Lucy, 'You seem to have an awful lot of stuff available to you on this computer, but where is it all stored?'

'It's stored on the computer. There's a room on the ship that has the computer's storage system in it, and it's quite large, even for 31st century standards. But then it has to be, considering how far we're having to travel. It already had a large amount of data on it when we left Earth, plus it's constantly downloading extra information from Earth. Of course, there aren't any programmes that we can watch live any more, but people rarely do that anyway, apart from sporting events, which I've never really been interested in. But, yes, there is a lot of material available. Back on Earth the computer doesn't really rule our lives. It's not like the screens they had in Orwell's 1984. But out here in space we are quite reliant on them. It's our only link to the outside world. Without it I think we'd all go a little crazy.'

Ryan could well understand that. He then asked, 'Apart from the computer and checking on the garden, what else do you do all day?'

'We have an exercise facility, where we have to get a mandatory two hours of exercise every day. And apart from that, not an awful lot. We monitor all of the sensors. Help make some

observations on stars to help astronomers back on Earth. We talk to each other, and to those on the Columbia. It's fairly mundane, really.'

'Do you often talk to the other ship?'

'Yes, every day. Our crew trained with their crew. It's common practice for ships to be sent out in pairs, at least as far as Jupiter. Ideally they'd like that to happen for the full duration for all ships, but it's not practical for that to happen. They'll never need to send more than five people at a time to a place like Uranus, it's not that busy a place compared to Jupiter or Saturn. But it's good to have another ship there, if only for a part of the journey. You have more people to talk to. Plus, if one of the ships gets into any trouble there's always the other ship nearby to provide assistance. As far as I know that's never been necessary, but we all trained for it, and it's good to know that they're there if we need it. It's actually a very complicated and dangerous manoeuvre to transfer people between ships when they're in flight. And that's what we'll have to do with you before Jupiter, if you're still here then... Sorry, it still seems really odd that you just turned up here from a thousand years in the past. It's all very surreal..'

'Well, if you think it's surreal for you how do you think it is for me? This is the third place that I've been since all of this started, and all three places have turned out to be surreal, at least, from my perspective they have.'

Lucy then said, 'So, anyway, we're going to have to figure out how this arrangement is going to work. I'm not due to come off duty for another three hours, and I'll probably be wanted on the Bridge. I think you should stay here and get some rest. I'll also leave the computer on for you so you can have a look around on that if you like if you find you can't sleep. Just don't go into any of my personal stuff, OK? Can I trust you to do that?'

'Absolutely.'

'OK then. Well, I'll go now. If you need any of us, you should know your way to the Bridge by now. Get some rest, and I hope you don't have any more bad dreams. And I hope you find what you're looking for soon.'

'Thanks.'

Lucy gave Ryan a smile, which he returned, and then she left the room. His brain was swimming at the moment. There had just been so much for him to take in. This strange world of the future seemed to have both its good and its bad points. He wasn't sure if he would want to live in this time. They were clearly far more advanced as far as technology was concerned, and he certainly liked what this computer could do. He also liked the fact that there was so much free entertainment available. But he didn't like the way the authorities treated its citizens, sending them out to deep space, depriving them of the right to have their own children, when they

themselves have done nothing wrong. If that was how they treated criminals then that would be a different matter, but that wasn't the case here. These were ordinary people. And Lucy was only a teenager. How could anyone do that to a teenager?

No, Ryan decided that, overall, he wouldn't want to live in this time. He could never imagine having a future where he wasn't able to have his own children. No amount of free entertainment could ever make up for that.

He thought about looking up some more things on the computer, but, with only three hours until Lucy was due to come off duty he felt that it was probably best that he did get some sleep. He was a little apprehensive to do so, however, because of the dream with the evil voice. But, in the end, he reasoned that if he deprived himself of sleep out of a fear of a bad dream, no matter how real that dream felt, then he wouldn't be doing himself any favours.

He closed his eyes, and allowed sleep to take him.

He didn't dream whilst he was asleep. But he was woken up by a loud beeping sound. On the computer screen he saw a message saying, 'Incoming Video Call From: Patrick'. Ryan wasn't sure what to do. He suspected that Patrick must be someone from the other ship, possibly even the man in the photos and who Lucy had been speaking to earlier.

In the end he decided that it was probably best not to do anything. If he answered the call he would probably have a lot of explaining to do about what he was doing in Lucy's bed, and he didn't feel quite up to that right now.

After a couple of minutes the beeping stopped, the message disappeared (and was replaced with a new one about a missed message), and then Ryan went back to sleep.

When he woke up again he could feel what felt like a faint breeze on his left cheek. This confused his panicked mind, disorientating him. When he opened his eyes and turned to his left, he saw that Lucy had been blowing on his cheek.

'Oh, sorry,' she said, 'I hadn't meant to wake you. I just thought that blowing on your cheek might help to give you a good dream, which might help you to feel a little better about things.'

'Oh, right...'

Ryan started to get up, but then Lucy said, 'No, you can stay there for now. I'm off duty, but I don't need to go to bed for a little while yet. You can get some more sleep for a few hours if you like.'

'OK.' Ryan settled back down into the bed. Then he said, 'By the way the phone rang whilst you were out.'

'Phone? What's that?'

'Oh, sorry, it's a 20th century thing. Your computer beeped, saying that you had an incoming call from someone called Patrick.'

'Oh, right, thanks. You didn't answer at all, did you?'

'No, I just left it. I wouldn't have known what to say to him.'

'OK. He probably saw that I was logged in and so tried to call me, that's all. He'll probably be a little confused about why I didn't answer. I'll see if he's still online and give him a call back.'

She took the keyboard, and went over to the office chair in front of the screen. On the computer she went into what looked like a directory of contacts, and looked up Patrick in it. Ryan could see from where he was that he was still online. She clicked on him, selected an option, and a message appeared on the screen saying, 'Calling Patrick...'

Shortly afterwards, Patrick answered, and Ryan could indeed see that it was the same man as before.

'Hi there!' said Patrick. 'Why didn't you answer earlier? You had me worried there. I thought I'd pissed you off or something.'

'Oh no, it's nothing like that. I know I was logged in, but I wasn't here. You know that mysterious man from the past that turned up? Well, he was staying in my room for a bit.' She turned to Ryan and said, 'Say "hello" Ryan.'

Ryan responded with, 'Hello Ryan!'

Lucy said, 'Silly boy!' She then turned back to Patrick and said, 'We had to find somewhere for him to sleep. John didn't want him using his room, and so I said that he could sleep in mine when I'm on duty.'

'Oh, right,' said Patrick, 'That's OK, I understand. He's got to go somewhere I suppose...'

'Yeah... So, how are things on your side?'

'Over here? Oh, they're fine, no problems here.'

'How's your visitor settling in. Lisa is her name, isn't it?'

'Yeah, she's doing fine. In fact, she's better than fine. She seems to have a boundless amount of energy. We haven't even thought about where she might sleep - it doesn't look like she'll need any at the rate that she's going. She's getting on fine with everyone. In fact, she's getting on better than fine. It feels like we've all known her for ages, like she's a old friend that's come back for a visit. How odd is that?'

'Yeah, that does seem a little strange. How have you been getting on with her?'

'Quite well. We had quite a long conversation earlier.'

'Telling her all about life in the year 3011 I suppose. I had that conversation earlier with Ryan.'

'Actually, no, she didn't ask any questions about that. Even though these two seemingly came from a thousand years ago, she acted like she already knew everything about the 31st century. No, we mainly talked about me and my life. I tell you what, she's the best listener that I've ever met. We'd never have to see a councillor ever again if she stays here, I can tell you. And everyone else over here agrees - she's had similar conversations with all of us. To be perfectly honest, even with all of the resource implications, I don't think any of us over here will want her to leave us. I don't know what it is that these two are over here to do, but once they've done whatever it is we'll all be sorry to see her go.'

'OK, you're making me jealous now!'

'Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to do that. But you have nothing to worry about, nothing like that is going on. She's like a really good friend, that's all. A really, really, good friend.'

'OK, that's fine then.'

'So, what's your guy like?'

'Here's OK. He's not quite having the same effect over here, but that's not his fault. He's a nice enough guy, I for one don't mind having him around, even if he did beat my top score on "Tetris"!' "

'Oh, so you showed him the computer then.'

'Yeah. But he's hardly surprising that he's so good at "Tetris", he did play the original after all!'

Ryan then chipped in, 'Well, it wasn't quite the original version, but it was certainly one of the earlier versions. It was on the Game Boy.'

'The Game Boy?!' exclaimed Patrick. 'They're museum pieces, aren't they?'

'Not when I was a kid. Don't forget, a lot of the stuff that you would consider ancient were all new to me when they came out. You lot are waiting for Final Fantasy 362 to come out. Well, I can remember playing Final Fantasy 7 when it was new.'

'Whoa, now that really is a classic!'

'Oh, so you've heard of that one?'

'Yeah, it's still considered a highlight of the series. There have quite a few classic ones since then, but that one is still often played, especially after all of the remakes that it's had.'

'Oh right, cool.'

Patrick then turned his attention back to Lucy, 'Well, it seems that we've all had quite a day today. What are you going to be up to tonight?'

'I really don't know, to be honest. I seem to have ended up being the main person to help look after Ryan. I'll need to go to sleep at some point, and I'll need to find somewhere for him to go and something for him to do before I do. How about you?'

'I don't know either. We're all still taking it turns to talk to Lisa. I don't think anyone over here wants to go to bed. Anyway, I suppose I'd better let you go. I hope Ryan doesn't disrupt things too much for you guys over there - no offense Ryan!'

'None taken!' said Ryan. He was perfectly aware how disruptive his sudden appearance on the ship must have been for everyone.

Patrick then said, 'I'll give you another call tomorrow morning. Have a good night, babe.'

'You too.'

Lucy and Patrick smiled at each other, then Lucy pressed a button to end the call.

Ryan thought for a moment, and he was pretty sure as to what was going on here. And, if he was right, he thought he knew what it was that he was meant to do here before he and Lisa could move on. Whilst he would certainly miss the computer and all of the entertainment that it had to offer, he felt that it would be wrong to delay taking action. True, it would also take him closer to going to the next world, and facing up to the owner of the voice (something that he was not looking forward to), but he didn't feel right about delaying things for his own selfish purposes.

He asked Lucy, 'How long have you and Patrick known each other?'

'Oh, since forever. We lived in the same street when we were kids, were in all of the same classes in schools, and then went through the Space Corp together. We've practically lived our whole lives together...' There was a hint of sadness in Lucy's voice, and Ryan believed that he knew the reason why.

'You weren't expecting to be on separate ships to separate destinations, were you?'

There was a long pause, and then Lucy shook her head.

'You have feelings for him, don't you?'

There was another long pause, and then Lucy said, 'When we were kids we always joked about getting married. We used to play Mummies and Daddies in the playground. Then, when we were teenagers, we started to go out properly. He was my first... my only... you know...' Ryan understood exactly what she meant. She continued, 'We were both a little apprehensive about being instructed to join the Space Corp. There may not be many people who are sent to Uranus and Neptune, but quite a lot do get sent to Jupiter and Saturn. We always knew that there was a very high chance that we would get sent to one of the outer worlds, and that would mean that we wouldn't be able to have a family together. I'd always wanted to have children, a part of me

still does. But I could have lived without being allowed to have children if it meant that Patrick and I could be together.

'The Space Corps don't like sending couples out together. They feel that it can lead to all sorts of problems, including illegal children. Patrick and I did the best we could to hide our relationship. We were in the same class at the Space Corps, and so we knew that when we would eventually be sent out into space there would have been a good chance that we would have been on the same ship. If that happened then we would have only had to keep our relationship secret until we got a safe distance away from Mars, and there would have been nothing that the authorities could have done to keep us apart.

'We got so close, so very close. Patrick had been able to get a quick look at the provisional assignments that they were prepared to hand out. We had both been originally assigned to this ship. OK, Titania isn't that great a place, but it would have meant that we would have been together! We wouldn't have been able to have children, but we could have at least made a go at being happy together.

'But we got careless, and we were caught out. I risked one too many visits to his room late at night, and one of the instructors caught us. They were very quickly able to figure out everything that had gone on. They told us to go away and they would tell us in due course what they were going to do to us.

'We were never called back to go and see them. They didn't have to. A week later they released the list of assignments, and they had made a change. Patrick had been reassigned to the Columbia to be posted to Ganymede, and John was assigned here in his place. I think John was fully aware of what had happened as he had been fully expecting to be sent to Jupiter, and so I think he's always resented me for it.

'As I've said, the Space Corps don't allow couples to be sent out on the same ship. They also don't normally allow them to be sent out on an accompanying ship, you know, with one person on one ship and the other person on the other ship.' Ryan nodded to show that he understood. 'Well, Patrick and I had been caught out too late in the day for them to prevent that, and so they allowed it on this occasion. We're allowed to communicate with each other, and we'll continue to do so, even after he's arrived at Ganymede. But it will get harder. Because our ships are currently flying alongside each other we're still able to have a real time conversation. But, as soon as we break formation and the Colombia makes for Ganymede that will no longer be possible. At first the gaps between one of us saying something and the other one hearing it will be measured in seconds. But the gap will slowly increase as we get further away from Jupiter, and then we'll never be able to have a real time conversation again.

'I know that it's going to be really tough on the both of us, and I for one am going to be absolutely heartbroken when that time comes. But we've decided that we're going to make the best of the time that we have left together. We call each other several times every day, and our conversations are always great. But, in the back of my mind, I know that it's inevitable that it will all come to an end, and all we'll be able to have are time delayed messages.

'I hate the Space Corps, and I hate the authorities. How can they get away from doing this to us? We haven't done anything wrong? Why are we being punished in this matter? If we want to get married and have kids, then why shouldn't we be allowed to? What right do they have to split us up and banish us to the outer worlds? We don't deserve to be treated like this, nobody does! It is cruel and inhumane.

'I know that you probably think that the future is great. We have all of this technology, and all of this material at our fingertips. Endless episodes of "Doctor Who" and literally hundreds of "Final Fantasy" games to play. But I would give all of that up in a heartbeat if it meant that Patrick and I could be together. You have no idea how lucky you were to be living in the age that you came from.' Lucy started to sob. 'I just wish that everything could be different...' She then started to cry uncontrollably.

Ryan got up from the bed, and put his arm around her to comfort her. He thought about saying, 'It's OK,' but he decided that it was probably best that he didn't, because it most certainly wasn't OK. Instead, he just said, 'I understand.' And he did. Whilst there were things about this future that he liked, there was a lot of it that he didn't. Life was extremely unfair in this time.

He was now clear on what it was that he had to do before he and Lisa could move onto the next world. He had to find a way for Lucy and Patrick to be happy. But how could he possibly do that? He couldn't change the laws of this age all by himself, and certainly not from all the way out here in space.

Then he realised that he didn't have to change the law as such, just find a way for Lucy and Patrick to be together, even if it involved a little bit of law breaking. He wasn't generally in favour of breaking laws, but, on this one occasion, to go against an oppressive government, he felt that it could be justified.

Lucy's tears fell back, she looked up at Ryan, and said, 'Thanks.'

Ryan responded with, 'I know how horrible things are for you. I know that there's nothing that I can say that can change that, but try and focus on the positive, at least for now.' He didn't want to say that he was going to do what he could to bring her and Patrick together, because he didn't want to give her false hope. Whilst he was certain that that was what he was here to do, he

didn't have any guarantees that he would be successful. But he was certainly going to try and do his best to help her.

He then asked, 'So, what are we going to do now? I can't stay in your room all day, and you need to get some rest. Do you know if the Captain is still about?'

'Yeah, he's still on the Bridge, and will be for a little while yet.'

'OK. Then I suggest that I leave you in peace for now, and I go and spend some time with him. He can tell me some more about the ship, and let me know if there's anything that I could be doing that would be useful.'

'Alright then, that sounds like a plan.' Ryan got up to leave. Just before he left the room Lucy said, 'Ryan...!' He turned round to look at her. 'Thank you for listening.'

'That's OK, I'm happy to.' He smiled at her, and she smiled back at him. He then left her room and made his way back to the Bridge.

As he walked down the corridor (he found his way to going down the one where he could see the Columbia), he started to think about how he might be able to help Lucy. He looked out at the Columbia, and thought about how short a space there physically was between Lucy and Patrick, but in real terms they couldn't have been further apart. To know that they were going to be split apart like this must have felt awful.

He also started to think about Lisa over on the Columbia, and wondered what she must be up to. Patrick said that she had been speaking to all of the crew over there, and was better than any counsellor that they could have had. He suspected that if that was the case then he had probably told Lisa about Lucy, and so Lisa would also be aware of their plight. She may have also reached the same conclusion as him that bringing Lucy and Patrick back together again is what they were brought here to do. All that was left now was to try and find a way to actually do it.

He arrived on the Bridge, where it was just the Captain and Jane who were still on duty. 'Ah,' said the Captain when he saw Ryan, 'How are you feeling? Did you manage to get some rest?'

'Yes, I did, thanks. Lucy's back in her room and so I'll leave her be for now. I now just need something to occupy me whilst I figure out what it is I'm supposed to be doing here. I don't suppose there'd be any chance that I could speak to her again, and this time without people listening in?'

The Captain thought for a bit, and then said, 'I'll need to consider that request, and it's probably best that I talk to Captain Cole about it. I'll do so now, if you're happy to wait outside.'

'OK, that's fine.' Ryan left the Bridge, and returned to the corridor.

He wasn't quite sure what exactly he was going to do yet, but he felt that a good first step would be to discuss it with Lisa, and see if she had reached the same conclusion as he had about

what they were meant to do. Then they could discuss about how they could actually bring this change about.

Before long Jane came out into the corridor and said, 'You can come back in now.' Ryan followed her back onto the Bridge.

The Captain said, 'I've spoken to Captain Cole, and it appears that he trusts Lisa completely, and so he's more than happy to allow you two to speak to each other in private, and I've agreed with him. Lisa will take you to a room with a computer in it, and set it up so that you and Lisa can talk to each other. We'll even make it a video connection for you.'

'Thank you very much sir.'

'That's not a problem.'

Jane then said, 'If you'd like to come this way...'

He followed her out of the Bridge via the door on the other side, and then made their way to the corridor. They only went down it a little while before they went into a door on their right. This room looked like it was a little office. It was almost empty, apart from a large computer screen, a keyboard that looked like the one in Lucy's room, only this one was connected to a table, and a large comfy looking chair was at the table.

Jane went and sat down in the chair, logged into the computer, and started pressing a load of keys. She was going so fast that Ryan wasn't able to follow what it was that she was doing. But, before long, he could see that she had set up the connection, as he could see Lisa appear up on the screen.

Jane then said, 'I'll leave you two to it. I'll be back on the Bridge. Come and get me when you're done and I'll come back and turn everything off.'

'Thanks,' said Ryan.

Jane left the room, and Ryan went and sat down on the chair.

'Hi Ryan!' said Lisa, 'How are you finding things over there?'

'OK, I've been able to get a little sleep. Not a huge amount, mind, but I'm doing OK. How about you? I heard from Patrick that you're becoming quite popular over there, and they're not going to want to let you leave!'

'Yeah, I often get that. I like talking to people, to find out what's going on in their lives. It's sort of what I do...'

'Well, I've had a long chat with Lucy, and from that I was able to gather that she and Patrick are a bit of an item - in fact, they were childhood sweethearts. But the laws of this time, and the situation they've found themselves in, is preventing them from being together. Did Patrick tell you anything about this on you end?'

'Yeah, he's told me all about it. It's such a sad story, and it's not such an uncommon one. You'd be surprised at just how often circumstances that are beyond people's control splits couples up and stops them from being together, and being happy.'

'Do you think that helping bring them back together might be what we're supposed to be doing here?'

'Yes, I do. From what I've been able to tell from Patrick he and Lucy are destined to be together. Keeping them apart like this is just plain wrong.'

'OK, good. At the very least we're making some progress. We know what it is that we're here to do. We just have to try and find a way to go about actually doing it.'

'Yes, but I think that might prove to be easier said than done. They have been assigned to these separate ships, and they are going to their separate destinations. I don't think there's anything that we can do to change that. This ship has to go to Ganymede as people are needed there, and your ship has to go to Titania as people are also needed there. And there's no possibility of your ship being able to stop off at Ganymede to drop Lucy off and then continue on its way. It's not going to be able to slow down and speed off again. It has to maintain its speed, and then get a gravity whip from Jupiter, if it's to have any chance of getting to Titania on time, which has to be before its resources run out.'

'If it's just a question of resources, couldn't they just pick some up from Ganymede? Yes, it would take them longer to get to Titania, but at least it means that Lucy and Patrick could be together.'

'I'm afraid that it's not as simple as that. Ganymede itself would only have limited resources. They wouldn't be able to give enough to the Challenger to enable it to last the prolonged journey to Titania, and still have enough for themselves and an extra person.'

'Right, OK, that makes sense...' Ryan thought for a moment, and then an idea hit him. 'I think I've got it! You know what they said they might have to do if we stick around for a while?'

'Go on...'

'Well, they said that before we get to Jupiter they would have to transfer me over to your ship, and we would land at Ganymede together. And Lucy told me that these ships fly out in pairs so that if one gets into trouble the other one can help out. And so people can be transferred between ships mid-flight. All we have to do is convince the Captains to allow Lucy to transfer over to the Columbia before we get to Jupiter.'

'I think we're going along the right tracks here, but it still won't be easy. If Lucy comes over here then, excluding us, the Columbia will have 6 crew members for Ganymede, and the Challenger will only have 4 crew members for Titania. Ganymede will have one too many

people, and Titania will have one too few. Ganymede will have an extra drain on their resources, and Titania won't have enough people to carry out the work that's required over there.'

'OK, let's think about this...' Ryan did indeed think about it, and then he said, 'Is there any way that someone from over there would be willing to come over here in exchange for Lucy?'

Lisa shook her head. 'Ganymede is a good deal for these people. Remember, this is where these people will be spending the rest of their lives. On Ganymede they have more people to interact with, and they have the opportunity to go and see the other moons of Jupiter. At Uranus only Titania has humans on it. It's a small moon, and there's not so much to do there. I can't see anyone exchanging a life on Ganymede for one on Titania.'

'I can understand that...' Ryan thought some more. Then it hit him! It was so obvious that he was surprised that he hadn't thought of it first. He said, 'Who said that Lucy had to join Patrick on the Columbia and go to Ganymede? Why can't Patrick join Lucy on the Challenger and go to Titania?'

'Do you think Patrick would be willing to go for that?'

'I think he would. Lucy told me that the provisional assignments had Patrick and her on the Challenger. They weren't overly thrilled about going to Titania, but they were prepared to do so if it meant that they could be together. I'm sure that Patrick would jump at the chance to come over here if Lucy was here waiting for him.'

'OK, then there's just the small matter of finding someone from over there to come over here. Do you have anyone in mind?'

'Yes. John would be the perfect choice. Apparently, he was originally meant to be on the Columbia, and he was a bit miffed when he found out that he was assigned here. He had always been expected to be posted to Jupiter. Lucy thinks that he was aware of why the change was made, and blames her for it. I'm sure he'd be willing to go to the Columbia and then on to Ganymede. And hopefully that would be a plan that the Captains would be willing to go for as well because that would make the two crews what they were meant to have been in the first place.'

'OK, that sounds good. It looks like we have a plan then. All we have to do is to convince the two Captains, and that might be easier said than done. I think I should be able to persuade Captain Cole. How do you think you'll be able to get on with Captain Roberts?'

'I'm not too sure. He comes across as really strict, but I think he's starting to warm to me. I'll speak to him and see how I go.'

'Alright then, good luck!'

'You too!'

Lisa then switched off the video link on her end. Ryan then left the room, and started to make his way back to the Bridge. He was starting to feel really good about himself. He was right - the task that he and Lisa were meant to complete had presented itself to them. They didn't have to go looking for it. They now knew what it was they had to do, and so soon they would be on their way again.

Then a feeling of dread hit him in the pit of his stomach. Yes, they would be moving on again soon, but that would mean that he would soon be facing the owner of the voice from his dream, and that was something that he was still not looking forward to. He had no idea what it had in store for him, or what the next world would be like. Whilst he wouldn't have wanted to live in this world of the future for his whole life, for the time being it was quite pleasant and he would have liked to stay here for a while longer.

But he knew that he shouldn't try and prolong his stay here any longer than he should do. That wouldn't have been right by Lucy and Patrick. He owed it to them to try and do what he could to bring them together as soon as possible.

He arrived back on the Bridge. The Captain looked at him, and then he looked at Jane and said, 'Please, leave us.'

Jane nodded, and left the Bridge.

The Captain then looked back at Ryan and said, 'Please, take a seat.' He indicated a seat that was just in front of his. Ryan was now starting to feel a little uneasy. Something didn't feel right here.

The Captain continued, 'Do you think you're somehow special? Do you think that you're more important than the rest of us?'

'No...!' Ryan didn't like the sound of this, or where it might be going.

'Oh, really, is that so.'

'Yes, that's right.'

'So, you don't think that you have any right to go around telling other people what to do?'

Ryan didn't say anything in reply to this. He didn't know what to say. And he didn't know where the words the Captain was saying were coming from.

The Captain went on, 'Captain Cole may have been willing to allow you and Lisa to have had a private conversation, but I still had my reservations. It turns out that I was right. I got Jane to set up the link so that I could see the whole thing in here. I heard everything that you and Lisa said to each other. So, I'm going to ask you again - do you think you have the right to go around and tell other people what they should do?'

Ryan felt that he should have known that things wouldn't have been this easy. He said, 'It's not like that. I don't think I have a right to tell other people what to do. I'm just doing the right thing here.'

'Oh, you're just trying to do the right thing are you? You just turn up on my ship out of the blue, uninvited and unwanted, and then start thinking that you can just reassign crew members as though you own the place!'

There was a pause whilst Ryan composed himself, and then he said, 'I know that I don't own the place, and I know that I'm not the one in charge here. I also know that you all have your rules in place for a reason. It just that those rules don't always feel right. It's clear that Lucy and Patrick are in love with each other. Is it right that they should be kept apart like this? It feels like they're being punished, but what was it that they did wrong? All they did was fall in love. They tried to live by the rules of your society - they went to the Space Corp, they accepted the fact that they would be sent to the outer worlds, they even accepted that they wouldn't be allowed to have children. But they couldn't stop being in love with each other. Once you fall for someone, that's it. If they feel the same way about you then you'll both do all that you can to be with each other, and you won't let anyone stop you. Haven't you even been in love? Hasn't there ever been anyone special in your life?'

This time it was the Captain's turn to pause for thought. He then said, 'This is not about me. This is about you, and Lisa, and your attitude. These ships and the outer worlds are run the way they are for a reason. They are very good reasons why things are the way they are. There's absolutely nothing that can be done for Lucy and Patrick. They were forced to separate, and they will just have to accept that that is how things are. They will have to move on. Patrick will have to prepare for his life on Ganymede, and Lucy will have to prepare for hers on Titania, and that is all there is to it. We will not be exchanging crew members with the Columbia, and that is the end of the matter. Do I make myself clear?'

Ryan didn't know what to say. He could understand the Captain's point of view, but he couldn't agree with it. It was wrong that Lucy and Patrick couldn't be together. It was just plain wrong.

After a moment of silence the Captain shouted, 'Do I make myself clear?!'

'Yes!' said Ryan, 'You have made yourself perfectly clear! But you are wrong. It is not right that Lucy and Patrick should be forced to live their lives apart. Your society may have its laws and its rules, but they are cruel. You have condemned both of them to a life of unhappiness.'

'Well, if that's how you feel about it...' The Captain turned his head towards the door and shouted, 'Jane, can you come back in please.' Jane did so, and then the Captain said to her, 'Take

our guest here, and lock him up in the office. Ryan, you are no longer a guest on this ship, you are its prisoner. You will be transferred to the Columbia shortly before we arrive at Jupiter, and you will be deposited on Ganymede. There, you and Lisa will be handed over to the authorities, where you will be charged with trespassing on a Space Corp vessel. You will also have no further contact with Lucy whilst you are on this ship. Jane, take him away!

Jane took hold of Ryan's arm (although she didn't hold it too tightly), and she said, 'Come with me please.' He didn't resist her, and he went with her back to the office where he had spoken to Lisa.

Once he was there he said, 'You heard my conversation with Lisa as well, didn't you? What's your opinion on all of this?'

'I don't have one.'

'Oh, come on, don't be like that! Everyone has an opinion on something. You must feel something, one way or the other. Either you think that Lucy and Patrick should be together, or you think it's right that they should be forced to live apart. Which is it?'

'There was a pause, and then Jane said, 'I think Lucy can be a bit of a spoilt brat sometimes. I know that she's young, but she needs to learn to grow up.'

'But that's just it, she has grown up. She's not a little girl any more. She's in love, truly in love with Patrick. They should be allowed to be with each other if that is what they want.'

Jane didn't say anything further, but Ryan felt, by the expression on her face, that he was getting through to her.

She turned around, and the door closed behind her. Ryan went up to the door to see if it would open again, but it wouldn't. He was now locked in.

He looked around the room, but there wasn't much to look at. The computer was switched off, and he knew that there was no point in him trying to turn it on. He didn't have an ID chip in his thumb, nor was his thumb print on the computer's database, and so he wouldn't be able to log into anything. There was nothing for it but to sit here and wait. And think.

He knew he had to find a way to convince the Captain, but he had no idea how he could go about that from within here. It was likely that the Captain wouldn't even want to speak to him again until they approached Jupiter in about nine month's time.

He started to wonder how Lisa might be getting on with Captain Cole over on the Columbia. She seemed to have been getting on quite well with the crew over there, and so he hoped that she was having better luck than he was.

He didn't know what to do with himself now. He was in this room, on his own, with nothing to do. All he could do was wait. He knew that at some point someone would have to come in

and give him some food and water. The last time he had eaten was all the way back on the 50th floor of the Citadel back in Triceria, and he was now starting to feel a little hungry.

He sat down in the chair, and closed his eyes. Once he had realised that Lucy and Patrick were supposed to be together, and when Lisa had agreed that that was what they had been sent here to do, he had thought that it would have all been so easy. It had been fairly straightforward on Triceria. All he had to do was convince the Council of Three that he was from Earth, and then they were eating out of the palm of his hand. But that wasn't the case here. Here, in this world, he wasn't anything important.

He put his hand in his pocket, and felt the key inside of it. He wondered what lock it could possibly fit? He had a quick look around the room in vain, just to see if there were any locks in here that the key might fit, but there weren't. It was just him and the computer in here, and that required a different type of key.

Even though he knew it was pointless, he pressed the button to turn on the computer. He had half been hoping that Jane would have left it logged in, and so he could have least used the computer to stop himself from becoming too bored in here. Unsurprisingly, she had logged out. She must have come back and done it when the Captain sent her out of the Bridge so that he could talk to him.

The computer had the message on screen that was asking him to identify himself. He knew that it should have been pointless to try, but he ran his thumb over the identification square, just to see what would happen. He had expected it to say that access would be denied, or his ID could not be found, or something else to that effect. But, to his surprise, it logged him in, with a message saying 'Welcome Ryan' on the screen. Ryan couldn't believe his luck. For a moment he wondered how on Earth the system had allowed him to log on when there wasn't an ID chip in his thumb, but then he figured out why. When they had arrived on Pyna the two shilling coin had mysteriously appeared in his pocket. What must have happened when they arrived in this world is that whoever it was that had brought them here must have also arranged for an ID chip to appear in his thumb, and his details to be entered onto the database. There was no doubt about it - there was definitely someone out there who was assisting them.

Not that Ryan was complaining. If nothing else it would give him something to do, although he suspected that he would be able to use the computer in some way to help him reach his ultimate goal. He looked at the menu screen, and he saw that oddly he had an e-mail waiting for him. He clicked on the appropriate option, and saw that it was a message from Lisa. It said:

'Ryan, I suspect that it won't be too long before you realise that you're able to log into the computer. You will need to be careful about what you use it for. I think Captain Roberts is still

suspicious of us, and if he's found out that you've been able to access the computer by yourself then it will only serve to make him trust us even less than he does now.

'When we spoke earlier I think the line was bugged. I don't think anyone on the Columbia was listening in, and so it was most like Captain Roberts. My guess is that he probably wouldn't be too happy about our plan. After I've sent you this I'm going to have a word with Captain Cole to see if I can convince him. I think I will be able to, he seems quite receptive of ideas backed by reasoned arguments. If, as I suspect, Captain Roberts was listening in and he doesn't think it is an idea, you might have a tough time trying to convince him. Your best bet will be to try talking to the other crew members. You might have better luck with them. If you can get them on side you might have better luck in convincing the Captain. I'm not suggesting that you arrange for a full scale mutiny to take place, far from it. But if the Captain starts to hear the same arguments coming from those around him then he might start to seriously consider it. Remember, that is still his ship, and so it is ultimately his decision.

'Good luck with this Ryan, and I hope to be able to speak to you again soon.'

Ryan reflected on what Lisa had written, and he knew that it made sense. He wouldn't be allowed to see Lucy again, at least not for the time being. And the Captain was unlikely to be making a visit anytime soon. But that still left three other crew members - Jane, Sally, and John. He felt that he had already been able to make some headway with Jane, and that he should be able to eventually persuade her. His impression of John was that he didn't particularly like him that much. He thought that John saw him as an intruder who was getting in the way. But he felt that if he got the chance to speak to John on a one-to-one basis, and then tell him that their plan involved sending him to Ganymede, then he could be persuaded to join them. And then that just left Sally. Ryan hadn't heard her say a word since he had got here, and so he had no idea what her views on the matter might be.

He decided that it was probably best that he turned the computer off for now. The last thing he would have needed was for someone to come into the room unexpectedly and see that he had access to the computer. And he couldn't think of anything else that he could do on the computer for the time being that would help to further his cause.

He turned the computer off and sat back in his chair. Once again, he was playing a waiting game. He had no idea how long it would be before someone came to see him again. He just hoped that it wouldn't be too long. He had now decided that, no matter what was waiting for him in the next world, he wanted to finish what he had to do in this one as soon as he could. He didn't like the idea of being locked up in room for any great length of time, and he certainly didn't want to remain a prisoner all the way to Jupiter.

After about an hour the door was opened. It was John who came in. He was holding a tray which had a glass of water on it and a foil packet of some kind. He said, 'The Captain said that you should be given something to eat and drink. He also said that if you need to, you know, use the facilities, then I was to take you.'

'Yeah,' said Ryan, 'I probably should. Did he tell you why I've been locked up in here?'

'No, he just said that you and Lisa were not to be trusted, and I think he's right.'

'Aren't you at least curious as to what it was that we did that made him turn on us so?'

There was a pause, and then John said, 'I trust the Captain.'

'And that's fine, you should be able to trust your Captain. And he hasn't even done anything wrong, not really.'

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't really be talking to you.' He turned to leave.

Then Ryan said, 'I know you'd rather go to Ganymede than Titania.'

John stopped in his tracks, and turned round. 'How do you know that?'

'From the things that I've been hearing. For what it's worth, I think you should go to Ganymede. In fact, that's part of the reason why the Captain locked me up in here.'

'Why would you say you want me to go to Ganymede? Why would you do something like that for me?'

'I'll be honest with you, I didn't say that primarily for your benefit. As you know, I spent quite a bit of time with Lucy, and she told me all about her relationship with Patrick.'

'Don't talk to me about that little bitch! If it weren't for her I wouldn't be on this bloody ship!'

'Hey, don't talk about her like that! She hasn't done anything wrong. It wasn't her intention for you and Patrick to be swapped assignments. They were just unlucky with the authorities, and you were caught in the crossfire. But it doesn't have to be this way. What happened was that the Captain eavesdropped on a conversation between me and Lisa, where we said that we felt that Lucy and Patrick should be allowed to be together. Our solution was that Patrick should come over here, and you should be sent over to the Columbia in his place. In other words, you should both be given back your original assignments.'

'And you tried to convince the Captain of this?'

'Yes, but he wasn't listening to me, and so he locked me up in here instead. But I still think that it might be possible to find a way to convince him. If you'll join me in talking to him then we might be able to get somewhere. Lisa's already talking to Captain Cole about it, and I have a good feeling that she'll be able to convince him. They all love her over there. With you onside we've all got a good chance to make this happen. What do you think?'

There was a long pause, and Ryan could see that John was really thinking it over. But then he just said, 'Come on, do you want the loo or not?'

Ryan decided not to push the issue any further at this stage, and followed John out of the room.

Once he came back to the room he ate the food that was in the foil container (which tasted like some form of peanut butter), and drank some of the water. He then quickly went on the computer again whilst he had the chance - it would be a little while before someone else came in again. He saw that there was another e-mail from Lisa. It said:

'Hi Ryan. I've had a word with Captain Cole, and he's broadly in agreement with the idea. He said that he had been surprised when the assignments had been released, and Patrick and John had been swapped around. He had felt that John would have been an ideal candidate for the Ganymede mission.

'However, he also said that it wouldn't be easy to arrange the transfer. Transferring someone's assignment whilst in deep space was highly irregular. He feels certain that if he were to contact Earth and suggest it then it will be rejected outright. The only way that he can make this happen is if he gets the agreement of Captain Roberts. They'll end up in trouble once the swap is uncovered when the Columbia docks at Ganymede, but by then there's nothing that the authorities would be able to do about it.

'But none of this can happen without Captain Roberts' agreement. And I gather that isn't going to well. I was with Captain Cole when he spoke to Captain Roberts, and before he could tell him about the proposal Captain Roberts said that he had taken you prisoner. Captain Roberts tried to get Captain Cole to lock me up as well, but he's refused to do so - he insisted that he is the Captain of the Challenger, and Captain Roberts has no authority to tell him what to do.

'However, I know this doesn't look good for you. I'm aware that you have access to a computer and so can read this. I believe I'm right in saying that the other crew members will come and see you, and I presume you're trying to convince them of the idea. You just need to hang on in there and keep trying. If you do that I'm sure you'll be able to convince the Captain eventually.

'Good luck!'

As soon as Ryan had finished reading the e-mail he shut down the computer again. He was starting to feel hopeful about getting out of the predicament that he found himself in. He had already started work on convincing Jane and John about the proposal. Another conversation

with each of them and he felt that he would have them on his side. But he was still yet to meet Sally...

It was Jane that next came in to see him. She said, 'The Captain sent me in to check on you. Is there anything that you need?'

'I could do with some water, thanks.'

She picked up his empty glass. She then said, 'I want you to know that we're not all heartless. I do understand the predicament that Lucy and Patrick are in. But we have rules for a reason, and they broke those rules. The Space Corp do not send couples out together in order to reduce the chance of children being born on the outer worlds. It's not a proper place for children, and they're too much of a drain on resources.'

'But people are still allowed to form relationships with new people once they get to the outer worlds, aren't they?'

'Yes, but that's after they've had a chance to see what life is like on the worlds. Once they know that they wouldn't dream of bringing a child into one of those worlds.'

'But Lucy and Patrick have already come to terms with the fact they will never be able to have a child together. They already know that the outer worlds are no place for children to be brought up. It was already hard enough for them to come to terms with that, do they also have to be separated as well? Isn't that just a little harsh?'

There was a pause whilst Jane thought this over. She then said, 'I can see your point, but the rules are what they are. We can't just go and change them to please ourselves.'

'But who would be harmed if, just this once, the rules were broken? Lucy and Patrick will be happy on Titania, and John will be happy on Ganymede. Titania will get all of the crew members that it needs, and so will Ganymede. And because Lucy, Patrick, and John will all be happy, they'll be more productive crew members. Everybody wins in this situation. Yes, by leaving things as they are you won't be breaking any rules, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's the right thing to do.'

There was another pause, and then Jane said, 'I'll go and get your water.'

Ryan couldn't be certain, but he felt that he had now converted Jane.

Later on that evening (was it evening? Ryan had little sense of time here) John came into the room with another peanut butter foil pouch. When he came into the room he said, 'Jane's been talking to me. I understand that you've told her about your proposal too.'

'Yes, I have. I think she understands where I'm coming from.'

'Yes, I get that. And I understand where you're coming from too. I do really want to Ganymede. Ever since I was a little boy I wanted to go and live and work on one of the Jovian moons, and not just fly past them on my way to the backend of nowhere. But what I want doesn't come into it. We simply can't go against the authorities, and against the Captain. It's just not possible.'

'Why isn't it possible? All throughout history people have gone against authority and won. And I'm not asking you to bring down a government. All you have to do is go and do the assignment that you were meant to be assigned to in the first place. Now, that's not a huge ask, is it?

'And as for Captain Roberts, I'm not asking you or anyone to go against him, not at all. We are all still perfectly aware that this is his ship and his command, and we're not wanting to change that. All we're suggesting is that you go and talk to the Captain and try and convince him. Captain Cole is already broadly in favour of it, and so there's only Captain Roberts to convince.'

'How do you know what Captain Cole thinks?'

Ryan realised that he had put his foot in it, but he thought it best that he didn't reveal that he had access to the computer. That would just leave to more awkward questions. Instead he said, 'Jane mentioned it to me.'

'Oh, right...'

Ryan now had to hope that John didn't go and try to corroborate this with Jane.

John then said, 'OK, I think I'm with you. But this won't be easy. Captain Roberts can be an extremely stubborn man. He won't be easily turned.'

'I understand, but we've got to at least try. For everyone's sake.'

It was another long while before anyone came to see Ryan. He went on the computer again, but there were no further messages from Lisa. He even risked a quick game of Tetris, but he found that he just wasn't able to concentrate on it, and gave up part way through. He then turned off the computer.

But he felt pleased with the progress that he was making. He may have been locked up in this room all by himself, but he was still able to assert an influence on the ship, simply through making reasoned arguments. He liked it when people were responsive to reasoned arguments. He felt that helped to make everyone's lives easier.

He had managed to bring John and Jane round to his way of thinking. The only person that was left was Sally. She was turning into a real mystery. He wondered why she hadn't been in to see him at all. She could end up being a lynch pin. If all of the Challenger's crew members

gathered together to debate the issue, John and Jane would be arguing for his proposal, and Lucy certainly would be. All that remained would be Sally. If she was against the proposal then she might end up getting the Captain to leave things as they are. But if she could be persuaded to their way of thinking as well, then everyone but the Captain would be for the proposal, and so they should hopefully be able to get him to change his mind.

But first he had to get to meet Sally, and he had no idea where she was, or how to get in contact with her.

Or did he? He looked at the computer. There was nothing to stop him sending her a message via the computer. Yes, it would reveal that he had been able to get access to the computer, but at least he would be able to get in contact with her. But it was a bit of a gamble. How would he explain how he acquired access to the computer? Would whatever explanation he gave her be enough to deflect from that issue onto the issue of Lucy and Patrick? Or would contacting her via the computer just create more problems than it would solve?

He mulled it over in his mind for a while. On the one hand if he did contact Sally by the computer he would have a chance to find out exactly where she stood on the issue, and, if she was against it, he would have a chance to try and convince her. But, on the other hand, by using the computer to contact her he would be running the risk of causing more trouble for himself. She might want to make a major issue of it, and they wouldn't get onto the main issue at all.

However, that said, even if she did decide to make a fuss about it, and even if they didn't get onto the issue of Lucy and Patrick, that wouldn't change the fact that John and Jane were now on his side, and so the prospects of convincing Captain Roberts to come around to his way of thinking should still hopefully be the same.

He decided that he probably had more to gain than to lose by contacting Sally by the computer, and so he decided that he would go for it. He switched on the computer, logged in, and then went to the video calling option. He was able to find Sally easily enough in the directory, and it showed that she was online, which Ryan considered to be a stroke of luck. He took a deep breath, and selected the option to contact her.

The screen changed, and a message appeared that said, 'Contacting Sally...' A brief moment later, and it changed again to show Sally on the screen.

The first thing that she said was, 'How did you get onto the computer system?'

He was afraid of this. He knew that he had to think on his feet, and so he said, 'That isn't important right now. You just need to know that I did.'

'What are you, some sort of spy? I should report you to the Captain at once!'

'No! No, I can assure you I am most definitely not a spy, and I am not here to cause you or anyone else on this ship any harm.'

'Hmpf, a likely story!'

Then Ryan decided to try a line of attack that would either work perfectly and get him out of this mess he now found himself in, or would make him sound like he was a complete idiot. He said, 'Look, I was able to get onto the computer because I'm not like everyone else. I am more special than you or anyone else here. And you know it! How else could I just magically appear on the ship? You all know perfectly well that I couldn't have been in hiding all the time since you left Earth. I only arrived on this ship yesterday. And if I was able to magically appear on this ship yesterday, then is it really so strange that I can also get myself onto the computer system as well? Now, you need to make sure that you listen to me. Myself and Lisa didn't just come to your ships on a whim, we have been sent here for a very specific purpose, and it is very important that we carry out what we came here to do. Now, are you prepared to listen to what it is that I have to say, or do you want to waste time discussing just how it is that I came to be on this computer talking to you now?'

There was a pause, and then Sally said, 'Alright, what is it that's so important?'

'Thank you. Now, have you been made aware of the reason why I have been locked up?'

'No, I have not. The Captain just said that you and Lisa could not be trusted. I don't even feel that I can trust you now.'

'Well, I can assure you that you can. Now, allow me to explain why I've been locked up here. Do you know about Lucy and Patrick?'

'No... What about Lucy and Patrick?'

Ryan then proceeded to tell her about the back story to Lucy's and Patrick's relationship, right up to the point where they were assigned to the different ships with different destinations. He then said, 'It's not right that they should be kept apart. And I am not the only one who feels this. What happened was that Lisa and I were having what we had believed to be a private conversation, but instead your Captain was listening in the whole time. In that conversation we were discussing what could be done to help alleviate this situation and allow Lucy and Patrick to be together. We felt that the best thing to do was to allow Patrick to come over here, and John to go over to the Columbia. In other words, put the assignments back to how they originally were. That way everyone can be happy, because John would much rather go to Ganymede as he was supposed to instead of going to Titania. Your Captain decided to have me locked up for even daring to discuss this matter with my friend. He thinks that we're trying to take over your

ships, and that absolutely is not the case. We just want to persuade him that this is the right thing to do.

'Now, as I said, there are already others who agree with me and Lisa on this one. What I need to know is how you feel about this? Do you think it's right that Lucy and Patrick should be separated, or should they be allowed to be together? They're happy to accept a future together on Titania, and to have a future without children. They just want to have a future together. What are your views on this?'

There was a pause whilst it appeared that Sally was thinking this over. Ryan realised that it would have been a lot for her to take in at once. But then she said, 'You say that the Captain wants to keep them apart?'

'That is correct.'

'He doesn't see anything wrong in keeping them apart?'

Ryan liked the way this was going. 'That's right. He thinks that they should remain separated, and be denied their happiness.'

'I see...!' There was then another long pause. Ryan was starting to get apprehensive, and wanted to know just what was going through Sally's mind. Eventually, she said, 'Wait there.' She then closed down the connection on her end.

Ryan wasn't sure what to make of this. He quickly logged out of the computer and shut it down. He didn't know where Sally was going or what she was going to do. For a moment he thought that she might be going straight to the Captain to tell him that he had gained access to the computer system and was using it to harass her.

But he felt relief when she had come to open the door to his room, and she was alone. She looked at him and said, 'Right, follow me.'

Ryan did indeed follow her, and she went and led him to the Bridge. On the Bridge they saw that the Captain was still in his seat. (Ryan now wondered if he ever left the Bridge.)

As soon as he saw that it was Ryan and Sally who had entered the Bridge, the Captain looked at Sally and asked, 'What are you doing here?'

'What am I doing here? What are you doing locking up this young man?' The Captain didn't appear to have an answer for this.

Also on the Bridge were Jane and John. At this point the door on the other side of the Bridge opened, and Lucy came in. Sally said, 'Ah, Lucy, it's good that you are here, considering that this concerns you. I understand that you and Patrick were in a relationship back during your Space Corp training, that you were found out, and then separated. Is that correct?'

Lucy just nodded, clearly confused as to what was going on, and a little bit afraid.

Sally then looked at the Captain and said, 'Now, that is a pity, isn't it? These two young lovers now have to spend the rest of their lives apart from each other. They should have been a bit more careful, shouldn't they?'

The Captain then said, 'Don't do this...'

'If they hadn't have been caught they would still be together now, wouldn't they?'

'Seriously, don't do this!'

'They should have been more careful, like -'

'Don't you dare do this!'

'Is that any way to talk to your wife!'

The whole Bridge was stunned into silence. Ryan couldn't quite believe what it was that he had just heard. Had Sally just said what he thought she had just said?

It was Sally who broke the silence, 'Yes, that's right. The Captain - Brian - and I are, indeed married.'

The Captain then said, 'It wasn't a legal marriage, not one that would be recognised by the authorities.'

'No, but it was conducted in a church and is recognised in the eyes of God. And don't even for one minute try to pretend that our marriage is anything less than real, otherwise you can stay in your own bed tonight!'

There was another awkward pause, and then the Captain said, 'Yes, alright, I'll admit it. We are married. We've been married for ages. We knew that it was the wrong thing to do, we knew that we should have declared our feelings for each other to the authorities, but we didn't. We chose to hide it. That's what you have to do if you want to stay together in our world, you have to hide it, and you have to hide it well. And we did.'

Sally then said, 'And, unfortunately for Lucy and Patrick, they weren't as good at hiding their feelings for each other as we were, and they are now destined to spend the rest of their lives apart. But that doesn't have to be the case. We have a unique opportunity to put things right. Ryan, and his friend Lisa, have come up with a solution that will work. Yes, it will involve the dangerous manoeuvre of transferring people between ships whilst they are in flight, but that is not insurmountable. John, I understand that you would be more than happy to transfer over to the Columbia and then be posted to Ganymede.'

John responded, 'Yes, that's right. It's what I want more than anything.'

'And, Lucy, I understand that you'd be happy for Patrick to join us here, and work with you on Titania. And that you're aware that you shouldn't have any children whilst you are there. Have I understood correctly?'

'Yes, you have.' Lucy now had a broad smile on her face. Ryan was relieved to see the joy on her face.

Sally continued, 'Well then, it all appears to be quite clear then. Patrick can come over here, and we will send John over there. We will of course be very sorry to lose John, but, other than that I see that this is for the best for all concerned.'

The Captain then said, 'Aren't you forgetting something? The authorities won't be happy with us if we do this. Allowing this to happen isn't going to do us any favours.'

'Brian! Stop being such a hypocrite! You weren't such a stickler for the rules when you and I got together. Screw the authorities! What are they going to do to us? They need us to work on these worlds, and these trips are one way - they can't very well send you back to Earth now. At worst you and Captain Cole will receive a slap on the wrists. It's not like either of you will ever be captaining a ship again, and so you won't be able to do this again. Anyway, things are changing back home. There are rumours that there are weaknesses in the government, and that it may collapse. If that happens, and we get a more liberal government in place then maybe things will be different for future generations, and this little incident will be forgotten.

'So, Captain, which is it to be? Will you be a hypocrite and deny Lucy and Patrick the happiness they want and deserve, when we broke the rules to have that very same happiness for ourselves? Or will you do the right thing?'

There was a pause, and then the Captain said, 'Oh, very well then. We'll do the transfer.'

Lucy squealed with delight. She jumped up, placed her arms around the Captain, and said, 'Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!'

'Steady on now! I still need to discuss it with Captain Cole.'

Jane then said, 'I've already had word from the Columbia. Lisa's been able to convince Captain Cole already. We've all just been waiting for your agreement.'

'Wait a minute, have you all been in on this?' The Captain looked around the room, and John nodded to indicate his complicity in the manner. 'What a bunch of mutinous dogs! But you're also the best crew a man could ever want. Jane, get Captain Cole on the line, and let's get this transfer on the way. John, you should go to your room and pack.' John nodded, with a huge smile on his face, and then he left the Bridge to return to the living quarters.

Whilst Captain Roberts was getting ready to talk to Captain Cole, Lucy came over to Ryan and asked him, 'Was this all your doing?'

'Well, it wasn't quite all of my doing. Lisa's been helping too. We couldn't bear to see you and Patrick apart, and so we felt that we had to do something to help bring you two together.'

'Why would you do this for me?'

'Because it was the right thing to do. Plus, it's kind of what Lisa and I are here for.'

'So, will you and Lisa be leaving now?'

'I suspect we probably will be. I don't think there's much more for us to do here. Although, that said, I don't think we exactly have much in the way of control over when we eventually get to leave. When we left Triceria it just sort of came on us completely unexpectedly.'

'Well, if you can, please stay long enough for when Patrick comes over. I'm sure that he'll want to thank you in person.'

'I'll do my best, but no promises.'

Whilst Ryan and Lucy had been talking, Jane had established an audio link with Captain Cole. Captain Roberts said, 'So, Captain, I understand that you were in on this little crew member transfer conspiracy?'

'Guilty as charged, I'm afraid! But I always think it's wrong when young lovers are forced apart like this. Bringing them back together is the right thing to do.'

'Yes, and you'll also be stealing one of my best crew members!'

'Ah, yes, John. He will certainly be most welcome over here. I was surprised when he wasn't assigned here in the first place - I understand that he is a bit of an expert on the Jovian system, one of the best in the Space Corp.'

'Yes, well, that's the Space Corp for you. Always wanting to stick by their rules rather than actually look at the truth of the matter and treat everyone fairly. So, what is this Patrick like as a worker?'

'I believe that he'll be a very good one, and an asset to your crew. He's been a bit forlorn of late, but I know the reason why now. I'm sure he'll perk up once he's back over there with Lucy.'

'So, when do you think we should get on with this crew transfer? John's off packing as we speak.'

'As is Patrick. Once they're done, and we've all said our goodbyes, I don't see why we shouldn't get on with it right away.'

'Very well then. I suggest we'd better start getting our shuttle pods ready then. Call me back when you're good to go.'

'OK, will do!' Jane shut down the line.

The Captain then turned to everyone and said, 'Well, we'd better get a move on! I know no one here, including myself, has ever done a crew transfer in mid flight, and the only experience that we have of it is from the simulators, but I have every confidence in you, and that we'll be able to get this right.'

They started to get to work on various consoles. Ryan started to feel that he was a little out of place, as there was nothing for him to do here. He wouldn't know the first thing about sorting out a crew transfer. He decided that he would return to the room that had effectively been his prison cell for a little while, and use the computer in there to contact Lisa. They needed to sort out what they were going to do next. He was going to suggest that one of them gets on one of the shuttle pods, so that the two of them could be together on the same ship.

He left the Bridge and made his way back towards the computer room. As he went through the door of the computer room he got a shock. Instead of finding himself in the computer room he found himself in some woodland.

He quickly turned around, and instead of seeing the corridor of the Challenger that he had just come from, he saw more woodland. He also saw Lisa standing behind him, with her back towards him. 'Lisa?' he called out loud.

Lisa turned around to look at him. 'Ryan!' She threw her arms around him. 'It's good to see you again!'

'Where are we?'

'I don't know, but, evidently, we completed what we were meant to do on the Columbia and the Challenger, and we've moved on to our next location.'

At this point Ryan's heart sank. Firstly, because he wouldn't be seeing Lucy again, and he never got the chance to say goodbye to her. He imagined the crews of the two ships wondering where he and Lisa had suddenly disappeared to. But, secondly, his heart sank because he remembered his dream, and more importantly, the menacing voice from his dream that promised that he would see him in this world.

This world, wherever and whenever it was, itself didn't appear to be particularly menacing. It looked like it was near sunset on an autumn day. There were birds singing in the trees. And, in the distance, he could hear what sounded like traffic.

'Are we back on Earth?' he asked.

'I think we may be?'

'Does this mean that my journey is over? Am I back home?'

'I don't want to disappoint you, but I don't think you are. I think there's another task here for us to complete. Come on, I suggest we start walking towards the road.'

Despite what Ryan had said, he had felt disappointed. He started to wonder just how many places that he would have to go to before this journey was over. The end of it could not come soon enough for him.

He and Lisa started to walk along the path that they had found themselves on, towards the sound of the traffic. As they got closer to the road he could see the vehicles themselves, and from this he could tell that they were definitely on Earth, but he couldn't be certain of what year it was.

Once they got to the road they found themselves on a pavement. The road was a fairly busy one, and Ryan could tell from the road signs, and the fact that everyone was driving on the left, that they were somewhere in the UK. They once again found that they had a choice of going either left or right.

'Well, I guess it's time to toss the coin again.' He took the coin out of his pocket, tossed it, and this time it came up as tails, and so they started walking to the right.

They walked along fairly quietly. Ryan didn't know what to say at this point. He was remaining constantly vigilant, looking out for anything that was out of the ordinary. He was especially looking out for any strange men to whom the mysterious voice from his dream might belong to.

The road that they were on was going steadily downhill. They walked past a pub, a church, and a graveyard. Eventually, in the distance, they could see a vast urban sprawl, and so he guessed that he must have been on the edge of a large town or city somewhere. Eventually, they saw a road sign that declared itself to be in the London borough of Harrow. 'Harrow!' he exclaimed, as a rush of memories came back to him, 'That's where I used to live before all of this started! Maybe I am home after all...'

Lisa looked at the sign, and then she looked at Ryan and said, 'We may be back in Harrow, but we may not be in 2011. Don't get your hopes up too high just yet. Let's keep going.'

They did so. Ryan was in two minds. He was constantly looking out for signs to indicate what year they were in, as well as looking out for any strange men. He looked at the number plates of the vehicles that went past him. Every single one, without an exception, started with a letter, followed by three numbers and three letters. He remembered that at around 2002 the format of number plates changed, with two numbers in the middle which indicated what year it was. The fact that he didn't see any number plates in this format either meant that everyone around here was driving really old cars, or he had arrived back in Harrow at a time before 2002, and, therefore, he was not properly home yet. Unfortunately, none of the vehicles that went past looked especially old, and some looked brand new. His heart sank a little more as each vehicle that went past confirmed the theory that this was a time before 2002.

Eventually the road started to flatten out a little, and Ryan could see that they were getting close to where the urban sprawl began. There was a lull in traffic. Then he noticed a strange man

walking, or, more like, running, towards them. Only he didn't look especially menacing. There was a disfigurement on the man's face, as though he had had an accident a long time ago. It was quite a bad disfigurement. The man looked like he was panicked about something, and he kept looking behind him. Then Ryan noticed that he was covered in blood. He looked over at Lisa, and he could see that she had noticed this too.

The man approached them, and, as he did so he said, 'Get out of my way! You don't know what I've done!'

Ryan felt that he had to get involved here. He said, 'Hold on, you're OK. Don't run off. What is it that you've done.' He took a hold of the man's arms, and he didn't struggle, but he still kept looking behind him. Ryan then asked, 'What is it that you've done?'

'Please, just let me go. Oh God, oh no, what have I done?! It's over, there's no going back now. There's no undoing this.'

'Please, just try and calm down.' Ryan was aware that if a car came by and saw this man covered in blood it would look highly suspicious, and he didn't think it'd be a good idea if anyone else got involved in this at this stage. He looked around him, and saw an opening in the woodland nearby. 'Come, let's go in here and talk about this.' He started to lead the man towards the woodland, and he came along willingly.

They went just far enough into the woodland so that they couldn't be seen from the road. Here, they found a bench, and Ryan got the man to sit on the bench. He then asked, 'What's your name?'

The man didn't appear to hear him. He just said, 'What have I done, what have I gone and bloody done?! I can't believe it!' He was almost in tears.

Ryan then said, 'Come on, stop being like this! I'd like to help you if I can, but I can't do that if you won't calm down and tell us what's going on. Things are only going to get worse if you don't start talking to us.'

The man just continued to look back towards the road, and muttering the same things under his breath.

Ryan then shook the man and shouted, 'Look at me!' The man did so. 'Good. Now, tell me, slowly and calmly, what has just happened to you. What is it that you've done?'

'I've done something awful, simply awful. It can't be undone.'

'Yes, you've said that already. But what is this awful thing that you've done?'

The man sobbed for a moment, and then he said, 'I've killed someone.'

Ryan had suspected that it might have been something like that. He then asked, calmly, 'Are you certain that this person is dead, and not simply wounded?'

'Yes, I watched her take her last breath.'

'OK then. Yes, this is bad. But let's not try and make any of this worse. Tell me, what happened, exactly.'

The man took a deep breath and said, 'It was the end of the day, one where she had been working on one of her art projects. She did a lot of art. Art was her life. Tonight it was her death. There was this little cupboard like area near the art rooms. There was a sink in the room and she was washing her paintbrushes in it. I thought about what it was that I was going to do. I had thought about it for such a long time. And now my opportunity had arrived.'

'It's not like she didn't deserve it, not after what she had done to me, the bitch!'

'What was it that she did to you?'

'She called me a freak. She said that I was ugly, and that I was weird. This wasn't my fault!' The man pointed to his face. 'This was my brother's fault, back when we were kids. All I did was love her. Was that so great a crime? All I did was love her, and she threw that love back in my face.'

'But, oh, I've shown her! I've shown her alright! A freak am I? Weird am I? Well, she won't be saying that about me anymore! In fact, she won't be saying much about anyone anymore!' He then started to laugh like a mad man, which then turned into moans of anguish as he said, 'Oh God, I've killed her! I've actually gone and killed her! I had to, you see, I wasn't left with any other choice. She had to die, she had to! That will teach everyone a lesson...'

'I had that axe with me all day. I even walked past her with it hidden up my sleeve. That felt good. She didn't suspect a thing.'

'I went up to her in that cupboard, and closed behind me. She didn't suspect a thing until it was too late. It felt good when that axe...!' He looked off into the distance again.

Ryan then asked, still talking calmly, 'Where is this axe now?'

'Hmm?' The man turned round to look at him. 'Oh, I, er, left it there. It was all covered in blood, and I didn't need it any more. Oh God, she's really dead, isn't she? And it was me who killed her. Oh God, oh God, oh God...!'

Ryan could see that this man was clearly conflicted. Part of him was clearly taking pleasure in the horrific act that he had just committed, but part of him was also feeling a lot of guilt about it.

The man continued, 'I can still see her body lying there, her guts all spilt out onto the floor, her blood everywhere, mixed up with the red paint from her paintbrushes. The look of fear on her face. Her hand going up on the wall, leaving a bloody red mark, as she tried to get up but couldn't. And her final, shallow, breaths. She was dead... and I killed her! Oh God...!' The man then vomited to the side of the bench.

Ryan was a little shocked to hear this horrific story, but he knew that the best thing that he could do right now was stay calm. He sat down next to the man and said to him, 'OK, this is bad, and I believe that you're aware of this. What is it that you're going to do next?'

The man looked up at him and said, 'I... I don't know. I never thought this far ahead...'

'OK, well, I don't think running is the best course of action. For starters, you're covered in blood. You won't get far like that. I think you're as aware as I am that there's no running away from this. You have done a terrible thing, and you know that. I think you need to think about not making this any worse than it already is.'

'How could this possibly get worse?'

'Well, running away from what you've done certainly won't help to make things any better. You've taken someone's life away from them. No matter how she treated you, she would still have a family, she would still have friends, and you've now taken her away from them. I think the best thing that you could do now is to face up to that fact, and to face up to the consequences. If you want my advice, I think that the best thing that you could do right now is to turn yourself in.'

'Turn myself in? But if I'll do that they'll send me to prison...'

'Yes, most likely they will. But if you don't turn yourself in they'll probably find out that it was you before too long. You left the weapon at the scene, and people would probably be aware that you and this girl didn't get on. You won't be able to run away from the police forever, they will eventually catch up with you. If you hand yourself over to them willingly, admit what it is that you've done, and show that you are truly sorry and regret what you did, then things will be better for you in the long run. Yes, you will go to prison and pay for your crime, but you may get parole one day. I'm saying that you will, but the best thing you can do for yourself now is to hand yourself in.'

There was a pause whilst the man thought this through. 'I know I can't escape this. I know what it is I've done, and I know that there are consequences for it. But I'm scared. I'm really scared.'

'I know you are. But you need to face up to that fear. That's the best thing that you can do now. If you don't you will only be making things worse for yourself. That girl's family and friends deserve an explanation for what has happened, and only you can provide that explanation.'

'You're right, I know you're right. I just hate myself right now. I can still see her body in my mind...'

'I'll leave you to think for a bit. Then we'll come with you to hand yourself in. OK? Is that a deal?' The man nodded.

Ryan and Lisa stepped away from the man, but still kept an eye on him. Ryan turned to Lisa and said, 'Well, of all of the things that I was expecting to find here, that wasn't one of them.'

'Yes, it's certainly a tragic tale. But I think you handled it well. That man clearly has some serious problems that he's going to have to face up to, and he's done a most horrid thing. But you've helped show him that he has to face up to what he's done, that he has to take whatever punishment is due to him. But that running away from this is not the answer.'

'Why were we sent here, Lisa? Why us? Why now? So far, in Triceria, and then out in space, our quests were to help to allow a couple to be together when their respective societies were trying to keep them apart. Why have we now been sent here to provide advice and assistance to a murderer?'

There was a pause, and then Lisa said, 'In the whole of the multiverse there are two great powers, good and evil, light and dark. You may think that for the multiverse to be harmonious these two powers should be in balance, but they very rarely are. In Triceria, and out in space, we were witness to areas where the good had the balance of power. Things ended well for all of the people there. Here, in this particular place at this particular time, it is evil that has the balance. Now, that man was in full control of his actions. There wasn't some external power that made him do what he did. He made a conscious decision to do what he did to that girl. But when he did that, he made the evil power a bit more stronger in this place. By this point all that good can do is mitigate against this power, to try and stop things from being any worse than they already are.'

'You have helped to do that, Ryan. If that man had run away from what he had done, then the evil power would have become stronger still. The police would have had a manhunt on their hands, that girl's family and friends would have been left wanting an answer. And the local community would have been worried that they had a murderer on the loose that might have struck again. But now that won't happen. That man will turn himself in, which will now be better for everyone, including him. His life will now be changed forever, and he'll never be able to fully go back to the life that he had before. But, by facing up to what he's done, there is still some hope for him.'

'But there's no hope for the girl that he killed.'

'True, which is why good can never fully triumph once things have reached this stage. An innocent girl has had her life taken away from her, and that can never be undone.'

'If we were sent back to this time, why couldn't we have been sent back to a time before he killed that girl? Why couldn't we have been sent back to a point where we could have prevented her from being killed?'

There was another pause, and then Lisa responded with, 'Because sometimes that just isn't possible. I don't know who is choosing these places for us, or why. But it'd possible that, for some reason, they wanted you to see some of this dark power, to see that it's not always possible to put things right. That, sometimes, you just have to accept that bad things happen that you can't always do something about. There were bound to have been other people in that man's life, people that knew him, and knew about what things were like between him and this girl. I'm sure that none of them would have wanted this girl to have been killed, but they were all powerless to stop it from happening anyway. At the end of the day, this man had it set in his mind that he was going to kill this girl. At one point he said that he had no choice but to. I don't know quite what was going through his mind in the run up to this murder, but he must have gone down quite twisted path to end up at this point. No one just wakes up one morning and decides that they're going to kill someone. This must have been coming for some time, and everyone just missed out on preventing it.

'I know that that might all sound a little harsh, but that's how things are in the multiverse. Sometimes, there are bad things that happen that no one can prevent. Good people just have to try and deal with them all as best as they can.'

Ryan looked back at the man, and he pitied him. He had done an awful thing, a thing beyond imagining, and a thing that he was going to have to pay the price for. But Ryan didn't feel hatred towards him, he felt pity. He clearly had problems, problems that were never addressed, at least, not addressed adequately, and they have led him to carry out this horrid act.

Ryan then went up to him and asked, 'Are you ready?'

The man looked up at him, and he nodded.

'OK then, let's go.'

The man stood up, and Lisa led them out of the woodland. The man walked between Lisa and Ryan. Ryan kept his eye on the man - he was ready to grab him in case he decided to make a run for it. But he didn't look like he was going to. The man was mainly looking up at the sky. The sun was setting somewhere in the distance, and the sky looked like it was on fire. Ryan wondered if the man realised that the sun was also setting on a part of his life, and when it rose again it would signify the start of a whole new chapter of his life. Ryan suspected that this was indeed the case.

They returned to the spot where they had met the man, and then continued walking in the direction that he had come from. Before long they came across a college, where, evidently, he had come from. Lisa led them into the college grounds. As it was late in the day there weren't

that many people about - it must have been after the day students had gone home, and before the evening classes had begun. But there were still a few people about.

A small crowd was starting to form by one of the buildings. Outside the building a couple of police cars were parked. Evidently, the body had been discovered. A police line had been put up, and some police officers were standing by the entrance to the building.

Ryan said to the man, 'OK then, are you ready for this?'

'Yes, I think I am. I'm scared, but I think I'm ready for this.'

'OK then. Well, I think you know what to do.'

The man, looked at Ryan, nodded, and then started to walk towards the police officers. Ryan and Lisa stood back and watched him.

Lisa was standing by Ryan's side. He said, 'Do you think he'll be OK?'

'As OK as he can be given the circumstances.'

They saw the man go up to the police officers, and start talking to them. Clearly, there were surprised to see a man covered in blood walking up to them and confessing to a murder. But Ryan and Lisa could clearly see that they had arrested him.

Then Ryan got another flood of memories. He said to Lisa, 'You know, I think I can remember this murder case. It was all over the news back in '98. Yes, it must have been this case - this girl had been murdered at college, and I believe it was this one. They said that she had been brutally attacked at the end of the day. And then shortly afterwards her murderer just calmly handed himself in. At first people just thought that he was just some kind of nut case. People thought that he was going to plead insanity at his trial, and I think his defence team had wanted him to do so. But he himself insisted on pleading guilty. He said that he was perfectly aware of what it was that he was doing, and he wanted to face up to it. He apparently broke down into tears in court as he explained to the girl's family why he had done it. He knew that he couldn't bring her back, but the best he could do is give her family an explanation. He was sentenced to life in prison - the judge had no choice about that, and quite rightly so - but that man was given some praise for at least having the courage to face up to what he had done and to face the consequences of it, to not leave her family with questions. It was quite an incredible case.'

'It sounds like it. Come on, let's go. We're no longer needed here.'

They turned around and walked away. Lisa linked her arm with Ryan's, and he was appreciative of this. He wanted to move on from this place. They found the whole story of this murder quite upsetting, and he now wanted to put it all out of his mind.

He turned to Lisa and asked her, 'Do you mind if we go back to that bit of woodland where we had arrived? I don't much feel like going into Harrow itself down there.'

'Yes, that's fine.'

They walked along back to the woodland in silence. Ryan was lost in his thoughts. Whilst he tried to but the murder out of his mind, he found it hard to do so. He also found it hard to forget about everything else that had happened to him so far. He wondered how much longer this journey with Lisa was going to take, and where else they would be going to. But the thing that troubled him most of all was why he was even on this journey in the first place. He still couldn't remember exactly what was happening in his life prior to his arrival in the town by the sea. What was it that had resulted in him ending up on this journey? Why was he here? Who was it that was guiding them on this adventure? And where would it end?

He then thought back to that voice from his dreams, the voice that had been full of menace. The voice that had promised that they would meet in this world. They still hadn't had this meeting, and yet Ryan somehow knew that this meeting wasn't far off.

They arrived back at the entrance to the bit of woodland where they had arrived in this time. As they walked down the path they saw a man standing on the path dressed entirely in black. He was wearing trousers, a shirt, and a long leather coat with a hat. He also had black hair, and a short black beard. He looked at Ryan and said, 'I told you we would meet here, Ryan.' Whilst the voice wasn't as booming or as menacing as the one he had heard in his dream, Ryan could tell that it was still the same voice.

Lisa stopped on the path, but Ryan took a few paces further forward. 'Who are you?' he asked.

'Don't you know?'

'I've never seen you before in my life.'

'No, you haven't, but you still know who I am. I'm sure it will come back to you in time. But if you need to give me a name, you can use the name Shadow Zero. So, young Ryan, what do you make of this place, this time? I rather like it. I've always liked a good murder, don't you?'

'Absolutely not.'

'Oh, come now, everyone likes at least a little bit of murder. Otherwise, why would crime books and crime dramas be so popular. I thought you would have loved this one, considering you followed it so closely back when it actually happened as far as your timeline is concerned.'

'So you're the one sending us from place to place, then?'

The man laughed out loud, and then said, 'Oh no, that's not me. If only it were. But no, that has nothing to do with me. I was just aware of where it was you were going to be sent next. I knew that you were being sent here, and I was so very keen to meet you.'

'What's going on? Why am I even here at all?'

'Oh, come now? Do you think that I'm just going to reveal everything to you, just like that? I'm not one of those maniacal villains that insists on revealing their whole plans to the hero instead of just getting on with things! Why you are here and what this is all about is something that you are just going to have to figure out in your own time, if you ever do, of course. No, for the time being I just wanted to meet you, face to face. To introduce myself to you. Remember Ryan, I am never far away. I know all about you, and about all that you do. Do not forget me. Because everything is your fault, Ryan. Everything is your fault, and I will make sure that you never forget that.'

'What do you mean that everything is my fault? What is it that I'm supposed to have done? I haven't done anything! Nothing is my fault!'

'Oh, will you listen to yourself! You sound like a spoilt child! When will you wake up and start accepting the blame for things, instead of trying to pass it on to everyone else? Of course everything is your fault, Ryan. Everyone knows it but you! Why don't you just accept it?'

'I'm accepting nothing. I don't know who you are or why you are here, but I know that I haven't done anything wrong. I don't care what you say. Just go away and leave me alone!'

'No! I will not be going anywhere! Have you really not worked it out yet, Ryan? Have you seriously not been able to figure out who I am? Oh Ryan, what a fool you are!'

'I don't care who you are! I haven't done anything wrong! Now, go away!' Ryan ran towards Shadow Zero, with the intention of grabbing him so that he could look him right in the face. However, just before he made contact he tripped and fell. But instead of landing on the forest ground, he found that he had landed on a wooden floor. It was fairly dark, and there were a lot of legs about. And he could hear 'Murder on the Dancefloor' by Sophie Ellis Bextor.

He looked up, and saw that he was at a disco of some kind. Lisa came over to him, and helped him up to his feet. No one around them appeared to have noticed them.

Ryan said (or, rather, shouted) to Lisa, 'I guess we moved again.'

'Looks like it.'

'Where on Earth are we now?'

'Beats me!'

They looked around where they were. Most of the people around them looked quite young - late teens or very early twenties. He looked at Lisa and said, 'Let's go outside.'

'OK then.'

They went outside, where it was quite chilly. They turned round and looked at the building that they were just in. In big letters above the door were the words 'Student's Union'.

'Ah, right,' said Ryan, 'We're at a university somewhere.'

'Really, how on Earth did you manage to work that out?' Lisa turned and smiled at him.

Ryan then said, 'Well, as long as there aren't any murder's here - on or off the dancefloor - I don't care where we are.'

'Shall we go back inside?'

'I don't think we can - once you leave a place like that you usually have to show some proof that you've paid to get in, otherwise they won't let you back in.'

'Look at the back of your right hand.'

Ryan did so, and saw that there was a black ink stamp there saying 'Student's Union'. 'Oh, right,' he said, 'Our guardian angel looking over us again.'

They went back inside, and the difference in atmosphere was immediately noticeable. Whilst it was cool outside, inside here it was hot and stuffy. And loud. During his uni days he had never really liked coming to places like this. He went to them occasionally with his friends, but not very often.

They stood to the side, and watched everyone else dancing. Ryan knew that they would have been sent here to help someone with something - he knew the drill by now. The only question was who, and with what. He knew the drill there as well - they would come to him. He just hoped that they were female and pretty. There were quite a few pretty girls here in skimpy outfits, and, of course, sadly for him, they would all be too young and out of his reach now. But that didn't stop him looking.

Lisa hit him on the arm and said, 'Stop perverting! I can virtually see your tongue hanging out of your mouth!'

'Hey, I wasn't perverting! I was simply admiring...'

'Oh, really!'

'Come on, give me a break! It's not often that I can get to come to a place like this without being in breach of a restraining order. Allow me to enjoy myself!'

'OK, but remember, you can look, but you can't touch!'

'Yes ma'am!' Ryan went back to looking but not touching the pretty young things that were around him.

However, he found himself being distracted by a group of people that were sitting near them. They looked like your typical group of friends at a Uni disco. Most of them had drinks, and they were getting up to dance every now and then. But he kept noticing that there was one guy who was doing neither of these things. He seemed to be doing what Ryan himself was doing, namely looking at all of the pretty girls. There was one girl in particular that seemed to have caught this guy's attention. She had fair skin, and long wavy dark hair. She looked to only be about 18, was

very slim, and had very long legs. However, the most striking thing about her was her outfit, which was a very short black backless dress, which showed a lot of cleavage (at least, the cleavage that she had) around the front. The poor guy seemed absolutely mesmerised with this girl.

He also seemed to be completely out of luck, because the girl was dancing very close to a guy who looked like he worked out a lot. At one point they started to kiss each other. And yet the guy that was watching the girl, still kept on watching her, although Ryan could see the look of disappointment on his face.

The other guy and the hot girl then left the Student Union together, and both Ryan and the girl's admirer were aware of what the girl and the guy would be doing for the rest of the night. Ryan felt sorry for the girl's admirer - it was a situation that he himself had been in many times before.

Ryan got Lisa's attention, and pointed out the guy to her. 'I know,' she said, 'I noticed what was going on myself. I was surprised that you didn't go running after that girl!'

Just then, the guy got up, and made his way outside. Ryan then said to Lisa, 'Come on, I think we should follow him. Just in case he's a little creepy and going after that girl.'

'OK, but if we do see that girl we're not going to start following her instead, OK?'

'I wouldn't even think of it!' He was lying, he had been thinking of it, and he hoped that this guy was going to be following the girl, just so that he could get another look at her himself.

But, unfortunately for Ryan, the guy wasn't following that girl, of whom there was now no sign of. The guy was walking very purposefully through the campus. Ryan assumed that he was going to be heading back to his Halls of Residence to call it a night. However, he went right through the campus, and across a road. On the other side of the road was a small supermarket. 'Let's follow him inside,' said Lisa, 'We've come this far, we might as well keep following him.'

Ryan did as she said, only he now felt a little wrong about this. He had preferred to follow the pretty girl, inside they were stalking this guy instead. He felt that there had been a clear fail in his planning here.

As it was late at night the supermarket wasn't that busy. The guy got a trolley, and started to make his way around the store.

'Get a trolley,' said Lisa.

'Oh, right, yes, of course.' Ryan knew that they had to look inconspicuous. Although, he felt that it wasn't as if anything particularly bad was going to happen if they were spotted by this guy.

The guy didn't seem to have much in the way of a varied diet. He got bread and milk - good, important staples - but then he got a box of Frosties. This guy was still a kid, it seemed. He also

got a load of Pot Noodles. A lot of Pot Noodles. In fact, he got so many Pot Noodles it looked like he was planning to live in them for the next fortnight.

Lisa was placing items in their own trolley. She went to put some cans of tomato soup in it, and then Ryan said, 'No, get the minestrone instead. They're much better than tomato soup!'

Lisa then muttered, 'Ryan, were not actually going to be eating this stuff you know. We're just trying to blend in here.'

'Well, don't look so out of place and get some proper soup then!'

Lisa sighed and placed the tomato soup back on the shelf and got the minestrone soup instead.

They continued to follow the guy around the store, where he also got himself some cheese slices, cheap margarine, and a multipack of Coke. Ryan said, 'It looks like he's going for the full student diet. All's that missing is... no, there it is!' The guy put some pasta and pasta sauce into his trolley.

They had now been all over the store. They saw the guy approach the checkouts. There were two that were open. One was being operated by a guy. He was currently serving a customer and no one else in his queue. The other was being operated by a pretty girl. She had fair skin, sparkly eyes, and long ginger hair. She was also serving a customer, and there was one other person waiting in her queue. And so it would have made sense for the guy to queue up at the checkout being operated by the other guy. Only he didn't, he just went right past both checkouts, and back up one of the aisles.

'That's odd,' said Ryan. 'Maybe he's just forgotten something...' Ryan was at a loss to think what this could possibly have been as the guy already had all of the student staples. They followed him around the aisle, and saw that he wasn't actually looking at anything on the shelves. He just seemed to be wandering aimlessly around the store.

They then came back around to the checkouts. This time the girl wasn't serving anybody, and the guy was serving a customer and had no one else in his queue. The guy they had been following went straight for the girl's checkout. Ryan and Lisa queued up at the guy's checkout.

'I think I get it,' said Ryan. 'Just keep an eye on him.' And they did. The guy didn't seem to be able to take his eyes off of the girl. The girl didn't appear to have noticed, or she choosing not to show that she had. The guy was still being served by the girl as Ryan and Lisa were starting to be served. They started putting their shopping into bags, whilst still keeping an eye on the guy.

They heard the girl say to the guy, 'That will be fifteen pounds twenty-five please.' She had a nice Welsh accent. The guy put his hand in his pocket, and produced a twenty pound note, which he handed to the girl.

Meanwhile, at their own checkout, their check out guy was saying, 'Twenty-two fifty seven please.' He also had a Welsh accent. Ryan hadn't thought how they were going to pay for their shopping, but Lisa had it covered, as she produced some money from her pocket. Presumably it had been placed there by whoever it was that had sent them here.

By some feat of timing, both Ryan and Lisa, and the guy that they had been following, were ready to leave the store at the same time. They followed him outside, where they saw him looking in again at the pretty check-out girl. She wasn't returning his look.

Ryan asked, 'Should we follow him any further?'

'No, I don't think so. If we keep on following him he might begin to suspect something.' Ryan was about to say something, but before he did Lisa said, 'And no, we go and look for the half naked 18 year old girl instead! Anyway, she'll be long gone by now.'

'And what makes you think I was going to suggest that?' He hadn't been - he was going to have suggested that they head back in the general direction of the Student's Union, but mainly because he had been half hoping to see the half naked 18 year old girl again.

'Because I know what you boys are like! You're always the same. It doesn't matter what planet you go to, show a boy a pretty girl and he'll automatically relocate his brains to his groin, or wherever the reproductive organs for his particular species are located. Come on, let's head off. I suggest we go into the town.'

She led them to the road, which was at the top of a hill. Down the road they could see a town, and, beyond the town was the sea. As they started along the road Ryan noticed that the road signs were all in English and Welsh. 'We're in Wales, aren't we?'

'Yes, I believe we are. Aberystwyth to be precise. It's a town that's dominated by its university.'

After a brief pause, Ryan asked, 'So you've been around a lot?'

Lisa gave him a somewhat dirty look.

Ryan then said, 'Oh, no, I didn't mean it like that! I meant that you've seen a lot of places. You've been to Pyna before, and to a lot of other worlds. And the fact that you seemed to know where in Wales this is suggests that you've been to Wales before, which surely must be about as alien as it gets.'

'Yes, you're right. About me having been to a lot of other worlds, not about Wales being an alien place.'

'So, who exactly are you then? What are you? I have a feeling that you're not human...'

There was a pause, and then Lisa said, 'We need to think about what we're going to do tonight. I'd rather not stay outdoors all night if I can help it. And we need to do something with all of this shopping!'

They continued walking into the town in silence. But Ryan wondered why she was being so evasive about who she was. He certainly found her to be very intriguing. He wanted to know where it was she came from, and how she came to be guiding him on this journey now. But he had a feeling that she wasn't just simply going to tell him just like that. He hoped that he would find out at some point before this journey was over.

As they got into the town they saw more people about, mainly groups of students going home after a night out (including, to Ryan's delight, more pretty girls in short skirts and short dresses).

As they continued on through the town Lisa said, 'I think we should look for a hotel to stay the night in.'

'Won't that look a bit dodgy? Two people turning up late at night wanting a room for just a night?'

'Yeah, and carrying some bags of shopping! Don't worry, it'll be fine. It's either that, or stay outside all night.' Ryan wouldn't have wanted that. It was now starting to feel a little cold outside, and he was feeling tired again. He would have liked to spend a whole night uninterrupted in a nice, warm, comfortable bed.

Before long they found a small hotel that looked like it was still open for people who wanted to check in. They went inside, and pressed a buzzer in reception. After a little while a lady who looked like she was in her sixties came down and asked, 'Hello there, do you have a reservation?'

It was Lisa who answered, 'Unfortunately not. We just got into town tonight, we had delays all day, and we won't be able to move into our new place until the morning. I don't suppose that you'd have a room available that we could have for the night?'

'I'll just check.' The woman looked at a large book that she had in front of her. She then looked up and said, 'You're in luck, we have one double room available. Now, will you be paying by cash or card?'

'Cash.' Without even asking how much the room was, Lisa produced some notes from her pocket. Ryan was starting to wonder if she had some sort of money machine in there that could produce as much money in any currency that she needed at a moment's notice.

Lisa paid for a room, and signed some papers, and then the woman gave her some keys. She said, 'It's on the top floor, room 12, about halfway down the corridor. You should find the room comfortable. If you want breakfast it will be extra, and served from 7.30. Checkout is by 9.30. I hope you enjoy your stay.'

'Thank you.'

The woman nodded, and then returned from wherever it was that she came from.

Lisa turned to Ryan and said, 'Come on, let's go.'

Ryan followed her up the stairs, which quite tired him out. He remembered with fondness the seemingly boundless energy that he had seemed to have back in the Citadel in Triceria.

There were three floors in the building in all, and so it didn't take them too long to get to the top. Once there, they turned to the left, and quickly found room 12. Lisa opened the door and they went inside. The room had a large double bed in it, two bedside tables, a TV, and an on suite bathroom. The curtains were drawn, but Ryan had a quick look through them, where he was able to see the sea - it reminded him of the house he had had at the start of this whole odyssey.

He turned to Lisa and asked, 'Are you OK about sharing a bed?'

'I'll be fine, just as long as you promise to behave yourself.'

'Absolutely!' Whilst Ryan couldn't deny that Lisa was a very pretty girl, he wasn't having anything like those sort of feelings for her. For some reason she now felt more like a sister to him rather than anything else.

Lisa took the bags of shopping and put them on a table. She then said, 'I'll see if we can make anything resembling a meal out of this stuff. You can take a rest on the bed if you like.'

Ryan got on the bed and stretched out. He turned on the TV and started channel hopping. He wasn't really focussing on anything in particular that was on or taking anything in. At one point he landed on S4C - the Welsh language channel that originally took the place of Channel 4 in Wales. He found himself strangely mesmerised by it. It was some sort of talk show, but all in Welsh and so he wasn't able to understand a word of it.

Before long Lisa handed him a cheese and tomato baguette, and a can of Sprite. 'Here you go, enjoy!' Ryan gladly took it. He hadn't realised it, but a cheese and tomato baguette was really what he felt like having right now. He briefly wondered how Lisa had managed to slice everything and spread the margarine on, as he saw no trace of any sort of knife in the room, but he quickly put that out of his mind as he started to tuck in.

After he had eaten that he lay back on the bed, and closed his eyes. Lisa then said, 'It's OK if you want to go to sleep now, I don't mind. Sweet dreams.'

'Good night,' said Ryan, as he quickly drifted off.

Once again he dreamed that night. He was back in his house by the sea. The weather was once again perfect - there were only a few white clouds high up in the sky, and a pleasant breeze was

blowing. he could hear the sound of seagulls, and the waves of the sea crashing onto the beach in the distance.

Only, unlike when he had been here before, he now wasn't here alone. He knew that there was someone else here. But he couldn't recall who, nor was he able to see them. Whenever he looked over to where he had expected to see them all he saw was a blur. But he didn't feel any menace from this person, quite the contrary. He felt a great deal of fondness towards them.

The dream didn't follow any sort of pattern, and was quite disjointed. At one point he was in his house, then they suddenly found themselves in Irene's cafe, then they were on the train, then they were eating fish and chips out of newspapers on the beach. But all the time this warm other presence was there.

Ryan woke up feeling refreshed. There was a cool breeze blowing in from the window, and he could hear the sea. But he knew that he was in Aberystwyth, and not in the town by the sea that he was in at the start of his journey.

'Good morning, sleepy head!' Lisa was already up and dressed, and sitting at the table. 'Did you have a good night's sleep?'

'Yes I did, thank you. How about you?'

'Oh, yes, I was fine. Now, why don't you pop into the shower, and once you're all freshened up we can go downstairs and have some breakfast before we leave and find out what it is that we're supposed to be doing here.'

'OK,' Ryan went to the bathroom, and he realised that he had fallen asleep in his clothes. He then realised that he had been wearing the same clothes since the start of this adventure, and then noticed that they were starting to smell a bit.

After he had had a shower he went to put his clothes back on. He always thought that it was a little pointless to put dirty clothes back on after he had had a shower, but he didn't have much in the way of alternatives.

However, when he went to his pile of clothes, they smelt like they were not only clean, but freshly laundered. He thought that this was very odd - he hadn't been in the shower that long, nowhere near long enough for someone to wash and dry his clothes. That and the fact that he hadn't heard anyone come inside to do anything to his clothes. But they were definitely his clothes, there was no doubt about that. Rather than stand there wondering why they were now clean, he went ahead and put them back on.

As he stepped outside he asked Lisa, 'Do you know how my clothes suddenly became clean?'

'Why, are you complaining?'

'No, not at all. I was just wondering how it was possible.'

'Well, let's just say that it's no less impossible than us travelling from one place in time and space to another in a blink of an eye and leave it at that.'

'OK then...' He was certain that Lisa did know what had happened with his clothes, and this just made her even more intriguing.

They left the room and went downstairs. Ryan noticed that Lisa didn't have any of the shopping that they had bought the day before, and he wondered where it now was, but he decided not to say anything. They made their way to the dining room, which was already full of people having breakfast. They ranged from elderly couples, to young families, to groups of students.

Ryan and Lisa sat down at a table, and Lisa asked, 'What is it that you'd like?'

'Just some cereal, some toast, and some orange juice.'

'Well, it looks like you can help yourself to the cereal and the juice. You go ahead and get that, and I'll order your toast for you. What would you like on your toast?'

'Marmite, if they have it.'

'Well, what sort of a hotel would they be if they did toast but not Marmite?'

'Absolutely!' Ryan smiled at Lisa, who returned the smile, and then he went to where the cereals and milk were.

He put a combination of Wheatabix and Rice Krispies in his bowl, poured himself a large glass of smooth orange juice, and then made his way back to his table. Once he'd sat down he asked Lisa, 'What are you going to have?'

'Oh, I'm just going to have some toast, I'm not that hungry.' Somehow Ryan wasn't surprised about this. In fact, he was surprised that she was going to be eating anything at all.

He got stuck into his cereal - he felt like a bit of a kid combining cereals together like this, but there were far worse things that he could have had in his bowl. Shortly before he had finished his cereal his toast had arrived - four slices of brown toast, liberally covered in Marmite, just the way he liked it. He saw that Lisa had exactly the same. He then got stuck into that. He was definitely in the 'Love Marmite' camp.

Once he had finished his toast and downed his orange juice, Lisa asked for the bill. She once again produced adequate money from her pocket, and left a generous tip. They then made their way out of the hotel.

It was a bright sunny day, but it was a bit chillier than Ryan would have ideally liked it to have been. 'So,' he said to Lisa, 'What are we going to do now?'

'I suggest we head back up to the campus. I reckon that, with this being a student town, we're most likely to find whatever it is that we're here to do up there.' Ryan's eyes lit up at this, and when Lisa saw this she added, 'And no, I don't think it will have anything to do with the half naked girl from last night! And even if we do see her, I suspect she'll now be properly dressed.'

'OK,' said Ryan, who had to admit that he was slightly disappointed. It was very rare for him these days to see a girl like that. He had seen quite a few during his university days, but that was a long time ago now.

It didn't take them too long to get back onto the campus. The town itself was quite compact and it didn't seem that it would take anyone too long to get from one point of it to another. There were already quite a few students about, even though it was still a little too early for lectures to begin.

'So,' said Ryan, 'Where do we go now?'

'I don't know, I suggest that we just walk around and see what we can see.' Ryan was slightly uneasy about this, as questions might be asked about why a couple of non-students were just wandering about the campus. But then he realised that they could probably quite easily pass for a couple of students. A mature student in his case, but still a student none the less.

They found their way to where it appeared most of the Halls of Residences were. Ryan then recognised, across the road, the supermarket that they had gone to the night before. Opposite it there was a building that looked like it had a number of student flats in it. Out of that building they then saw the guy that they had been tailing from the night before.

This got Ryan feeling a little worried, as the memories from the previous trip back to 1998 was still fresh in his mind. What if this guy was some kind of obsessive freak that might be tipped over to the point of murder? What if he had been spying on the pretty check-out girl from his flat, and had been following her every move, trying to establish when would be the best time for him to strike? What if he had set up some kind of secret shrine in his room dedicated to this girl, where he pledged every night that he would one day make her his?

Then again, Ryan thought, maybe that was all going a bit too far. Maybe, instead, he was just a shy guy who had developed a little crush on a pretty girl, and he wasn't sure what to do about it. Ryan knew only too well what that was like. When he was younger he was always surprised at how easy other guys seemed to be able to just go up and talk to girls. It was something that he himself had always had some difficulty with.

They saw that the guy was carrying a large stack of books. They must have been extremely heavy, and he didn't look particularly strong. He then tripped on a curb, lost his balance, and fell to the ground, his books being sprawled all over the floor.

Without even thinking about it Ryan and Lisa ran over to help him. Ryan helped him to his feet and asked, 'Are you OK?'

'Yeah, I'm alright, thanks.'

Lisa had started to gather his books together. She said to him, 'That's quite a lot of books you've got here!'

'Yeah, I was working on this big essay late into the night. But I've got to get these back to the library quickly, in about 10 minutes or so, otherwise I'll get a big fine. Most of them were short term loans.' Ryan was familiar with the concept of short term loan books from when he had been at Uni. These were books that were especially popular on courses, and often essential when it came to essays. In order to ensure that all students had fair access to the books the libraries would only loan them out for a few hours at a time, so that they could be shared out amongst the maximum number of students possible. There were often hefty fines for anyone who returned them late, to act as a deterrent to try and prevent anyone from doing so.

'Here,' said Ryan, 'We'll help you carry them.'

'Oh, thank you, you're very kind. My name's Ben by the way.'

'Pleased to meet you Ben. I'm Ryan, and my friend here is Lisa.'

'Hi,' said Lisa, with a smile.

'Hi...' said Ben, with the same look in his eyes as he had had with the pretty check-out girl last night.

'Well,' said Ryan, 'Lead the way!'

'Don't you know the way to the library?'

'Oh, well, we just transferred here recently, we're still trying to find our way around.' Ryan thought that he was starting to get good at this thinking on his feet thing.

Ben led them through the campus, and, in no time at all, they had arrived at the library. Ben went straight to one of the self service machines, and then started to check his books back in. As he did so Ryan and Lisa started to have a casual look through some of the books that the library had.

Ryan then whispered to Lisa, 'So, what do you think? Do you reckon that he might be our guy?'

'Possibly. I suggest that you go and have a word with him, one-on-one, and see what you can get from him.'

'Why me?'

'Because you're a guy, and you can talk to him about guy stuff, even if it involves a half naked girl that you were both checking out!'

Anything that brought back the memory of the half naked girl was guaranteed to bring a smile to Ryan's face, and so he said, 'OK then. Cover me, I'm going in!'

Lisa just shook her head, and said (with a smile on her face) 'Idiot...'

Ryan smiled back at Lisa, and went back over to Ben. 'So, Ben, how are things?' At this early point Ryan quickly realised that this opening might start making him sound a little menacing, and so then he quickly said, 'I don't suppose you could show us around a little. Like I said, Lisa and I are still a little new here, and we're still finding ourselves getting a little lost.'

'Oh, sure, that's fine. Now that I've got these books in I don't have anything planned until the afternoon. So, are you and her a couple or something?'

'What? Me and Lisa? Oh, no, it's nothing like that! No, Lisa and I are just friends. Really good friends. Yeah, Lisa and I go way back.'

'OK then.'

Ryan could see the look that Ben had in his eyes, and so he felt that he should snuff this out right away, as he didn't any of this to get complicated. And so he said, 'Yeah, but, don't go getting any ideas. She's spoken for. Yep, well and truly spoken for.'

'Oh, right...'

'Yeah, her boyfriend's a real brute of a guy. Built like a house. Plays rugby and everything. Yeah, you wouldn't want to do anything to upset him. They've been going out with each other for ages. I'm surprised he hasn't asked her to marry him yet!' At this point Ryan suddenly felt a little strange, but the feeling quickly passed.

'Oh,' said Ben, 'I understand...'

'Don't worry about it mate. Plenty of other fish in the sea and all that. Now, why don't you start this tour?'

'Tour? Oh, yes, right, a tour. Well, er, this is the library, where you can, er... find books...'

'Ah, yes, the library.' Ryan had to really fight to suppress the urge to say really sarcastically, 'I wondered what this place was.' Instead, he settled on saying, 'Yes, and a very nice library it is to. So, where to next?'

'Oh, I don't know really. What is it that your studying?'

'Film and TV.'

'Both you and Lisa?'

'Yes, both of us.'

'OK then, so have you seen the Theatre, Film, and TV Department building then?'

'No, now that you mention it, I don't think we have.'

'That's a bit odd, I'd have thought that they would have got you to register there when you joined.'

'Like I said, we're both really new here. Like really, really new.'

'OK then, I'll show you where it is...'

Ben started to lead them out of the library. Ryan looked at Lisa and caught her eye, indicating that she should come with them. She put down the book that she was looking at, and came after Ryan and Ben.

Ben took them a little way through the campus, and then indicated a building that was built on a hill. He said, 'Well, that's the Theatre, Film, and TV Department building.'

'Ah,' said Ryan, 'So that's where it is! We should probably check in there at some point, Lisa.'

'We should?'

'Yeah, you know, to register for our Film & TV degrees.'

'Oh, yes, right, of course.'

Ben then said, 'Right... So, er, what would you like to see next?'

Ryan got the impression that Ben was starting to feel a little uneasy. He also felt that the tone that he had been taking may have come across as a little patronising, like how a bully might start a conversation with a prospective new victim, and that was absolutely not the impression that he wanted to create. However, he had a feeling that it was Ben that they were here to help, and after the way he had looked at the pretty check-out girl, and then at Lisa, he was fairly certain as to what it might be. But he knew that he may have to come back later to address the issue directly.

He then said, 'Actually, Ben, you have been really helpful. But Lisa and I still have some unpacking to do. But if you're not doing anything for lunch, why don't we meet up?'

'I'm not sure...'

'It'll be our shout. What do you say?'

'Well, OK then. Where do you want to go?'

'Where's good to eat around here?'

'Erm, the Student's Union building? Do you know where that is?'

'Yes, that's one we do know! So, let's meet up there at, say, 1pm. Does that work for you?'

'Yeah, that's good.'

'OK, see you then!'

Ben then started to make his way back to his flat.

Lisa came up to Ryan and asked, 'So, what have you got planned then?'

'I'm not sure yet. I think I know what's going on here, and what we can do to help.'

'OK, do you want to share with me?'

'Actually, I'd rather not. I could be wrong about this, but I don't think I am. When we meet Ben for lunch, let me meet him on my own first, and then you can come along later, say, at about a quarter past. I should be able to confirm as to whether or not I'm right in that time, and from there what we need to do. But I won't be able to do it if you're there. Is that OK?'

'Well, if you're sure.'

'Yeah, I am. So, we've got a few hours to kill, what shall we do with them?' Ryan looked at her pleadingly.

'No!' said Lisa, 'We're not going to look for the half naked girl!'

'Spoilsport!'

In the end they went down to the beach and spent some time there. Unfortunately for Ryan, because the weather was still quite cold, there were no half naked girls there for him to 'admire'. They went back up to the Student's Union ready for 1pm. Ryan found a place where they served food there, and he sat at a prominent table so that Ben wouldn't be able to miss him when he came. Lisa went off to hide somewhere, although Ryan wasn't sure as to where exactly.

As for Ben, sure enough, he arrived bang on 1pm. 'Hi Ryan!' he said as he walked up to Ryan.

'Ben! Take a seat.'

As Ben sat down he asked, 'Where's Lisa?'

'Oh, she just had something to sort out quickly. She'll be along before too long.'

'OK.'

'You took quite a liking to her, didn't you?'

Ben blushed a little, and then said, 'Yeah, well, she's very pretty.'

'Yes, she is, isn't she. Are there any other girls that you happen to like at the moment?'

'Well, there was this girl who was at the Student's Union last night. She was absolutely stunning...'

'Yes, she was... I mean, was she?' Ryan told himself to focus, and to try and forget the half naked girl once and for all - something that was far easier to say than to do.

'Yeah, she had this really amazing dress on which -'

'OK, I don't think we need a detailed description!' If Ben had gone on to describe the scrap of material that had passed for a dress on that girl Ryan would lose all ability to concentrate on the task in hand.

'Oh, right, well, I don't think it matters anyway. She left the Union with this other guy.'

'Oh dear, tough break. Well, is there anyone else, someone who isn't already spoken for?'

'Well, there is this other girl, but I don't really know too much about her.'

'Go on, tell me more...'

'Well, she works in the supermarket near my flat. I go there all the time. Her name's Anna, and she's got ginger hair...'

'Ah, so that's why Lisa caught your attention. So, you like gingers do you?'

'Yeah, I love gingers, I go nuts for them - I'm a gingernut!'

Ryan had to physically resist the temptation to groan.

Ben continued, 'So, er, anyway, like I said, I go in there all the time, and I somehow always seem to end up in her queue.'

'Do you really?' Ryan thought to himself that he knew perfectly why Ben always seemed to end up in her queue. The poor girl didn't stand a chance...

'Yeah, it's a really weird co-incidence.'

'So, do you know if this girl is single at all?'

'No, I don't...'

'Have you ever spoken to her?'

'Yeah, loads of times at the check out.'

'Oh right, and what do you talk about?'

There was a pause, where Ben didn't say anything.

Ryan then said, 'Now, Ben, be honest with me here. What is it that you and Anna talk about at the check out?'

Ben looked down and said, 'How much I have to pay...'

Ryan shook his head, 'Oh, Ben, no! This is bad! You need to say more than that!'

'Well, yeah, I know, but I wouldn't know what to say...'

'Ask how she is, tell her that her hair looks nice, hey, your British, talk about the weather if you have to!'

'This is Wales - it rains, a lot.'

'Yeah, good point, but that's not the point! The point is that if you're to have any hope with this girl you have to say something to her that is outside of the conversation surrounding your purchase of goods from the supermarket!'

'I get what you're saying, I really do. It's just not easy for me to talk to girls. What if she doesn't like me in that way? I'll feel awful, and I don't think I'd ever be able to shop in there. I have to shop in there - the nearest alternative is miles away!'

'OK, Ben, you need to pull yourself together here. First, if you don't at least try, you'll never get the girl. If you don't talk to her properly, then you definitely won't get her. But if you do talk to her, then there is at least a chance that something may happen between you. Now, secondly, if

it does become clear that she's not interested in you then that does not mean that you have to go and shop somewhere else. As long as you are subtle in your conversation with her, you should be able to get an idea about whether or not she's interested in you. And, if she's not, which may well be the case, you need to be mature about it, and take it on the chin. Chalk it up to experience, and look for romance elsewhere. Now have you got all that?

'I feel like I should be taking notes.'

'Ben, this is not a lecture! This is real life! Now, are you a man or a mouse?'

There was a brief pause, and then Ben said, 'Squeak...'

Ryan stifled a laugh, 'Come on, be serious! Don't be a mouse! They crawl around on the floor, get caught by cats, and eat way too much cheese. Be a man, Ben! Be a man, and go and get that girl!'

At this point Lisa came over to join them. 'Hi guys, have I missed anything?'

Ryan said, 'Ben here was just telling me about this girl that he likes.'

'Ryan!' said Ben.

'Don't worry, Lisa's cool. She may even be able to help you, she is a girl herself you know.'

'Yes, right, of course.'

'So,' said Lisa, 'Tell me about this girl then?' Ben then proceeded to fill Lisa in on the details about Anna, what little they were. 'Right then,' she said, 'So you don't actually know what she thinks of you then?'

'Well, I think she may be a little freaked out by me. She tends to look a little awkward whenever I go into the store. I think she's thinking, "Oh no, it's that guy that's been stalking me again!" Not that I've been stalking her or anything! I know that stalking is naughty and wrong and girls don't like that very much.'

'No,' said Ryan, 'You just end up in her queue every time you're in there.'

'Yeah, like I said, it's an amazing co-incidence.'

'Ben, is it a co-incidence, is it really?'

Ben looked down again, and then he said, 'No, it's not. I make it happen every time...'

'Well, there's your problem. You end up in her queue every time, but you never say anything to her! If she is feeling a little freaked out then it can hardly be surprising.'

'Anyway,' said Lisa, 'For all you know she may not be thinking, "Oh no, it's that guy that's been stalking me again!" She might actually be thinking, "Oh no, it's that cute guy again. I hope my hair looks OK.'"

Ben then said, 'So, you think I'm cute?'

Ryan said, 'Ben, focus! You need to think about what you're going to say to Anna the next time you see her.'

'Oh, I don't know about that. This is all a bit too much for me...'

'Pull yourself together! You have to at least try! If you don't at least try and tell the girl that you like her then one day you'll leave this university and you will look back on your time here and you'll wonder, "If only I had plucked up the courage to talk to Anna. If only I had said something to her. She might have liked me after all, and we might have ended up together. But I'll never know now." Is that what you want, Ben? Is that what you want your future to be? Do you want to go through life not going up to the girls that you like, and then wondering what might have been? You can't go through life admiring pretty check out girls from afar, or perverting on half naked girls in the Student's Union, because that sort of attitude won't get you anywhere. It certainly won't get you the girl. You need to find the guts to go up to them and say, "Hi, I'm Ben. You look nice today." Or words that are similar to that. You don't have to use that exact example, that's fine. But you do need to say something to the girl! That is the one and only way that you'll ever be able to find out if there's even a remote chance that she may be interested in you. It is all done to you, Ben, you and only you. No one's going to make it happen for you. It's up to you to take the initiative Ben! It's up to you, and you alone! Are you with me Ben?'

'I don't know...'

'I said "Are you with me Ben?!'

'Yes, OK...'

'I can't hear you!'

'Yes, I'm with you!'

'Great let's do this!'

Lisa then said, 'Ryan, calm down! You're shouting.'

'Am I? Oh, yes, sorry about that. I got a little carried away there. But I think we've made a breakthrough here, don't you think, Ben?'

Ben said, 'Er, yeah, we have. Who are you guys? Are you some sort of crack team councillors?'

'Something like that.'

Lisa slapped Ryan on the arm and said, 'Ryan!' Ryan quickly got the message that he shouldn't hint at the fact that their true purpose here wasn't to do a Film & TV degree, but to help Ben out.

'So,' said Ben, 'When are we going to do this? She should be working on the check out by about now.'

Ryan said, 'You've memorised her roster?'

'It wasn't hard.'

'Ben, that's not cool.'

'I know...'

Lisa then said, 'So, what are we all going to have to eat?'

Ryan responded with, 'Eat?'

'Yes, we are here for lunch, aren't we?'

'Ah, yes, lunch. Right then, first we eat, then we go and get the girl. Does that sound like a plan to you Ben?'

'Yes, OK...'

Once they had all eaten they all made their way to the supermarket. They could see through the window that Anna was indeed working on the check out. Ryan turned to Ben and asked him, 'Do you know what you're going to do?'

'No, not really.'

'Well, you are going to have to once again end up in her queue on purpose, but try not to look too obvious about it. Then, once you're there, you need to start up a conversation with her. It doesn't have to be anything grand, you just need to ask her how her day's going, or something along those lines. You might get an idea about what she thinks about you from this. If she gives you cold, straightforward answers, then I'm afraid that it might mean that she's not the girl for you. However, if she's warm with you, and smiles at you, then you may have a chance. Don't get ahead of yourself if this happens, it won't mean that she's your girlfriend yet. But it will be a step in the right direction. Now, have you got all that?'

'I feel that I should be writing this down...'

'No, you don't. You just need to get in there and do this.'

'Yes, you're right. I just have to do this. I mean, how hard can it be? She's just a girl. She's human like everyone else.'

'That's the idea.'

'Will you come in there with me?'

'I'm sorry, but this is something that you're going to have to do yourself.'

'Yes, you're right. OK then, wish me luck.'

'I'm sure you won't need it.'

Ben nodded, and then he went inside.

Ryan turned to Lisa and said, 'How do you think he's going to do?'

'I think he'll be OK. I'm pretty sure that Anna does like him a little bit, and just wishes that he would say something to her.'

'What makes you think that?'

'I'm pretty good at being able to spot these sort of things.'

They could see that supermarket wasn't particularly busy. Ben got himself a few things (including more Pot Noodles - Ryan couldn't quite believe that one man could eat so many of them) and then made his way to Anna's check out. There was no one else there when he arrived, and so she started serving him right away. Ryan and Lisa could see that things were now different from last time. They could see that Ben was actually talking to her, and she was smiling back at him. At one point she even laughed.

As Ben left the store they could see that Anna was still smiling, and she waved at him as he left. Once he was outside he came over to Ryan and Lisa, with a broad grin on his face. Before he could say anything Lisa said, 'Come on, let's keep walking. It won't be good if Anna sees you here talking to us.'

They started walking back to the campus. As they did so Ryan said, 'It looked like it went well in there.'

'It did! It went very well in fact.'

'What did you talk about?'

'I asked her how she was, and then I found myself saying that she looked nice today.'

'Very good, I like the way this is going.'

'Yes, but it gets even better! She said that she's going out tonight, to this bar in town. She said that if I'm around then I should drop by and say "hi!"'

'Now that is better than even I would have expected that to go! It appears that you're a natural at this and you never even knew it.'

'Yeah, maybe.'

'So I take it you're going to see her tonight?'

'Of course.'

'Good man. I hope it all works out for you.'

'Thanks, I couldn't have done this without you guys. You've been great. Let me know how I can repay you one day.'

'No, seriously, you don't owe us anything. We were happy to help, weren't we Lisa?'

'Yes, of course.'

They made their way to Ben's flat. As he was about to go inside he said, 'Do you fancy coming along to the bar yourself later? I could do with a bit of morale support?'

Lisa answered, 'I'm afraid that we're not going to be able to make it. We're meeting up with some other friends later. But good luck! I'm sure it will all work out for you.'

'Thanks. Well, see you then!'

'Bye!'

Ben then went back inside his flat, and Ryan and Lisa turned to leave. They started walking, but in no particular direction.

'So,' said Lisa, 'That all went rather well then.'

'Yes, I didn't expect that she would effectively arrange a date with him there and then.'

'Well, like I said, I believe that she was just as interested in him as he was with her, she was just waiting for some indication from him. She got that today, and so now that the ice between them has finally been broken they can finally get on with things.'

'Good, I'm happy for them. I really am...'

There was a pause, and then Lisa said, 'Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation to him?'

'Yes, actually, a very similar situation. When I was at Uni there was this retro video games shop that I used to go in a fair bit. I quite like retro video games, particularly SNES games, and they always seemed to have quite a good selection in there. And there was often a pretty girl that worked in there. She would sometimes comment on my choice of games, which she generally approved of. But we never really got beyond that. I was always a little shy back in those days. I didn't know what to say to her, and so our conversations never went any further. I never even found out what her name was...'

'And look at you now! I could have hardly called you shy today! You were practically running the whole show there! You were being very assertive, you were almost like a completely different person.'

'Yeah, I guess I was. I'm not quite sure what came over me there. I just felt really confident about everything there.'

'Maybe it's because you were in what felt like a comfortable situation for you. You knew what it was like to be in Ben's position, and you also knew what the best thing for Ben to do was. You were happy to give Ben your advice, weren't you?'

'Yeah, I was. I didn't want to see him make the same mistakes that I made when I was his age. And I'm glad to see that he hasn't. Do you think it will work out between him and Anna?'

'I don't see any reason why it shouldn't. I think they're quite well suited for each other.'

'Oh, and what makes you say that?'

'Well, like I said, I'm quite good at spotting these sort of things.'

'OK, so, now that we've helped Ben out, what can we possibly do now?'

'Oh, no, I know what you're thinking.'

'What, how could you possibly know what it is that I'm thinking about?'

'I think I know you well enough by now!'

'Oh, you think so? So, what am I thinking about.'

'I'm not going to say it...'

'Go on, don't be like that now.'

'No, I'm not going to say it. If I said it out loud you'd only deny it. You know what you're thinking about, and I know what you're thinking about, and you know that I know what you're thinking about. I know that you've been thinking about it a lot, and the answer is no, we're not going to look for her!'

'Look for who? In seriously have no idea what you're talking about.'

'Oh really?'

Ryan looked at her and smiled, 'I mean, who could I possibly want to go and look for in this town?'

'Oh, you know!'

'No, I really have absolutely no idea.'

'That dress is totally impractical you know.'

'Who said anything about it having to be practical.'

'Aha! So you were thinking about her again!'

'Damn, busted!'

'Like I said before, all boys are the same!'

'Not all of us.'

'What, so you don't all go crazy for pretty girls then?'

'Well, the ones who are gay certainly don't.'

'Good point, but are you gay?'

'No...'

'And are you going crazy over a certain pretty girl that we spotted last night that had very little in the way of clothing on?'

'No comment, your honour.'

'You see, you were thinking about her, weren't you.'

There was a pause, and then Ryan said, 'Oh, OK, you got me. I was thinking about the half naked girl again. But, you've got to admit, she was very attractive.'

'I'm not denying it. She's way out of your league though.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Like I said, I'm good at spotting these things!'

'Oh, right... Anyway, now that we're on this subject -'

They stopped and Lisa looked at him right in the eyes and, smiling, she said, 'The answer's still no!'

As soon as she had said 'no' their surroundings completely changed. They were no longer on a quiet street in a university town in the middle of Wales. They now found themselves in the middle of a bustling crowd. They appeared to be in a field somewhere, and the crowd of people seemed to stretch as far away as the eye could see.

Ryan turned to Lisa and said, 'I wish whoever was doing this to us would at least give us a bit of notice before they take us somewhere else.'

'But it wouldn't be as much fun otherwise!'

'Anyway, where and when are we now?'

'I'm not sure...'

Ryan had a good look around them. At first he saw quite a few tents dotted about the place, and so he thought that they may have found themselves at some sort of music festival. But there was no sign of any stage, or any sort of festival. In fact, there was no sign of any organisation at all.

Then he started to look at the people themselves. Everyone under the sun appeared to be here, from every race on Earth. But there were also some people here who didn't quite look human. They were all quite short, with very large bald skulls. They also had very small ears that just looked like a bump on each side of their head. He then noticed that on each hand they had five fingers and a thumb.

Ryan turned to Lisa and said, 'Are they aliens?'

Lisa replied, 'Yes, that's right. They call themselves the Alia. They're from a world not too far from here in astronomical terms, just a few stars away. But this planet is definitely Earth. If they are here then we must be a very long way into the future. Contrary to what much of science fiction says, it's never possible for someone to break the speed of light, and their star is about 12 light years away. So it takes light 12 years to travel between the two worlds, but it takes spacecraft far longer. They've done quite well though - the human scientists that is. They've managed to cut the journey time down to about 150 years or so.'

'Oh, so about the same amount of time as a typical train journey in 21st century London.'

'Yes... So, anyway, that's still beyond the lifetime of the average human. Research into finding ways to prolong human life beyond its natural limits was banned because of the drain on

resources that having everyone live to extraordinary lengths would have had. And so no one's ever lived longer than 125, which is still too short to make the trip to the Alian's home world. But what they have been able to do is put people into suspended animation whilst they make the trip. Of course, by the time someone has gone there and come back again, over 300 years would have passed on Earth. Only a very select few ever make the trip, and no one's ever been more than once.'

'How did they know to go there in the first place? Did they just point themselves at the nearest star and hoped for the best?'

'No. Telescopes developed to the point where they were able to capture images of planets around other stars. Not terribly good images, but enough to pick out certain features. They were able to see that the Alian's home world was very similar to Earth - they could make out continents and oceans, polar ice caps, and a cloud system. It was also comfortably within the "Goldilocks Zone" of its host star - the planet wasn't too hot and wasn't too cold to support life. It was therefore a prime candidate for hosting life. It was also slightly larger than the Earth, by about a quarter.

'Once the planet had been discovered, scientists started to analyse its atmosphere. They were able to conclude that it was remarkably similar to the Earth's. They were also able to infer that the planet almost certainly had life on it.

'Radio receivers were then pointed at the planet to try and see if there were any transmissions coming from there. The planet was of a similar age to the Earth, and so many people speculated that the world must have had an intelligent race on it that they could communicate with. But the receivers didn't pick up a single thing.

'Eventually it was decided to send out a probe to the new world, to take a closer look at it. It took a great deal of dedication from the scientists who designed the probe and launched it into space. It took a very long time to do, with a lot of perseverance, but none of the people who worked on the project then would have lived long enough to see the results of that project.

'The task of receiving and analysing the results fell to a later generation. When the probe finally reached its destination it split into two. One part stayed in orbit around the planet. It conducted a detailed survey of the planet, including taking high resolution photos of the planet's surface. The other part descended into the atmosphere. At first it glided round the upper atmosphere, taking various measurements. Then it descended further before landing safely on the surface of the planet, where it became a rover. Only it didn't get very far. It landed in a field near an Alian village.'

'I bet that must have been a surprise for them!'

'It was. At first the people in the village didn't know what to make of it. However, they were able to trace its tracks back to where it had landed in the field, and they were then able to figure out that in order for it to have arrived there it must have come out of the sky. The probe itself had a drawing on it that showed where the Earth was in the galaxy, and what human beings looked like.'

'Like what was on the Pioneer and Voyager crafts?'

'The same one, in fact. There was also a vinyl disc which had recordings from the Earth, but none of the Alian's knew what to do with that. To them it was just a black disc. However, they're not a stupid people, and some of them were able to correctly conclude that the rover had come from another world out there in space. They had seen the stars in the sky, but had never fully understood what they were. They believed that it had fallen from one of them, which wasn't actually too far away from the truth.'

'All the time that they spent examining the rover it was still recording data - still pictures, sounds, and videos - and beaming them back up to the probe in orbit. The probe in turn relayed the data back to the Earth.'

'Eventually, the data reached Earth, and the scientists started to examine it. Many of them could hardly believe what it was that they saw. The data clearly showed the Alian's. There were clear pictures of them, they could clearly hear what their language sounded like, and they could even see how they walked. It was the first, conclusive, proof that the human race was not alone in the universe. When the news was released to the public the whole solar system went a little crazy.'

'At that point people immediately started speculating when they would send human beings to this world in order to meet the Alian's face to face. However, that was still a very long way off. The technology for suspended animation didn't exist yet, and there was no reason for it to because there was no where that anyone needed to go that would take longer than a human lifetime to reach. But now that there was somewhere to go people started to look into ways of getting there.'

'This, however, still took a very long time. It was a further 850 years or so before the technology was perfected. During this time further probes were sent to the Alian's home world. Some of these contained video screens that would automatically play messages from Earth, and display images of it. There were some people on Earth who were against sending such probes, because they were worried about what effect that it would have upon the Alian people, of who they still knew so little about. Some were concerned that the Alian's might start to worship the probes as gods.'

'They needed have worried, though. The Alian's may not have been a technologically advanced race, but they weren't a stupid people. They knew that the probes were coming from another world somewhere, and they expected the human race to come and visit them one day.

'That day did indeed come, when an expedition of twelve humans went out to the Alain home world. When they went out there they didn't know what sort of welcome that they would receive there. It turned out to be a very warm one. The Alians had had a very long time to prepare for their arrival.

'The expedition spent three years on the Alian home world. During that time they learned to communicate with them, and learnt a great deal about them, their world, and their beliefs. When they were ready to return to the Earth they offered three Alian's the chance to come back with them to see the Earth for themselves. Even though the Alian's knew that it would be a one-way trip, there were no shortages of volunteers. But eventually three were chosen to come back with the expedition to Earth. And once they were on the Earth they, too, received a very warm reception.

'Ever since that time there have been many more trips between the two worlds. A lot of information, technology, and art have been exchanged between the two worlds, and relationships between the two worlds have always been good. Over the millennia many people had speculated that when the human race finally encountered an alien race it would all end in disaster, that one would want to try and annihilate the other. But the truth turned out to be the exact opposite of that.

'Eventually, there were colonies of Alian's living on Earth, and colonies of humans living on the Alian home world. The human race also set up colonies on the other worlds in the Alian system.

'And I guess that more or less takes us up to where we are now I suppose, if there are Alian's living here amongst humans.'

'Wow!' said Ryan, who felt that that was quite a story to take in. He had always wondered what it would have been like when the human race finally encountered an alien one, something which he had felt was always bound to happen sooner or later. Whilst it had happened far, far later than he had thought that it would, he found it heart warming that it had all turned out so well for everyone.

He then said, 'You said that it wasn't possible to travel faster than the speed of light. But haven't we effectively been doing that? I mean, we went to Pyna which is on the other side of the galaxy, and then, in no time at all, we found ourselves on the Columbia and the Challenger somewhere between Mars and Jupiter.'

'Yes, well, that's not quite the same. When we go from one place to another we're not so much travelling physically through your space. We just sort of disappear from one place in your space, and pop up in another. We sort of take a short cut, so to speak.'

'Like a wormhole?'

'Yes and no. Sort of like a wormhole, but not. Wormholes don't actually exist. Anyway, it's all a little complicated to explain, and we don't really need to worry about that.'

Ryan decided not to push that issue any further - his was already spinning around enough with the story about the Alians. He then said, 'OK, so we're now far into the Earth's future, where we're sharing the Earth with an alien race. That doesn't explain why, in what appears to be a field in the middle of nowhere, there's all of these people here. Is something supposed to be happening here? If so, I can't see where it could happen. There's no room here for anything to happen!'

'Yes, it is all a little odd...'

At that point an group of Alian's came by, and one of them said to Ryan, 'Excuse me please, coming through!' It had a fairly squeaky voice.

However, it wasn't this fact that struck Ryan. He said, 'You can speak English?!'

'Yes, of course I can, dumbass! Now, get out of my way!' Ryan did as the Alian asked.

He turned to Lisa, 'OK, that was a little surreal. Come on, can we try and find out what's going on here?'

'OK.'

They started to wander through the crowd. There was a generally happy, friendly vibe in the air. Whilst the humans still vastly outnumbered the Alians, by around twenty to one, there were still plenty of Alian's about.

Eventually they found some stalls that were selling goods. Some of them were selling food, but Lisa led Ryan to one that was selling a magazine of some kind. She purchased one of them (once again producing the correct currency from her pocket) and handed it to Ryan.

He saw that it was a programme which detailed the event that everyone had gathered here to see. And it suddenly made sense where there was no stage or any room for an event to take place. That was because the event wasn't going to be taking place on the land. It was going to be taking place in the sky.

The programme was for 'The Last Ever Total Solar Eclipse.'

'All of these people are here to see a solar eclipse, and, apparently the last of them...!' He then thought for a bit, as he racked his brains for all he knew about solar eclipses, and then he said,

'Oh, I get it! Wow, we must be really far into the future if this is going to be the last ever solar eclipse.'

'And how do you know that?'

Given Lisa's detailed knowledge about the Alians, Ryan suspected that she already knew the answer herself, but he decided to humour her - assuming, of course, that he turned out to be correct. He said, 'Well, if I remember correctly, the Earth and the moon aren't in perfect alignment. Each year the moon moves a little further away from the Earth, although it's only a very slight amount, like, millimetres, if that.'

'Now, we're able to get a total solar eclipse because the Sun is 400 times larger than the Moon, it's also 400 times further away from the Earth than the Moon is, and so both of them appear to be the same size when you look at them in the sky. The total solar eclipse occurs when the Moon is in line between the Earth and the Sun.'

'With the Moon moving ever so slightly further away from the Earth every year, it will eventually get to a point where the Sun is no longer 400 times further away from the Earth than the Moon is. The Moon will look slightly smaller in the sky, and so when it gets between the Earth and Sun it won't fully cover the disc of the Sun, and so you then won't get a total eclipse of the Sun. If there's a point where you can no longer get a total eclipse of the Sun, then there must be a time when you have the final total eclipse of the Sun, and we are now in that time!'

'Congratulations! Give the man a prize!'

'Yeah, yeah, very funny. So I take it that means that I got it right.'

'More or less.'

'Fantastic. So, now we know where we are and when, what on Earth are we here to do?'

'Well, you know how this works. We don't need to seek it out.'

'Yeah, we don't need to go looking for trouble, trouble normally comes looking for us!'

'Now, now, don't be like that! Come on, I suggest we try and find a good spot.'

They moved away from the stalls, and started to make their way through the crowd. But everywhere seemed to be just as crowded as anywhere else. It seemed like everyone from two worlds was crammed into this field. But Ryan could understand the appeal of this. He had always wanted to go and see a solar eclipse. He hadn't been able to go down to Cornwall in 1999 when there was a solar eclipse then, and it probably just as well he didn't as it had been clouded over down there, so people didn't get to see the actual eclipse. (There didn't seem to be any chance of that happening here as the skies above were completely clear.) He was aware of the appeal that they had. And considering that this was going to be the last ever solar eclipse, it made sense that as many people as possible would want to come and see it.

Eventually, he said, 'Shall we just sit down? Every spot here seems to be just as good as any other.'

'OK, sure.'

They sat down on a patch of grass. Next to them there was a group of people furiously typing away on laptops. The laptops themselves didn't look that much different from the laptops that Ryan himself used all the way back in 2011, only they had what looked like solar panels on them.

He decided to have a look through the programme that Lisa had bought for him. It showed that they were somewhere in Mongolia. The path of the eclipse was going to be going down through Russia, then Mongolia, before going on to China and then out to sea. It also explained that any clouds across the path of the eclipse would be dispersed, so that no where along the path would have their view of the eclipse obstructed by clouds. The rest of the programme gave details on how a solar eclipse worked, and how this was the going to be the last one, details on myths about what solar eclipses were during ancient history, and some details of some of the key solar eclipses that there had been.

Ryan was distracted from his programme when he heard an American girl say, 'OK Wrimo people, you can stop sprinting now!' All the people with laptops stopped typing and started chatting to each other.

There was a guy that was sat next to Ryan that turned to him and asked, 'Are you Nanoing as well?'

'Er, no, sorry. What is "Nanoing" exactly?' Ryan wondered if this was some new weird thing that people did in the future, and braced himself to try and get his head around whatever it might be.

'Oh, we're doing NaNoWriMo - that's National Novel Writing Month. It takes place every year in November. Despite its name it's now universal in scope. What it is is that people try to write a novel of at least 50,000 words during the month of November. It's been going on since forever - it started all the way back at the end of the 20th Century.'

'And are all of you here doing it?'

'Yeah, we're sort of doing an outdoor-write-in. We're all writing together at the same time in a series of 45 minute sprints. It really helps us gets the words down. And it's not like we have anything better to do before the eclipse tomorrow.'

'Oh, right... Well, if you don't mind my saying so, I think you're all completely and totally mad.'

'That's OK, we all get that a lot!'

'But, seriously, good luck to you!'

'Thanks, I think I'm gonna need it, I'm quite behind on my word target.'

Ryan left the man to get back on with his madness, and turned to talk to Lisa again. 'The eclipse isn't until tomorrow, it looks like we've got quite a wait ahead.'

'I think we're lucky that we're only having to wait a day. I think some of these people got here months in advance. It doesn't look like anyone wanted to take the chance of missing out on seeing the eclipse.'

'So, what are we going to do until then?'

'The same as everyone else, I suppose. Just enjoy the atmosphere, and wait.'

Ryan had to admit that there was a good atmosphere about the place. Everyone seemed to be excited about what was going to be coming up tomorrow. Ryan had thought that having this many people in one place would have surely been some sort of logistical nightmare - that there might be all sorts of trouble breaking about the place. But he saw no sign of that, nor, indeed, any sign of any sort of authorities who job it would have been to keep order. He thought that there wouldn't have been any chance of having something even a fraction of the size of this event being this organised back in the early 21st century.

He was having a good look about the place, and even getting a sense of excitement about what was going to be happening tomorrow. It was, after all, going to be his first solar eclipse, even if this was going to be everyone else's last one. Then a man came and sat down between Ryan and the group of novel writers. Ryan turned round to see who it was and, in an instant, his sense of happiness and well being disappeared. For the man that had come and sat down next to him was none other than Shadow Zero.

He looked at Ryan, smiled, and said, 'Howdy Ryan! How's things?' Ryan turned to try and get Lisa's attention, but before he could Shadow Zero took his arm and said, 'Don't bother - she can't see me. No one can. Apart from you, of course. It's just you and me here Ryan. I just want to have a little talk with you, that's all.'

Ryan looked back at Shadow Zero and said, 'What do you and I possibly have to talk about?'

'Oh, lots of things. The weather, what you're doing tonight, how nice you're looking today. Half naked 18 year olds and pretty check out girls.'

'You know about all that?'

'Oh, but of course, my dear Ryan. I know everything there is to know about you. I saw all of that happen. You really are a very naughty boy, Ryan. I saw you looking at that half naked 18 year old, Ryan. The way that you were fixating on her. And, oh, the things that you were doing to her in your head! Absolutely filthy!'

'Shut up!' Ryan found that he was trembling. The fact that Shadow Zero seemed to be able to go into his head made him feel incredibly uneasy. He actually felt a little violated. Yes, he had had some naughty thoughts concerning that girl, but they were just normal, private, thoughts, that many men in a similar situation would have also had. He didn't think that he had any reason to feel guilty about them. Only now, with Shadow Zero here, he was starting to feel guilty about them. Part of him felt that it was wrong the way that he was looking at that girl, that it was wrong to have been having the thoughts that he had had about her, but he couldn't quite understand why he was feeling guilty about them.

Shadow Zero continued, 'You are a very naughty boy, Ryan. And I just wanted you to know that. After all, this is all your fault.'

'What do you mean? What is all my fault?'

'Don't you know? Ah, of course you don't. But just know this, my dear Ryan. This will not be the last time that we meet. Remember that I am fully aware of everything that you do. There is no escaping from me. Everywhere that you go, everything that you see, everything that you do, I want you to know that I will be there with you. I want you to remember that, Ryan. Do you think you can do that for me?'

Ryan just looked at him. After a pause he said, 'Who are you?'

Shadow Zero stood up and said, 'I am Shadow Zero, and that's all that you need to know about me. Good day!' He turned around and started walking into the crowd.

Ryan stood up, meaning to go after him, but Shadow Zero had already become lost in the crowd, and Ryan couldn't see him anymore.

Lisa looked at him and said, 'What is it? What are you looking at?'

Ryan felt a little disheartened. Lisa seemed to know just about everything about anything, but it was clear that Shadow Zero had been right, and she hadn't been able to see him.

Ryan sat back down and said, 'It was nothing...' He found that he was still trembling, but Lisa didn't say anything further.

Neither of them said anything for quite a while. Ryan just had thoughts about Shadow Zero and what he had said going round and round in his mind. He seemed to know everything about him, right down to what it was that he was thinking. And, from what he had said about what Ryan and Lisa had done in Aberystwyth, and what Ryan had been thinking, it would appear that he was right when he said that he could see everything that Ryan did and thought. This put Ryan on guard. He felt that Shadow Zero was planning something, something that was going to be really bad, although he didn't know quite what it would be. But Ryan felt that it was coming. With every moment, it was coming closer, and when it came, whatever it was, he was going to have to

be ready for it. He still remembered that dream when he had first been introduced to Shadow Zero - the fiery landscape that stretched out in every direction. And Shadow Zero saying that everything was Ryan's fault. Ryan still had no inkling what he could have meant by this. But he felt that he would find out just what Shadow Zero meant before too long.

He tried to put him out of his mind. There was still a good atmosphere about the place, and Ryan tried to get himself tuned back into that. The novelists were now typing furiously away again, there were Alian's walking about the place and mingling seamlessly with the humans, and everyone seemed to be having fun. Everyone, that was, apart from Ryan. He wanted to try and see if he could change that.

He stood up again and looked around him. He wanted to see if there was anything specific happening in the crowd. There had been some stalls selling goods to people, and so he wondered if there might be some form of entertainment about. However, he found it hard to make anything out from amongst the great throng of people. But then, in the distance, he saw what looked like a TV screen. He turned to Lisa and said, 'Shall we go and check that out?'

She looked in the direction that he was pointing in and said, 'OK, sure.'

They got up and started to walk towards the TV screen. However, the crowd was fairly packed, and so it was fairly slow going. However, after what seemed like an extremely long time, they eventually arrived at their target. It was showing a news report, which was all about the eclipse. Apparently, around five billion people had congregated along the path of the eclipse, which was the biggest gathering of people ever. Aerial shots of the crowds showed a vast sea of people, far larger than Ryan had imagined. He started to think that this must now probably be one of the biggest events in human history.

The programme then switched to a report from the Moon itself. Despite the fact that there were five billion people gathered in the path of the eclipse, there were still many more who weren't able to make it. This included three billion people on the Moon. Some of the Moon's citizens had been able to make the trip to the Earth to see the eclipse, but for those left behind tomorrow was still going to be a special occasion. Those on the Earth facing side of the Moon said that they would be looking at the Moon's shadow on the Earth as it raced across the surface.

Ryan turned to Lisa and said, 'This is a pretty big thing, isn't it?'

'Yeah, just a bit. But for many people even in your time the chance to see a total solar eclipse is a once in a lifetime opportunity. For all of these people it's their last ever chance to see one. And the Alian's don't get eclipses on their world - they have two moons around their world, but they're both relatively small and don't fully cover their sun when they pass between it and their world.'

Ryan turned away from the TV and said to Lisa, 'I wonder if there's any chance of people being able to get any sleep tonight. I imagine it's pretty noisy at night with all of these people here.'

'Oh, I think you'll be in for a surprise!'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, you'll see. Many of these people have been here for some time now, and none of them look exhausted. So they're certainly getting plenty of rest...'

Ryan suspected that there was something that Lisa wasn't telling him, but he chose not to push the issue any further.

They wandered away from the TV, and found themselves back near where the novel writers were - they were once again typing away furiously on their solar powered laptops.

The rest of that day went by fairly slowly, as Ryan just tried to take in all of the atmosphere. He was also keeping half an eye out for Shadow Zero, as he had a feeling that he was still out there in the crowd somewhere, but he didn't spot him anywhere.

In the evening he and Lisa went to get some food from one of the stalls. To his delight they still did fish and chips in the far future - which meant that fish stocks hadn't been depleted, or so he thought. The fish that he was given was a very uniform shape, although it still tasted fine. When he pointed it out to Lisa she said, 'Oh, that's because it's not a real fish as such. It's been a very long time since anyone caught fish from out of the sea. What you've got there is genetically identical to a haddock, only it was never properly alive as such. It was grown in a lab.'

Ryan almost spat out his food when he heard this. 'This was grown?!'

'Yes, but don't worry, it's all perfectly fine. It won't do you any harm. The people of this age had no choice but to grow their meat and their fish in labs, they just don't have the resources to catch fish in a sustainable way, and to farm all those animals. The best place to go for natural food is the Alian's home world, although most people consider the 300 year round trip a bit much for that.'

Ryan decided to carry on eating his fish, which, after all, still tasted absolutely fine.

As the day moved on to the late evening there was a general buzz about the place. As the sun got lower in the sky, and the sky itself went from blue, to gold, to red, the general noise level from the crowd increased. Ryan didn't quite understand what all of the excitement was about, but he somehow found himself starting to be swept away with it.

He turned to Lisa and asked, 'Do you know if this has been happening every night?'

'I believe so. The sunset is an exciting things around here at the moment. And tonight especially so. The people know that it's about to get dark, and they know that the next time it gets dark will be during the solar eclipse itself.

The Sun slowly went below horizon, and, as it did, a huge round of applause went out around the crowd. It was the loudest round of applause that Ryan had ever heard, as the excitement level in the crowd grew further still.

Eventually the applause died down. Ryan now had a feeling of expectancy, as if there was something that was about to happen. People started to light camp fires, and from those torches were also lit. Even though it was rapidly getting dark overhead, the crowds were still bathed in light from all of the fire.

Ryan turned to Lisa and said, 'I'd have thought there would have been a better way to provide light and heat in this day and age instead of fire.'

'Oh, there is. They now have various methods of providing heat and light. But don't you agree that there's no better way than using fire?'

Ryan had to admit that Lisa was right. The fire did create a rather amazing atmosphere. There were now campfires and torches as far as the eye could see, almost as if there was now a field of stars on the surface of the Earth.

Ryan still had a feeling of expectancy about him. He still felt that something else was about to happen. The novel writers had all stopped writing and had put their laptops away, and Ryan had a feeling that it wasn't just because the Sun had now gone down. Everyone else who had been on their feet before now sat down on the ground. In fact, Ryan looked around him, and he wasn't able to see a single person who was still standing up. The stalls where he and Lisa had been before were now closed down and empty, and the TV screen was switched off. Even the noise about the place had died down to a gentle murmur, as though they were all in a theatre and the lights had just been dimmed before the performance was due to start. Ryan watched in wonder at whatever was about to happen.

There was then another sound that started up. It was quiet at first, but then generally rose in volume, but didn't get too loud. As the sound grew Ryan saw all of the Alien's rise to their feet. The sound turned out to be that of them singing.

There were no words, just a melodious sound coming from their voices. By now all of the humans in the area had stopped speaking, as they listened to the song of the Alien's. Ryan found the song to be incredibly soothing. Evidently all of the other humans in the area felt the same.

Ryan looked over at Lisa, and she smiled at him. She clearly knew that this was going to happen, and she had wanted Ryan to discover it for himself rather than just have her tell him about it.

Ryan lay back, and allowed himself to close his eyes. The song of Alian's washed over him, and he slowly drifted back off to sleep.

Once again he dreamed. He found himself laying down on a beach somewhere. His feet were bare, and his trousers were rolled up. There were a few other people on this beach, but it wasn't overly crowded. There was also a person laying down next to him, but, like with the last dream that he'd had that was set back in the house, he wasn't able to make out who this person was. Once again, whenever he tried to focus on them he only saw them as a blur.

He got up, and walked towards the sea. He then walked along the beach, with the sea to his left. To his right he also got the sense that the same person that had been laying down next to him was now walking alongside him.

He then felt this person take his hand in his, and they continued walking along, hand in hand. And it felt nice...

When Ryan woke up he could still hear the sound of the Alian's. He still had the memory of his dream in his head, but as he slowly came fully awake the images and feelings of it started to fade. He tried desperately to hang on to them - he wanted to remember them. He felt that it was important to remember them. He didn't know why it was important, he just felt that that was the case. But, try as he might, the images all slowly faded away to a part of his brain where he wasn't able to recall them. All that he was left with was a sense of well being - that he had just had a very nice dream, although he couldn't recall any of the details of it.

He sat up, and looked over at Lisa, who was also awake, and looked like she had been for some time. He asked her, 'How long was I asleep for?'

'About 8 hours or so I think.'

'8 hours, really...' Ryan was amazed that he had been able to get a full 8 hours sleep. It hadn't felt like anywhere near that amount of time had passed. He then asked, 'Have the Alian's been singing all this time?'

'Yes. Their home world spins round on its axis once every fifty-one and a half hours or so, and so their bodies evolved to cope with a day of that length. And so they don't need to go to sleep for 8 hours out of every 24 like humans do. They've evolved to be able to cope with about

five hours sleep every 50 hours or so.' Ryan couldn't imagine what it must be like to be able to get by with so little sleep.

Lisa continued, 'Singing is one of the major art forms of the Alian's, and all of them are taught how to sing from when they are children. And it is something that they are all very talented at. Even the very worst singer amongst the Alian's would sound beautiful to human ears.'

'And do they do this every night?'

'Those that are on Earth do. When the Alian's first came to Earth they took to getting their sleep during the height of daylight hours, which is something that they were quite used to on their home world as, in some parts of the world, including the parts that they evolved in, it can get incredibly hot during the middle of the day. And so they're all used to being awake all night. On Earth many people have been afraid of the dark, and of the night, but this is not so for the Alian's. They see the night as having magical qualities, that their singing is able to accentuate. And this solar eclipse is the largest gathering of Alian's on the Earth. The entire crowd of five billion people have been treated to their singing every night. That's why everyone else falls silent during the night. Everyone wants to appreciate the singing, as for many it has an hypnotic quality for them. It helps to send people off to sleep. And whilst they sleep they all have pleasant dreams and wake up refreshed.' That was something that Ryan could attest to, although he wished that he had been able to hold on to and remember the details from the dream that he had had.

Lisa continued, 'What the Alian's do is perfectly safe and harmless. They know that they're nowhere near as technologically advanced as the human race is, but they feel that their singing, along with their many other art forms, are their gift to humanity. And it has been a gift that humanity has been grateful to receive. There are many cities throughout the world where there are large concentrations of Alian's, and where the streets are filled with the sound of their music whenever night falls. Those cities have also seen greatly reduced crime rates, which many people felt was as of a result of the mood that the Alian's bring to these cities.'

Ryan was still being soothed by the Alian's song. Many people around him were asleep, and others were sitting up, quietly taking in the atmosphere.

A little while later the sky began to brighten up. As it did so the torches and campfires were slowly put out, and the Alian's slowly stopped singing. Everyone started to wake up, and, once again, the excitement amongst the gathering began to increase once more.

As he and Lisa stood up she said, 'It'll be soon be sunrise, and then, in a few hours time, the eclipse will begin.' Ryan wondered if, during totality, when everything was as dark as the night,

the Alian's would start to sing. He had heard of animals acting as though it were the night time when totality began, and so he wondered if the same would be true of the Alian's.

The crowd was slowly starting to rise up to fever pitch again, as it became almost as noisy as it had been yesterday. Everyone was facing the east, as they waited for the sun to rise. When it eventually did, another great round of applause, accompanied by cheering, rang out amongst the crowd. After it had died down the excitement of the day could be felt all around them.

Ryan looked around, and wondered about what they could do until the eclipse began. Then he got thinking, and he asked Lisa, 'Do you have any idea why we're here? Presumably we were sent here to help someone, but there's been no obvious person here for us to help. Plus I don't see what help we could give to people here.'

Lisa replied, 'I don't have any idea, I'm afraid. I'm sure whatever purpose that we've been brought here for will make itself known in due course. I suggest that until then we just try and enjoy ourselves.'

That was a plan that Ryan could agree with. Whilst part of him was keen to keep moving with his journey, so that he could get to the end of it sooner, he was now looking forward to seeing the last total solar eclipse. He would hate it if he got caught up in something, provided some help to someone, and then got whisked away to their next adventure before the solar eclipse had taken place.

He was feeling hungry, and so he and Lisa went back to the stalls to get some food. They were doing some brisk business, as many other people were getting their breakfast from them. Although not everyone was. Some people had mini portable fridges with them, which had fresh milk and fruit juice in them. And some others had portable stoves with them on which they were now frying bacon and sausages (or, Ryan presumed, their lab grown alternatives). There were also all sorts of other food being prepared, from all the various cultures of Earth, and the Alian's home world as well.

Eventually Ryan and Lisa were able to get some bowls of porridge from one of the stalls, and a very generous serving of it. Ryan ate his whilst standing up, as he once again looked out amongst the crowd. The porridge itself was very warm and filling, and it was just what he needed right now.

Once they were done they deposited their bowls on a table near the stall where they had bought the porridge from. They then started to wander through the crowd again. Ryan started to wonder what it must have been like for the people who had been in this crowd for a while, what it would have been like to be exposed to this atmosphere for all of this time, and what the excitement of knowing that the big day had now finally arrived. He also wondered what would

happen after the eclipse, and how long it would be before the vast crowd of billions dispersed and went home again. Ryan imagined that that was something that would probably take a very long time to do.

Eventually they stopped and sat down on the ground again. There were still a few hours to go until the eclipse began. Then Ryan thought of something. He turned to Lisa and said, 'Lisa, you know it's dangerous to look directly at the Sun, even during an eclipse, at least until totality occurs?'

'Yes, why?'

'Well, back in 1999, I remember that lots of people had these special sunglasses that they could use to look at the Sun during a partial eclipse, or in the run up to totality. I don't supposed you'd happen to have anything like that on you?' He wouldn't have been surprised if she just happened to bring out a couple of pairs from her pockets.

However, she said, 'Oh, no I don't. I'm sure there must probably be some on sale around here somewhere. You stay there, and I'll go and have a look...'

'Oh, OK then.'

Lisa got up, and quickly disappeared into the crowd. Ryan now started to feel like a fish out of water again. He looked about him again, and it was still the same endless sea of people.

His attention was then drawn to a couple of people that were sat next to him. They were a woman who was in her thirties, and a young girl who looked like she was about 10. They both had natural blonde hair, and it was clear from their resemblance that they were mother and daughter. The girl had a huge smile on her face, as she looked around her. Clearly she, too, was feeling the excitement of the day. Her mother had her arms around her, and was talking to her, although Ryan couldn't make out what it was that she was saying.

The mother then caught him looking at them. For a brief moment he thought that she was about to give him a really dirty look because he was staring at them, but instead she gave him a smile. He returned the smile and said, 'I guess this must be very exciting for her?'

'Yes, it is! We've been looking forward to this day for years, haven't we Poppy?' She spoke with an English accent.

'Yeah!' squealed Poppy.

The mother then said, 'Hi, I'm Fiona.' She offered her hand.

Ryan went over and shook it, and as he did so he said, 'I'm Ryan.'

'Are you here with your girlfriend?'

'Oh, no, she's not my girlfriend, or anything like that. We're just friends.'

'Oh, sorry... So, you sound like you're from London?'

'Yep, I've lived there practically all of my life.'

'You're lucky. I guess you were already used to the Alan's song before you came here?'

'Er, yeah...'

'We're from Brighton. We have a small group of Alan's living there, but we're very lucky if we ever get to hear their song. What's it like in London?'

'Oh, it's, er, pretty good...' Ryan hoped Fiona wasn't going to ask him too many questions about the London of the far and distant future, as there was only so far that he would be able to get by bluffing. He then looked at Poppy and asked, 'Have you ever seen an eclipse before?'

'No.'

'Me neither. I guess we're lucky to catch this one then, aren't we?'

'Yeah. We've been planning to come here for ages.'

'So have we. How long has it been since you arrived here?'

'About two weeks.'

'And now the big day's here!'

Fiona then said, 'She's been watching endless videos of eclipses on the computer ever since it was confirmed that we'd be coming out here. But videos just don't compare to the real thing. I was lucky enough to go and see one over in America before she was born, and, as this was going to be the last chance for anyone to see a solar eclipse I thought it was important to bring her out here so that she would get the chance to see one.'

Poppy then turned round to Fiona and said, 'Mummy, can I have a sandwich please?'

'OK sweetheart. I've run out so I'll have to go and get some more.' Fiona then turned to Ryan and asked, 'Would you mind looking after her?'

'Er, no, not at all.'

'Thanks! I won't be long.' Fiona then stood up, and walked off into the crowd.

Ryan was a little surprised by this. Fiona had only just met him, and yet she was already trusting him with her daughter. He thought that was most odd. He thought that something like that would never have happened back in the 21st century. He wondered if this was a sign that people were much more trusting in this future age, or, at the very least, trusted where children were concerned.

He then realised that he was now in the company of a 10 year old girl. He wouldn't have had an idea of what to say to a 10 year old girl back in the 21st century, let alone what to say to one in this age. Fortunately, it was Poppy who spoke first, when she asked, 'Who is the girl that was with you?'

'That's Lisa, she's a friend of mine. She's very nice, you'd like her.'

'Where's she gone?'

'She's gone to see if she can find some special sunglasses that we can wear that will allow us to look at the Sun. You know that you're not supposed to look at it directly without protection, don't you?'

'Yes, Mummy's got some of those glasses for us. Here, have a look...!' Poppy went into a bag, and brought out a cardboard pair of glasses with heavily tinted lenses. She passed them to Ryan, who put them on. Poppy giggled when he looked at her with them on. She said, 'You look funny!'

'So do you! You've gone all dark... In fact, so has everyone! Is it night time again?' There were more giggles from Poppy.

Ryan then looked up at the Sun. It still appeared as a perfect disc in the sky.

He then took off the glasses and handed them back to Poppy. She then asked him, 'What do you do?'

He was a little confused by this question. He said, 'I'm sorry, what do you mean?'

'What job do you do? Mummy works in her office all day. Where do you work?'

'Oh I...!' Ryan stopped himself as he came across another one of his mysterious mental blocks. He tried to think back to what job he specifically did back before this journey began, but, as with some other things, his mind came up blank. He had memories of working in an office too, but he didn't have the foggiest about what it was he actually did there. He had an image in his mind of a spreadsheet that had many tabs on it, and that he knew what all of the tabs were and how they all linked with each other. He was aware of a great many complicated formulas contained within the spreadsheet, and of how the graphs in it worked, and what all of the macros that he had programmed into it did. But when it came to trying to remember what exactly all of the numbers actually meant he found that he was completely unable to do so. They just appeared in his mind as one great big blur.

'Are you OK?' Poppy's question brought Ryan back out of his confused muddle.

He looked at her and said, 'Yeah, sorry. I, er, haven't been sleeping very well lately.'

'What do you mean you haven't been sleeping well? With all of these Alian's here I thought everyone was able to get to sleep easily. I always used to have trouble sleeping at home, but I just have to put my head down on Mummy's lap when they start singing and I'm like - ' She placed her palms together, and then placed her hands by the side of her head, which she then tilted, to symbolise being asleep.

'Oh, right, yes. It's just, er, the dreams that I've been having, that's all.'

'I've been having lots of nice dreams since I've been here.'

'OK, what sort of things do you dream about?'

'I dream about Daddy still being at home, and playing with him.'

'Where's your Daddy now?' As soon as Ryan had said those words he realised just how dodgy they must have sounded, although he had meant them innocently enough. Fortunately, no one within earshot appeared to have taken any offense by them.

Poppy answered with, 'He died...' She looked forlornly at the ground.

He thought about asking her how he had died, but decided not to. He didn't want to risk bringing up a painful memory for her if he could help it. Instead he asked her, 'So, are any of your friends out here, or they all back home in Brighton, and insanely jealous of you?'

'Well, Karen and Kirsten came out to see the eclipse, but I think that they went somewhere in Russia. No one else in my class got to go, although they all wanted to. Their parents had all entered the lottery to be able to go, but they didn't win any tickets like my Mummy did.'

'Oh, so you're very lucky then!'

'Yes! I can't wait for it to start!'

There was then a bit of a pause, as Ryan ran out of conversation, although he was impressed that he had been able to make it this far. Once again, it was Poppy who broke the silence, when she asked, 'Ryan, why are you sad?'

Ryan was surprised by this question. He hadn't been feeling especially sad. 'What do you mean?'

'You look really sad. Is it because you'd like Lisa to be your girlfriend?'

'No... no, were just friends, and I'm happy with that.'

'Are you missing your home?'

Ryan pondered this, and then he said, 'Yes I am a bit. I'm a long way from it, and I'm not sure how I'm going to get back to it.'

'Mummy says that we may have to wait here for a few days after the eclipse because it will take a long time for everyone to leave.'

'Yes, I can imagine...' Ryan wondered how long he and Lisa would be here for.

'I don't mind so much. The Alian's will still be here, and I like them.'

There was another pause, whilst Ryan reflected on his journey so far. He was still at an utter loss as to what it was all about, what it was all for. And the fact that he was still finding gaps in his memory concerned him. He was also concerned about whatever it was that Shadow Zero was doing, and as to who, or what, he was. Even though he was in a crowd of five billion people, he had never felt so utterly alone.

He was brought out of his thoughts by Poppy coming over to him, and giving him a hug. As she did so she said, 'Don't be sad, Ryan.'

He was taken a little by surprise at this, but he couldn't help but smile. Poppy was a very sweet little girl, and one couldn't help but smile at her. He was envious of her youthful innocence. Not for her the troubles of a grown up life, at least not for a few years yet.

Shortly after this both Lisa and Fiona came back together. As they sat down Fiona said, 'She wasn't any trouble was she?'

'Oh, no, not at all. She was a little angel.'

Lisa said, 'Here, I was able to find them, although it took me a little while.' She handed Ryan a pair of cardboard sunglasses, that were identical to the ones that Fiona and Poppy had.

'Thanks,' he said as he took them.

Lisa then asked, 'Are you OK?'

'Yeah, I'm fine.'

Ryan suspected that Lisa could tell that he was feeling a little down, and she placed her arm around his shoulder, which he was grateful for.

They stayed with Fiona and Poppy for the rest of the morning. The excitement amongst the crowd (and with Poppy in particular) steadily grew throughout the morning. At one point Fiona brought out a radio, and switched it on. The programme that was on was providing information on the day's event. Quite a few other people were also bringing out radios and were now tuning into the same programme, which could now be heard all throughout the crowd.

They then went over to a live reporter over in northern Russia. A huge cheer went out amongst the crowd when he reported that the Moon had now made first contact with the Sun. The eclipse had now officially started, although it would still be a little while yet before it started where they were.

A lot of the chatter amongst the crowd started to die down, as people focussed on their radios. Ryan could see a look of sheer delight in Poppy's face as the day developed.

There was another massive cheer when the reporter in northern Russia reported that they were now at totality. He described how amazing the scene looked where they were. Poppy turned to Fiona and asked, 'Mummy, how much longer will it be until it gets here?'

'Not much longer now, sweetheart.'

Whilst it was still totality in northern Russia, Ryan heard a man shout out, 'We have first contact!'

Suddenly there was a rush of movement as everyone got out their sunglasses, put them on, and looked up at the Sun. There was another cheer amongst the crowd as they could all see first contact for themselves.

Ryan saw it himself. It wasn't much at this stage, but he could quite clearly see an indentation on the right hand side of the Sun, which was obviously the Moon. It was growing and moving to the left, although it was going a little slowly.

Ryan took off his sunglasses, and he saw Poppy holding hers onto her face - they were a little big for her. There was a look of wonder and amazement on her face. Fiona then said, 'If you constantly look at it like that you'll strain your neck!' Poppy giggled, and looked back down, taking off her sunglasses.

In the rush of excitement surrounding first contact, they had all missed the reporter in northern Russia informing the world that totality had now ended where he was, as the shadow of the Moon raced across the surface of the Earth for what would be the last time.

The programme switched to reporters elsewhere along the path of the eclipse. There were cheers amongst the crowd whenever there was a report of totality reaching somewhere. There was a real sense of expectancy amongst the crowd, with everyone periodically looking up at the Sun to see how much more progress the Moon had made.

Poppy could barely take her eyes off of the Sun. She was now lying on her back (presumably to prevent herself from straining her neck), looking up at the Sun. Ryan was also periodically looking up at the Sun himself, as he could see the Moon making yet more progress across the Sun.

The radio programme then switched to a report from the Moon itself. The reporter there said that she could see the Moon's shadow on the surface, and there was another cheer from the crowd when she reported that it had now left Russia and entered Mongolia. Everyone knew that it wouldn't be long now until it reached them.

Most people put their sunglasses on and were looking up at the Sun. Ryan did the same, and he saw that the Moon had almost completely covered the surface of the Sun. They were now just moments away from totality.

He quickly looked down to take in the sight around him. The whole sea of people were now looking up at the Sun in expectation and anticipation. Ryan looked over at Lisa, who was also taking in the sight. Despite everything that she had apparently seen in her life, Ryan reckoned that she, too, also considered a total eclipse of the Sun to be something pretty special. He then looked over at Poppy. She was standing up now, sunglasses firmly held onto her face, eyes pointed directly at the Sun, and a wide smile on her face.

Ryan looked back up at the Sun. The Moon now had very little left to go. The sound of excitement around the crowd reached an even higher level. Ryan now kept his eyes on the Moon as it ate up the last bit of the Sun.

And then they had totality. They were covered in the darkness of the Moon's shadow. The temperature around them dropped.

And everything went silent.

Ryan couldn't hear a thing. He couldn't hear a single person talking. There wasn't even any sound coming out of the radios.

He looked around at the crowd. They were all frozen, still looking up at the Sun, still wearing their sunglasses. Ryan's first thought when he saw this is that they didn't need to wear their sunglasses any longer - it was safe to look directly at Sun during totality.

But then he realised that something was wrong. He turned to face Lisa. She, too, was frozen, looking at the Sun.

'Lisa!' he cried out, but there was no response. He tried to grab her arm, but it felt cold, and it wouldn't move, not even slightly.

Ryan knew that this was bad. If even Lisa was affected by whatever it was that had just happened then he knew that something extremely serious was going on.

He looked back up at the Sun, and he could see the corona glowing around the edges of the Moon. He would have found it a beautiful sight were it not for what was happening on the ground.

He started to look around some of the other people. But they were just the same as Lisa - frozen solid. It was the same for the humans and the Alien's - both species were affected.

Ryan was really starting to panic now. He had no idea what could have possibly have caused this, nor why he seemed to be the only one that wasn't affected.

He then heard a young voice from behind him say, 'What's happening?'

He turned around and saw that he wasn't the only that hadn't been affected. Poppy was also unfrozen, looking around her at all of the other people. She then saw Ryan, and could see a sense of relief on her face when she realised that she wasn't alone. He went up to her, then got down on his knees so that he could look at her at her level. He said, 'I don't know what's happened, Poppy. But, whatever happens, stay with me, OK? I'll do what I can to look after you.'

Poppy looked over at Fiona, and then started to tug on her arm. As she did so she said, 'Mummy! Mummy! Wake up Mummy!'

Ryan turned her away, and said, 'It's no use. Whatever's happened, it's affected her as well. Now, look at me Poppy!' She was still looking at her mother, and so Ryan placed his hand on her face, and slowly turned it to face his. 'I don't know what's going on here. But, as far as I can tell, you and I and the only two people who haven't been affected by it. I don't know why that is, but that's what the situation is. Now, what that means is that you and I have to stick together, OK? No matter what happens, we have to stay near each other. I don't know how long this will last for, or what's behind it, but if we stay together we'll have a better chance of coming out of this on the other side unharmed. Now, do you understand all of that? We need to stay calm, and we need to stick together. Can you do that for me Poppy?'

She nodded, and then she said, 'Ryan, I'm scared...'

'So am I, Poppy. So am I...'

Ryan stood up and took Poppy's hand in his. He looked up at the Sun. Whilst everything on the Earth appeared to be frozen, the Sun wasn't. Whilst the Moon wasn't moving any more, he could still see the Sun's corona glowing around the edge, and it wasn't a frozen image.

He then started to try and think about what might have been causing this. His first thoughts went to the Alian's. He'd seen enough science fiction to be aware of the staple plot where a group of aliens come to Earth, apparently friendly, but then end up trying to either take over the Earth or destroy it. But, as he looked around him, he quickly discounted that theory - all of the Alian's in the crowd were also frozen in exactly the same way as the humans were. And so it had to be something else.

He then thought of Shadow Zero. He had turned up here earlier, and it appeared that only Ryan could see him - not even Lisa had been aware that he had been there, even though she had been able to see him back in Harrow in 1998. Was this somehow his doing? And, if so, for what possible purpose?

Ryan then thought back to the dream that he had had when he had first become aware of the presence of Shadow Zero - the fire filled landscape. He started to fear that this situation was about to come much, much worse. He wondered if this landscape - this gathering of five billion people - was about to get turned into that landscape. And then he wondered if it would all somehow be his fault.

Once this thoughts had passed through Ryan's mind, he heard what was a terrifying sound given the situation that they were in. It was the sound of wolves howling. A great many wolves - it must have been hundreds of them, possibly even thousands. Ryan wondered where they could have come from - there were no indications that there were any animals at all in this vast crowd

of people. And, if there were now wolves here, why weren't they frozen in the same way that all of the people were?

Ryan held onto Poppy's hand tighter, and she moved closer to him. He continued to look around them. Whilst the sound of the wolves was getting louder, there was still no visible sign of them.

He then looked back up at the Sun. There was now something new there - there was a light in the middle of the Sun, or, rather, in the middle of where the Moon was blocking the Sun. Ryan wondered if it was something from the Moon's surface that they could see. But he discounted that when he saw that the light was growing bigger. Only, he quickly realised that it wasn't so much growing bigger, but it was coming closer. It appeared to be heading straight for them.

'What is it, Ryan?' asked Poppy.

'I don't know, but stay close to me, and don't let go of my hand.'

As the light came closer the sound of the wolves died down, and was replaced by a new, humming sound. Ryan tried to make out what the light was, where it was coming from. But the light became so bright that he wasn't able to focus on it, he wasn't able to look at it directly.

Eventually the light came to a halt about twenty metres away from Ryan and Poppy. He still couldn't work out what it was, only that, whatever it was, it appears to be around five metres across. It hovered above and in front of them. Poppy was now cowering behind Ryan. They could now feel the vibrations that were emanating from the object, presumably caused by whatever it was that was also creating the humming sound.

They then heard a voice say, 'Ryan...!' It was a female voice which spoke in a Scottish accent, one that seemed a little familiar to Ryan, although he couldn't quite remember where it was that he had heard it before. 'Ryan...!' it said again.

'Who are you?!' he called out. 'What do you want?!'

'Ryan... Can you hear me?'

'Yes! I can hear you! Who are you?'

'Ryan...'

'Please! Tell me who you are!'

'Ryan... please...'

At that moment the level of the light intensified, and the humming noise grew louder. A beam of light shot out from the object, and was directed right at Ryan's chest. This gave Ryan a shock, but he didn't feel anything.

'Ryan... Ryan... Ryan... please...'

The words were echoing all around them, as the light grew so bright that it became impossible for Ryan to keep his eyes open any more.

'Ryan...! Please...!'

The light and the humming sound reached such an intensity that they completely filled Ryan's mind. They were the only things that he was aware of, apart from Poppy, who was now clinging onto his legs and screaming. But then the humming sound grew even louder to the point where it was reverberating around his head, to the point where it was starting to cause him pain. He started to cry out himself.

He then heard what sounded like an explosion. At the same time he was also aware that the intense light had vanished. He opened his eyes, and, as he did so, his ears were filled with the sound of the crowd cheering. He looked around him, and everyone was unfrozen, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Only they didn't have their sunglasses on, and were now in fact putting them back on, as totality had just ended, and the Moon's shadow had moved on.

However, Poppy was still holding on to Ryan's leg. She let go, and he knelt down. She asked, 'What happened? What was that light? Whose voice was that?'

'I'm afraid I don't know. But, whatever and whoever it was, I think it's gone now. We should be safe now.' He could see that Poppy was trembling a little, but seeing that everything was now back to normal seemed to be calming her down a little.

He stood back up, still holding her hand. With his other hand he put his sunglasses back on, and saw that the Moon had, indeed, passed on.

Fiona looked down at Poppy and asked, 'What did you think of that, Poppy?' Poppy looked back up at her, and didn't say anything at first. Fiona then asked, 'Sweetheart, is everything OK?'

Poppy then said, 'Yes, I'm OK. But I'm glad it's over. That was really scary...'

Fiona smiled at her, clearly oblivious to what Poppy had witnessed during totality. She then said, 'Well, you don't have to worry about that anymore. There'll never be a total eclipse of the sun again now.'

'Good!' Fiona laughed at this.

Ryan then turned to Lisa, who was smiling. She asked him, 'So, did you enjoy that?' It was clear that, she, too, was also oblivious as to what had happened during totality. She was completely unaware that she had been frozen, whereas Ryan and Poppy weren't and saw and heard things that nobody else did. This worried Ryan, this worried Ryan a lot.

He wasn't sure if he should tell her about what had happened. She seemed to always know everything about anything. But the fact that she hadn't seen or heard what had happened was

greatly concerning. He was also worried that if he did tell her she might start to think that maybe he was going a little crazy, even given the context of the situation that they were in. He also wouldn't know how to go about explaining it all, and the part about Poppy in particular. Why hadn't she been frozen? The object that had appeared to have come from the Moon seemed to be interested specifically in him, as it had called out his name. What did Poppy have to do with any of this?

All of these thoughts went through Ryan's mind in a mere moment. In the end, he decided that he wouldn't tell Lisa about what had happened. Whilst she would have probably been understanding about it, he found that he didn't want to go through the awkwardness of telling her about it. He just wanted to do whatever it was that he had to do in this place, and move onto the next one, and hopefully get home as soon as he could.

And so he just said, 'Yeah, it was alright.'

'Only alright? Ryan, you don't get to see a total eclipse of the Sun everyday you know! Is "alright" really the best that you can do?'

He then whispered to her, 'Well, this is hardly going to be my only chance to see one, is it?' He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

He then turned back round to Fiona and Poppy, and asked, 'So, that was that. The end of the eclipse, the last ever total solar eclipse of the Sun. I suppose we now all have the small matter of getting out of here and getting home.'

Fiona said, 'Yes, this has been the part that I've been dreading from the start. I think we're right in the middle of the crowd here. They said that it will probably take a few days for the shuttles to reach us here. Still, it could be worse, the Alian's will still be here. You'd like to hear them for a few more nights, wouldn't you Poppy?'

Poppy smiled and said, 'Yes!' Ryan was glad to see her smiling again. He wouldn't have wanted what had happened during totality to have scarred her too much.

They all sat down again, and Lisa started to talk to Fiona about how she had found the eclipse. Whilst they did that, Ryan leaned into Poppy and asked her, 'Are you OK?'

'Yes. Has that thing gone away for good now?'

'Yes, I think it has. You don't have to worry about that again, I don't think. If you stick with your mum, you'll be OK.'

'Ryan...'

'Yes...?'

'Thank you for looking after me.'

'It's not a problem.' He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

He turned back round to Lisa and said, 'I don't know about you, but I feel like going for a bit of a walk. I'm also a little hungry. Shall we go back to the stalls and see what they have in the way of food?'

'Yeah, OK.' Lisa then turned to Fiona and said, 'We won't be long.'

'OK,' said Fiona, 'See you in a bit.'

Ryan and Lisa turned to walk away. Just before they did, he looked at Poppy once more, and gave her a wink, which she returned with a smile. She was going to be fine.

They then started to make their way back through the crowd towards the direction of the stalls. The crowd now seemed to be thicker than it had ever been, and getting through it was hard going. Eventually, a space opened up, and Ryan forced his way through it.

Once he did, he found that he was no longer in a field. He was in a living room. He then turned around, and there was no sign of the crowd anymore. However, Lisa was still with him. 'We've moved again...' he said. 'Why? We didn't do anything back there?'

'I'm not sure. We got to see the eclipse, but I'm not sure why.'

Ryan then realised that they had moved on because they had done what it was that they were meant to do there. Or, rather, he had done what it was that he had meant to do. Namely, see what had happened during the eclipse, and to protect and reassure Poppy. However, quite what that light was, who that voice belonged to, and why Poppy hadn't been frozen like the others, were all still mysteries to him.

That world was now behind them, and so he started to take a look around their new surroundings. The living room that they were in wasn't especially large, but it was comfortable. There was a large blue sofa in the room, and a few games consoles set up on the floor near the TV. There was also some shelves near the TV, which had a collection of videos, DVDs, and video games on them. In the far corner of the room was a dining room table with a lot of paper on it. A spacious kitchen opened up onto the living room.

And Ryan knew where they were.

He turned to Lisa and said, 'This is my flat! I remember it now! We're home! Or at least I am! It's over! I'm back!'

'Hold on,' said Lisa, 'You don't want to get ahead of yourself there. You thought you were back home when we arrived back in Harrow in 1998. We know where we are, but we don't know when we are yet.'

Ryan knew that she was right. But he knew of a quick way to find that out. On his sofa he had a copy of the Radio Times. But, as he went to pick it up he got a shock - his hand just went through it, and the sofa as well.

He retracted his hand, and it was fine. He hadn't felt a thing. He then went and tried to pick up the magazine again, but still couldn't do so.

'OK,' he said, 'What's going on? Why can't I pick it up?'

'I think I know what's going on.' Lisa then waved her arm through the sofa, and then proceeded to walk through it. She then said, 'I'm afraid we're not back yet. I think we're somewhere in your past.' She looked down at the Radio Times, and then said, 'It's May 2009, does that date mean anything to you?'

Ryan racked his brains. He felt that that date should have meant something, but he couldn't fathom what it was. It was part of the fog that still existed in his mind, a fog that he was still unable to see through. He looked up at Lisa and shook his head.

'OK,' said Lisa, 'Try not to worry about it. I think we've been brought here for something different. We're not here to assist anyone with anything. I think we're simply here for you to observe something from your past, something that, for the time being, you've forgotten. We'll see you at some point, and you'll start to remember things. Try not to be afraid, it can be a little disconcerting to see yourself.'

'Have you done this sort of thing before then.'

'Yes, I have. You don't have anything to be afraid of. Whilst we're here we won't be able to interact with anything - that's why you weren't able to pick up that magazine. Whilst we'll be able to see and hear people here, they won't be able to see or hear us.'

'So, we're like ghosts?'

'Yes, that's right.'

Then Ryan had a thought. 'If we're ghosts, and can't pick up magazines but can walk through solid objects like sofas, then how come we can stand on the floor? Why don't we just fall through it?'

'Whoever it was that has brought us here is enabling us to stand on the floor. We'll still be able to move about in this world - we can walk on the floor, we can climb stair, we can even go up and down in lifts provided that we're with someone from this world who is operating the lift. If they hadn't have done that for us then we would have had difficulties in moving about in this world.'

'OK, I guess that makes sense.' They then heard a noise from his bedroom. He then said, 'Right then, shall we go and meet me then?'

'Lead the way!'

They went into his bedroom, where they saw the younger version of himself getting ready to go to bed. It was after 11pm at night. He was already wearing a blue pair of pyjamas. The room itself looked a little untidy. There were clothes dumped on the floor, a computer on the far side of the room (with a lot of papers around it), and there were three posters on the wall. The ones either side were of Girls Aloud, and the one in the middle was of Nicola Roberts from Girls Aloud.

Ryan turned to Lisa and said, 'Yes, I'm a Girls Aloud fan, and, yes, Nicola is my favourite. Don't judge me!'

'I wasn't going to say a word!' Lisa had a smirk on her face.

They both then turned their attention onto the younger Ryan. They saw that he was just about to get into bed when his telephone rang. He went to answer it. He said, 'Hello... OK... OK...' He sighed, and then said, 'But I'm really tired and I was just about to go to bed! ... Er... no, sorry, but I'm really tired and I need to go to bed... OK, goodbye...' He then put the phone down, and went back towards his bed.

Lisa asked, 'What was that phone call about?'

'I'm not sure...' Ryan tried to remember what it had been, and he felt that some of the fog in his mind was starting to lift. Even though it was after 11pm, someone was trying to get him to go out. He very rarely went out at night, and so it would have been most odd for someone to ask him to go out at all, let alone at this time of night.

They saw the younger Ryan get into bed. Just as he was about to turn the light out to go to sleep the phone rang again. As soon as it did Ryan got a flash of memory. He turned to Lisa and said, 'I remember some of this now! That phone call before was from my mum, and this one will be from my brother. You might want to cover your ears...'

Ryan wasn't proud of what his younger self was about to say. He answered the phone, sounding very annoyed, and said, 'What?! ... I was literally just about to get into bed! ... But I really need to get some sleep...' He then started shouting into the phone, 'OK, I'll come down there, I'll come down there right now and I'll die of exhaustion!!!' He then slammed the phone down. He clearly didn't look very happy. He then took off his pyjama top, as he prepared to get dressed.

Ryan ushered Lisa out of the bedroom, and back into the living room. He then said, 'I know what this is about. This is about my dad. By this point he had been ill with lung cancer for some

time. The cancer was terminal, and he had been in hospital for quite a while. He wasn't very happy there. But for the past few weeks he was being looked after by a hospice over in Kenton called St Luke's. He was a lot happier then.

'This is Saturday night. The last time that I had seen him was on Sunday, and he seemed reasonably fine then. He was still smiling and talking and able to make jokes. But on Thursday I had got a call from my mum saying that he had taken a turn for the worse. I hadn't thought too much of it at the time. He'd been having his ups and downs. There was one time that I had been called out of work to go down to the hospital because they thought he may have had a stroke, but on that occasion he turned out to be fine.

'In the phone call from my mum earlier she was telling me that it might be a good idea for me to go down to the hospice now. But I was seriously really tired by this point, and I didn't want to be called out on what might just have been another false alarm. Then my brother called me, and, as you heard, I've now agreed to go down there in spite of my tiredness.'

Lisa then said, 'OK, I see. Are you going to be OK with seeing all of this again?'

There was a pause, and then Ryan said, 'Yeah, I should be fine...'

It didn't take younger Ryan long to get dressed. Once he was he came into the living room, picked up his wallet, his Oyster card, and his keys. He put some things in a bag (something to read, and a bottle of water), and then started to turn the lights off. Ryan and Lisa followed him out of the flat, as he locked his door, and then downstairs and out of the building.

It was a fairly quiet and cool night. As they followed the younger Ryan, the older Ryan explained to Lisa, 'I've now got to make my way to Kenton. The best way to get there is by the Bakerloo line, even though it's only one stop. I'm not quite sure what busses go there, and it's too far to walk - and I'm not even sure of the way.'

It only took them about five minutes to get to Harrow and Wealdstone station, where they followed the younger Ryan over to platform 2. The display's indicated that the next southbound Bakerloo line train wasn't going to be due for about another 7 minutes. They saw the younger Ryan pacing up and down impatiently.

Ryan said, 'At this point I just wanted to get there as soon as I could. I never like waiting for busses and trains at the best of times. I just like to keep moving. That's why I tend to walk to places as much as I can. As long as you're moving you're getting closer to your destination. I find standing still and waiting for a train to be incredibly frustrating, and even more so given these circumstances.

Eventually, an empty train came out of the sidings and onto the platform. The younger Ryan got on and sat down, whilst the older Ryan and Lisa got on and stood near him.

The doors to the train closed, and it left the station. It didn't take long for it to get to Kenton, where they saw the younger Ryan get off of the train. They followed him out of the station, and into Kenton.

There was a busy road in Kenton, with a fair bit of traffic on it. Ryan said to Lisa, 'It's a bit of a walk to the hospice from here, but I'm a little happier by this point as it's on foot all of the way - no more having to rely on public transport.'

After a little while they could hear that the younger Ryan was humming something. Lisa asked, 'What is that?'

Older Ryan smiled, as he remembered what it was. He said, 'It's from a video game. Earlier that day I had connected my PlayStation 3 to the internet for the first time and downloaded some games. One of them was an HD remake of Street Fighter II. As part of the remake they had included remixes of all of the music, and the one that you can hear be humming there is Dhalsim's theme, the remix of which I thought was particularly nice. I know it's probably an odd thing for me to have been humming, or even thinking about at this time. But that, along with this walk, was helping to clear my head and calm me down. I still wasn't too happy about being called out literally before I was about to go to bed for some much needed sleep, even though deep down I knew that this was the right thing for me to do.'

Eventually, they saw St Luke's Hospice come into sight. They followed the younger Ryan as he went up to the door, which was locked. He rang the bell, and one of the staff members came to let him in. It appeared that they were expecting him.

He was led into the room where his father was. He was lying in bed, and he looked like he was asleep, although his breathing was laboured. Also in the room was his mother, his brother, and his aunt.

His brother came up to the younger Ryan and asked, 'Are you glad you came now?' The younger Ryan just grunted at him.

He walked over to his mother, who asked him, 'Are you OK?'

'Yeah. How's he doing?'

'Not very well. He may not make then night.'

The younger Ryan sat down on a chair next to his dad, and put his bag down. His aunt and brother left the room. Then one of the staff members asked him, 'Is there anything I can get you? A drink or a sandwich?'

The younger Ryan said, 'All I really need is some sleep. I am so tired right now.'

'OK, well, we've got a room upstairs that relatives can use. I'll just go and get it ready for you.' She then left the room.

The younger Ryan then asked his Mum, 'Can I talk to him?'

'Yes, of course. They say he can still hear you.'

The younger Ryan then started to talk about the qualifying for the Grand Prix that had taken place earlier that day. The older Ryan and Lisa stepped out of the room. Ryan said, 'We used to watch the Grand Prix together sometimes whenever I went round on a Sunday. He always wanted to know who was on pole before a race. Although when it came to the race itself he was only mainly interested in the start. Sometimes he would set the video recorder to just record the first ten minutes of the race, in case there were any crashes during it. He would also want to know what the final results were.'

Lisa then asked, 'Were you very close to your dad?'

Ryan thought for a bit, took a deep breath, and then said, 'Not especially close, but, you know, we got on. When I moved out of home - and I'm only just remembering all of this now - I would still go round and see my parents about once a week. I hadn't moved that far away from them, only about a fifteen minute walk or so. I hadn't moved there specifically to be close to them, it's just the way it worked out. But, yeah, I got on OK with my dad.'

They looked back in on the room. Before too long the staff member came back down to tell the younger Ryan that the bed was ready for him now. He then followed them out of the room, and up some stairs. The older Ryan and Lisa followed him.

Once they were inside the room the staff member said that if the situation with his father changed they could come and get him. He thanked them, as then they left, closing the door behind them. He then closed the curtains, took off his shoes and his trousers, and then climbed into bed before turning off the lights.

The older Ryan said to Lisa, 'Even though I had been really tired, I wasn't able to get any actual sleep. By now my brain was too busy with other stuff. It still hadn't quite sunk in that my dad was now right at the end. He had been ill for quite some time, and we knew that he was going to die sooner or later, but I don't think any of us thought that it would be quite this soon. It's not actually the cancer itself that's killing him. From what I remember he was weak because of the cancer, and as a result of that he had succumbed to an infection, and that's what it is that's... well... you know...'

Lisa then asked, 'How are you finding all of this?'

'To be honest, not too bad. It's all coming back to me now. Obviously, this wasn't a very happy time for me. But I'm OK, I'll be fine.' He smiled at her, and he smiled back.

They sat down on the floor, as they watched the younger Ryan try and get some sleep. Lisa asked the older Ryan, 'Would you rather go back down and see your father again?'

Ryan thought for a moment, and then he said, 'No, I'm OK here. I didn't particularly want to be there then, and I don't particularly want to be there now. Yeah, it is my dad in there, but, on the other hand, it's not. He's not himself - he not his usual chatty, jokey self. It doesn't feel like it's him. Do you get what I mean?'

'Yes, and it's fine. We can stay here if you like.' She took hold of his hand, and he gladly let her.

They sat there in silence for a while. Ryan thought about this whole event, now that he could remember it again. He had known that the ending had been coming for a while, and he had told plenty of people about it. On the Thursday when he had received the phone call from his mother telling him that his father had taken a turn for the worse, he had been with a friend, after he had just had dinner with her. She knew all about what was happening with his father, and she was being a really good friend to Ryan. Once he had died she came round to his mum's house to see him, and to make sure he was alright, and he was greatly appreciative of the friendship and support that she gave him at the time.

He had also told all of the people that he worked with. Over the past months, whenever they were planning a piece of work, he always warned them that his father was terminally ill, and it could mean that he would have to take a couple of weeks out of the office at zero noticed, something that they were fully understanding of.

He then started to think about how it was that he came to be witnessing these events again. In the early part of this journey he and Lisa were being sent to places to go and help people out with problems that they had in their lives. But that seemed to be changing now. In the last world they weren't there to help anyone. As far as Lisa was concerned, all that had really happened is that they had been given an opportunity to see the last ever total solar eclipse of the Sun. She knew nothing about what it was that he and Poppy had seen. It was obviously that which he had been sent there for, but he still didn't have a clue about what it meant.

And now he was here, being forced to relive the night that his father died. He wanted to know who it was that was sending him to these places. He knew that these times and locations weren't being chosen by Lisa, they were being selected by some higher being than her. Whoever that higher being was would have known exactly what it was that happened during the eclipse, and why Poppy hadn't been frozen. They would also know why Ryan had been brought here at this time.

Whilst it had helped to unfog part of Ryan's mind, so that he could remember his parents and his family, he was still left with many questions. He still didn't know where exactly he worked - he could now remember some of the people that he had worked with, but he couldn't remember

the specifics of what he did. He also couldn't remember what had been happening in his life recently - before he had found himself in his house in the town by the sea. He had vague memories of seeing his mum each week at home on her own after his dad had died, and of going back to work after his compassionate leave, and after that everything turned back into a blur. He still couldn't remember what had been happening in his real life before he had left it and found himself in his current state of existence.

After a while, there was a knock on the door. The younger Ryan hadn't been able to fall asleep, and so he answered straight away with, 'Yes?'

'Ryan, you might like to come downstairs now. Your father's breathing has changed.'

'OK, thank you, I'll come down.'

The person at the door went away, and the younger Ryan got out of the bed, whilst the older Ryan and Lisa stood up, with Lisa still holding Ryan's hand. The younger Ryan got his trousers and put them back on, and then he started to put his shoes back on.

Whilst he was still tying up his shoelaces there was another knock at door. 'Ryan, are you coming down?'

'Yes, I'm just putting my shoes back on.'

'OK, I think you should come down quickly...'

The older Ryan turned to Lisa and said, 'That was the moment when I knew that it had happened...' Lisa didn't say anything in response. She didn't need to.

Once the younger Ryan had put his shoes back on he could be seen visibly preparing himself for what was to come. He took a deep breath, opened the door, and went downstairs. The older Ryan and Lisa followed him.

His father's room was opposite the stairs. As he came down them he could see his mother stoking his father's hair. She looked up at him and said, 'He's gone...'

He continued down the stairs, and went into the room. His aunt and his brother were in there as well, as well as one of the hospice staff members. He then saw his mother burst into tears on the other side of the room, but his aunt (her sister) was there to comfort her.

Once she had recovered he stayed for a little while, and then he decided to leave the room, and sit in a chair near the reception. The older Ryan explained to Lisa, 'I know that this may sound a little odd, but I didn't want to stay in that room.'

'That doesn't sound funny at all.'

His brother came out a short while afterwards, and sat in a nearby chair. The younger Ryan asked him, 'Were you in there when it happened?'

'No...'

They sat there in silence for a while.

Then his aunt came out, and handed something to the younger Ryan. As she did so she said to him, 'Here, it's your father's watch. Your mum said she wanted you to have it.'

The younger Ryan held it in his hands and looked at it. This watch that he had often seen on his father's wrist. This watch that had associated with his father all of his life, the father that he now no longer had with him. This watch that had now been passed to him.

The emotions all became too much for him, and, for the first time in years, he began to cry.

He didn't hold anything back, as his cries became extremely loud. His brother did his best to comfort him.

Then his mother came out to see him. She told him that things were going to be fine, and that they were all going to get through this together.

The older Ryan said to Lisa, 'I felt really guilty for crying as loud as I did there. It's two in the morning, and there would be other patients trying to sleep here, other patients that I probably just woke up. They would all know what it meant when they heard someone crying, and I thought that they probably wouldn't have wanted to be reminded of it.'

Lisa took hold of his arm and said, 'You've got nothing to feel guilty about. You just lost your father. I'm sure everyone would have understood.'

Shortly afterwards his tears died away. His aunt asked, 'Is there anything I can get for you?'

'Yes, my bag, I left it in there.'

She went back to the room without saying a word, and came back shortly afterwards with his bag.

His mother went off to talk to some of the hospice staff, and he waited in the reception. The older Ryan said to Lisa, 'I think the staff here were fantastic. My father was a lot happier here in his final days than he had been during his stay in hospital. He was a lot more comfortable here. And they provided great support to me and my family. I mean, I come here, having had to be persuaded to come in the first place, and the main thing I was interested in is going to sleep, rather than staying with by my father's side. But they didn't judge me, and were able to provide a bed for me, even if I found it impossible to actually get any sleep. And even though I must have woken up some of the other patients, they didn't complain to me about that either. And I'm sure that they helped my mum to get through all this as well - before and after he passed away. Everything that they did was great. I don't know what my father and my family would have done if it weren't for this place. Did you know that they get most of their funding from charity

donations? One day, and one day soon, I want to see if I can do something to help raise some money for them, so that they can continue to do the good work that they do.'

'I think that's a lovely idea.'

After a short while his mother came back out, and she was talking about driving back home that night. His aunt was trying to convince her not to. But her car was already here, and she was saying that she didn't want to come back here tomorrow just to get it.

The older Ryan said, 'When we came here to see my dad we would often go and have lunch in a nearby pub. But after he died we never went back there - she associated it with him dying. She didn't want to have anything that reminded her of his passing, or his sickness, and so she was keen to get away this night.'

Eventually it was decided that she would be driving home that night, and that she would be taking Ryan and his brother with her. The older Ryan and Lisa watched them all get into the car, and drive away.

The older Ryan turned to Lisa and asked, 'What do we do now?'

'I'm not sure. I don't think we'll be able to follow them, and so I think we've seen all that we were meant to see. Unless you'd like to go in and see your father one last time...?'

Ryan looked back towards the room where his father was, but then he said, 'No, I'd rather not. Shall we go outside?'

'OK.'

Lisa took hold of Ryan's arm, and they went outside into the cool night together. They started to walk down the road, but weren't heading in any particular direction.

Lisa asked, 'How has all this been for you?'

There was a pause, and then Ryan said, 'Well, it wouldn't have been my first choice of destination. But, I'm OK. It's certainly helped with my memory, if nothing else.'

'What happened next after you all left?'

'Well, we all went back to my mum's house. The cat was very confused to see us all, he didn't know what was going on. The first thing that I did - and you might think this was a little odd - was to go on the computer and update my Facebook status. It may seem like an unusual thing to do, but I had a lot of friends all over the place who would have wanted to know what was happening, and who I would want to tell. I just felt that the best way to get the message out there to all of them was via a Facebook status update, and so that's what I did. I got quite a few messages of support in the comments to that update.'

'Next, I tried calling a couple of my closest friends, but they didn't answer their phones, which wasn't surprising considering what time it was. So I sent them a text message telling them what

had happened, and asking if they could call me when they could as I needed to talk to someone. Then I sent an e-mail to work, telling them that I know that I would be too tired to call in by 10am on Monday to tell them I wouldn't be in, so I was going to let them know by e-mail instead.

'By the time I had sent that there were quite a few people in the house. Despite the time the news had spread amongst my mum's friends, and a few of them had come round. They were all sitting in the living room and talking. They were talking about my dad, and other things as well. I joined them for a bit. I was also a little hungry, and so I found a Pot Noodle - which had originally been bought for my dad - and I had that. After a little while I really did need to sleep, and so I went up to my parent's bed and slept there. After a little while the cat came to join me. I think he pleased to see that I was still there, even if he was still confused as to what was going on.

'I was woken up twice before I was ready to get up again, but it was OK - it was my friends calling me after they had seen my text message, and it was good to talk to them. Over the coming weeks they both came to see me, and that was nice. For one of my friends it was the first time that she had ever been to Harrow. For some obscure reason she used to keep referring to it as a village, but after she had actually seen it she was willing to concede that it wasn't.

'The next two weeks went by in a bit of a blur. We had the funeral a few days later, and I read out a poem that I had written.'

'Oh, that's lovely!'

'Yeah. I had actually written it a little while ago. He got to see it before he went, and he liked it. In fact, he said that it was "superb".'

'Well, you can't ask for higher praise than that.'

'No, you can't.' He paused again, and then he said, 'Do you have any inkling yet what all of this is for, why we're being sent to the places that we're being sent to?' And then a thought came to him, and he was surprised that he hadn't thought to ask sooner. He asked Lisa, 'How did you come to be in that town where we met?'

There was a moment of silence, that went on longer than Ryan felt comfortable with. Then Lisa said, 'I've come from long ago and far away. I've also come from very recently and close to here. It's hard to explain exactly where and when I'm from. As to how I came to be in that town, I tend to have a habit of finding places like that.'

'Are there other people like you out there?'

'Yes and no. There are people that I'm associated with who are far more like me than like you, but they are not quite the same as me. Again, it's not really easy to explain.'

'How old are you?'

'Age is relative when you're able to travel through time.'

'Yes, but you still have your own timeline, your own beginning, middle, and end. Or at least I assume you do. Relatively speaking, how much time has passed by for you in your lifetime.'

Lisa thought for a moment, and then she said, 'I've lost count...'

Ryan was glad that he was able to get some information about who Lisa was, even if it didn't make much sense to him. He was still intrigued as to who she was. Whilst she did look human, he was now convinced that she wasn't, that she was some higher being. Possibly even an angel. And if she was an angel, then that meant that the person that was choosing where to send them could be...

No, that couldn't be right. He couldn't see why they would spend any of their time on him.

They continued walking along in silence. The only sound that Ryan could hear was the sound of their footsteps on the ground, and the traffic going past them. It was this way for a little while. Then the sound of the traffic seemed to be receding, and he could hear another sound. It was the sound of chatter, like that of a crowd of people. Not as big a crowd as there had been for the last total solar eclipse, but a crowd none the less. He looked around him to see if he could see where this crowd was, but he was at a loss to be able to do so.

With each step that they took, the sound of the traffic seemed to decrease and the sound of the crowd increased. Then, the world around them started to change. The image of Kenton by night started to fade, and was starting to be replaced by the image of a pub. A few steps later, Kenton was completely gone, and all there was was the pub. Ryan wasn't afraid, or even hugely disconcerted by this. He was fully aware that they had just moved onto their next world.

He turned to Lisa and asked, 'OK, when and where are we now?'

'I know this place...'

Ryan was a little surprised to hear this. Somehow he found it a little odd that Lisa would be able to recognise a specific pub. 'So, where are we then?'

'Well, we're in London, Waterloo to be precise. This pub is called "The Mad Hatter". And, if we're here then that must mean...' She started to walk off purposefully towards the back of the pub, and Ryan followed her.

In the back there was a large crowd of people. Some of them were typing away on their laptops, but most of them were just talking to each other. Dotted about the place were lots of signs that said 'NANOWRIMO Nano London'.

Ryan said to Lisa, 'I've heard of that! One of the people that I spoke to at the eclipse said that there was a group of them doing it there. This is a bunch of crazy people who all trying to write a

novel in a month.' Ryan thought that he might have said this a bit too loud, but, if anyone did hear him, they didn't appear to mind.

'Yes, I know them well. And if we've been brought here, then we've come to see the craziest one of them all...' She went up to one of the girls from the NaNoWriMo group and said, 'Excuse me, could you tell me where the crazy guy is?'

'Oh, so you've heard of him then? He's over there...' The girl pointed to a table over to the right.

The person that she was point to was a man dressed in black, who had a short beard and glasses. He was typing on a very small black laptop. He seemed to be using an unusual writing programme - it was all green text on a black background.

Ryan saw Lisa take a deep breath. She turned to him and said, 'OK, brace yourself. This is all going to get a bit weird.'

'As opposed to everything that we've already been through?'

'Trust me, that will all see straightforward after this...'

Lisa took another deep breath, and then she went over to the writer. She tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned round.

As he saw her he seemed to recognise her, but, at the same time, was also a little shocked and surprised to see her. But he also seemed delighted to see her. 'Lisa?' he said.

'Yes,' said Lisa, with a smile on her face.

'Is it really you?'

'In the flesh...'

The writer took in the sight of her, as though he still wasn't sure if she was really there. He then stood up, and gave Lisa a hug, which she returned.

'Oh my God, it's so good to see you!' He pulled back, but held onto her arms as he looked into his eyes. 'I can't believe you're really here...'

'Well, I am...'

'It's been far too long.'

'Yes, it has.'

The writer then looked behind Lisa at Ryan. He then asked Lisa, 'Who's your friend.'

'This is Ryan. We've been travelling for a while.'

The writer let go of Lisa, and offered Ryan his hand. 'Good to meet you, Ryan.'

'You too...' Ryan shook the writer's hand. He wasn't quite sure what to make of this man.

The writer then said to Lisa, 'I suggest we find an empty table where we can talk without being disturbed.'

Lisa said, 'Oh, I don't want to stop you if you're in the middle of writing something.'

'No, it's OK. I'm pretty much on target for where I need to be for today.' He closed the lid of his laptop, and he took it with him as they all went along to an empty table on the other side of the room.

They all sat down, and then the writer said, 'So, here we are then. You're here. You're actually here. It's really you...'

'Yes, it's really me...'

There was a bit of a pause, and then Ryan decided to ask, 'I'm sorry, but I'm a little confused here. When Lisa asked for you, she asked for "the crazy guy". Why would you be called that? I shouldn't be worried, should I?'

'Yes, you should be afraid, very afraid! No, actually, you don't. I may be insane, but I'm harmless.'

'So, why are you known as "the crazy guy" then?'

'Well, do you know what NaNoWriMo is all about?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, most people here are trying to write a novel of 50,000 words in a month. But 50,000 words is nothing to me. I laugh in the face of 50,000 words! I eat them for breakfast! No, I've decided to go for a much bigger target...'

'So, how many words are you trying to write...?'

'155,000.'

Lisa then said, '155,000?! Have you completely lost it?'

'Yes, I think I might have.'

'That's more than three times what everyone else is doing!'

'Please, don't remind me...'

Ryan then asked, 'Why so high? And why 155,000? Why not a more even 150,000?'

'Well, last year I aimed to write 150,000 words, but I "only" did 111,634.' The writer did air quotes as he said 'only.' 'This year I wanted to try and go to 150,000 words again. But this will be my fifth year of Nano. I looked at all of the words that I had written in previous years, and I worked out that if I wrote 155,000 words this year then my cumulative total will reach a massive half a million words!'

'That's insane!'

'And now you know why they call me "the crazy guy."'

'Yeah, sure...' Ryan still wasn't sure what to make of this guy. He seemed a bit arrogant and big headed. He certainly seemed to think of himself a lot. He wouldn't have been surprised if he

turned out to be the sort of guy who would write himself into his own novel, and think that it was really clever.

Lisa then asked, 'So, how have you been going? How many words are you up to?'

'I'm slowly coming up on 113,000.'

'Wow... so you've beaten what you wrote last year.'

'Yep, and I'm still on course to hit my 155k target by the 30th.'

'What day are we on now?'

'This is day 19.' Ryan noted that the writer didn't think it in the least bit odd that Lisa didn't seem to know what day it was.

'OK, so you've still got a little while to go yet. You should get there easily though.'

'Yeah, hopefully. But I had a bit of advantage. I took the first two weeks to focus on the novel, and I got a big head start. By the 13th - the day before I had to go back to work - I had exactly 91,500 words. My original plan was to have 92,000 words by that stage, and so I was only 500 off, which I felt was really impressive. It wasn't like last year where I was already quite far behind by the time I had to go back to work. This has definitely been my best Nano yet.'

'How long did it take you to do the 50k?'

'I got there in just 7 days this year, 3 days faster than last year. I was also the first in London as far as I'm aware, although the second person got there just a couple of hours later. It was quite fun when I got there. It was at a write-in, right towards the end of it. One of the ML's said that I could shout out when I got to 50k.'

Ryan then asked, 'Sorry, what's an ML?'

'Municipal Liaison. They help to run NaNoWriMo in each region. We've got some really good ML's in London. So, yeah, anyway, she said that I could shout out when I got to 50k, even if they were in the middle of a writing sprint. I was a little apprehensive to do so at first, but I told a few people, and then she cheered for me, and so I then stood up and told everyone. I got a round of applause, which was then followed by a round of pantomime booing. I was quite far ahead of everyone else - by that point par would have been about eleven and half thousand.'

Lisa then said, 'And you've just kept on going!'

'Yep. By the time all of this is over I'm going to be in two minds. Part of me is going to be relieved it's all over, and that I don't have to write any more words. But another part is going to miss it all. I've had a lot of fun during Nano this year, and I've met a lot of really nice people.'

'And were any of them female and pretty?'

There was a pause, and the writer had a smirk on his face as he said, 'Maybe...'

'It's alright, I know what you're like!'

'Yeah, I know...'

'Is there anyone in particular that you like?'

'Now, that really would be telling...'

There was another pause, and, once again, Ryan decided that he would be the one to break it. he asked the writer, 'So, what is your novel about?'

'Oh, it's a fantasy novel.' He looked at Ryan, and then continued with, 'I can't really say much more than that I'm afraid. It's all a little complicated. You're just going to have to read it when it's finished. I'll be putting it up on my website by 1am on 1st December.'

Lisa said, 'I'll be sure to check it out.'

The writer then said, 'So, what is it that brings you here, at this time?'

'Well, that's a long story in itself. Almost as long as one of your novels. Suffice to say, Ryan and I are on a journey, and I've been helping Ryan out. And we've been brought here.'

'I see. So, Ryan, how are you enjoying your journey so far?'

'It's not that great, actually.'

'Oh, I'm sure there must have been some good parts, some highlights. Some memories, or images, that will stay with you forever...'

Ryan started to smirk, and he could feel himself blushing as he remembered the half naked girl, an image that would certainly stay with him for a long time.

The writer said, 'That's OK, you don't have to tell us if you don't want to. So, where were you before you turned up here?'

'Well, we were in Kenton, two years ago - well, in 2009, I don't know when we are now.'

'You're OK, this is 2011.'

'Oh, right. So, year, it was Kenton two years ago. My dad died in a hospice there, and we sent back to see it again for some reason.'

'I see...!' The writer seemed to be considering this piece of information for quite some time. He then said, 'And how are you feeling now?'

'I'm feeling a fair bit tired.'

'Don't talk to me about feeling tired! In haven't slept since October!'

'Yeah, sorry.'

'No, you're alright. So, apart from feeling tired, how are you feeling? Are you happy, sad, elated, suicidal? How are you doing?'

Ryan thought for a moment, and then he said, 'Well, I'm OK, I guess. I've been a lot worse in the past. But I'm quite keen for all of this to be over. I want some answers to what's been going on. But whenever I seem to get any answers all I seem to end up with are more questions.'

'I think I know what you mean. But you should keep on going. Remember, however long the road is, with each step that you take along it, you will be one step closer to the end.'

'Yeah, but I just wished I knew just how long the road actually is!'

'You shouldn't try to think about that. You just need to focus on where you are at any one time, and deal with that. The road ahead of you isn't an endless one. In fact, chances are there's someone who already knows what is at the end of the road. But just try to enjoy the journey.'

'But sometimes the journey isn't always enjoyable. There was this one part where we came across a murderer...' As soon as Ryan had said this he felt a bit funny talking about it. If he had said that to just about anyone else they would have probably been shocked at first, and then wondering what on Earth he was talking about. But not this guy for some reason. He seemed to be just as tuned in to the weirdness that was his life right now as Lisa was. In fact, he and Lisa seemed to know each other quite well.

The writer then said, 'Ah, the murderer... How'd that work out for you?'

Ryan was a bit taken aback by the fact that the writer seemed to know about the murderer. He then said, 'Well, er, I guess it went OK. He turned himself into the police, but I'd rather not have to do anything like that again.'

'OK, good. And, where else have you been?'

Ryan wasn't sure how to answer that, he still didn't feel quite comfortable or right talking about going off to strange worlds and times. However, it was Lisa who answered with, 'We've been to Triceria on Pyna, in space in 3011, Aberystwyth, and the last solar eclipse.'

'The last solar eclipse? You were lucky to get to go there!'

'Yeah, it was fantastic, wasn't it Ryan?'

'Erm, yeah, it was OK...' Ryan was still a bit perturbed that Lisa was unaware of what had actually happened during the eclipse. He then said, 'So, er, how do you two know each other?'

The writer and Lisa looked at each other, and the writer said, 'Well, that's a little complicated. How far back do we go now, Lisa?'

'Oh, it seems like forever.'

'Yes, it has been a long time. We first met on 6th September 1993, and so that was... over 18 years ago now. Wow, 18 years...'

'It really has been a while. How are you doing these days?'

'Reasonably good. My sanity levels haven't been too bad recently.'

'Apart from the fact that you're trying to write a 155,000 word novel in a month!'

'Yes, apart from that. How about you? Apart from helping out Ryan here, have you been up to anything exciting?'

'Oh, I've been doing this and that. Mainly this, but a fair bit of that as well.'

'I'm loving the red hair, by the way.'

'I thought you would.'

The writer looked at Ryan and said, 'Lisa used to be a natural blonde, you know.'

This surprised Ryan, to him Lisa looked perfectly like a natural red head. He looked at her now, and he could see no possible indication that her natural hair colour was blonde.

Lisa and the writer looked at each other and smirked, and Ryan felt that he was now the butt of some joke. The writer then said, 'Don't worry about it. So, Ryan, are you liking your story so far?'

'I'm sorry?'

'This is your story, your adventure. Are you enjoying it?'

'Not especially.'

'OK, so, if you could improve it at all, how would you go about it?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, if you were writing your own story, what would you want to put in it?'

Ryan thought that this was an odd thing to ask, but he immediately thought back to the half naked 18 year old girl, and thought that he would have liked to have seen more of her (in every sense).

He hadn't said anything out loud, but the writer said, 'Apart from more half naked - or even fully naked - girls aged 18 or otherwise.'

Ryan was now starting to feel a little spooked out. Had this writer, whoever - or whatever - he was, just read his mind?

The writer continued, 'Seriously, where would you like the story to go now?'

Ryan thought some more, and then he said, 'I don't know... I'd just like to get home. I want some more answers, like how I ended up on this trip in the first place.'

'Don't worry, those answers are coming.'

Ryan then remembered something, and then he took out the key that he had acquired in Triceria. He showed it to the writer and asked, 'Do you have any idea what this is for?'

'Let me have a look at it...!' Ryan handed the key over to the writer, who looked it over carefully, before handing it back to Ryan. There was then a pause, and then he said, 'You've got a difficult path ahead of you Ryan. I have to be honest with you, I don't envy you. But you just have to keep it together, and keep on going. I have faith in you Ryan. I'm sure that, when the time comes, you'll make the right choice.'

Ryan turned to Lisa and asked, 'What does he mean? What choice do I have to make?' He turned back to the writer and said, 'You know what this key is for, don't you? Why won't you tell me what it's for?'

'I'm afraid I can't do that, Ryan. But you hold on to it, and it's purpose will become clear to you.' The writer then turned to Lisa and said, 'Well, it was really good to see you again, Lisa. Hope it won't be so long before I get to see you again...'

'Hopefully it won't be. I'll try and come and see you again soon.' She then took hold of the writer's hand and said, 'Hang in there. She is coming...'

'Yes, but when...'

Ryan had no idea what this meant, and he had a feeling that he didn't want to know. His mind was confused enough already without trying to figure out just what was going on here.

The writer then said, 'I guess you'd best be on your way then. Good luck to you Ryan, although I'm sure you don't need it.'

'Thanks...'

'And good luck to you too, Lisa. I'm loving the red hair, by the way. It really suits you. I hope you don't change again the next time I see you...'

'Well, no promises, but we'll see...'

'Right, you two had better be off. You've spent enough time already - a couple of thousand words at least.'

Ryan just said, 'Sorry?'

'Don't worry about it.'

Lisa then said, 'Come on Ryan, it's time for us to go.' She stood up, and Ryan did the same.

The writer stood up as well, and Ryan saw that he couldn't take his eyes off of Lisa. Lisa seemed to notice this, and Ryan felt that there was something unspoken that was passing between them.

Without saying another word, they nodded at each other, and then Lisa turned to leave. Ryan followed her. She then said, 'Don't look back...'

They went outside onto the street, and then kept on walking. Ryan could see what looked like a tear in her eye. 'Are you OK?' he asked.

'I'm fine thanks, let's just go...' She then started to run, and Ryan ran after her. He was struggling to keep up with her. He wondered why it was that she was running, and what it was she was running from. Who had that guy been? And just what was his connection to Lisa? Ryan had a feeling that those were questions that he would never get the answers to...

They kept on running. His legs were really starting to tire now, and the gap between them was widening. He couldn't understand why she wouldn't at least slow down so that he could catch up.

His thoughts were then interrupted as he tripped over. In the split second after he tripped he mentally braced himself to land on the hard concrete surface below. But instead he landed on soft, hot sand.

He stayed down for a few minutes. He realised that they must have transitioned again, that they were now in a new time and a new place. But he didn't want to get up and look around, at least, not just yet. He just wanted a moment to himself to try and gather together all of his thoughts. He was worried what this new world might bring. The writer had said that he was going to have to make a hard decision soon, and the thought of this made Ryan feel a little ill. He hoped that he wouldn't have to make that decision in this world at least. He wanted this to be a nice world, where only nice things were going to happen. A place where he could relax.

He started to imagine what it might be like. There was sand here. Maybe he was on a beach somewhere. Yes, he thought, this was a beach. And on this beach he was going to find a lot of girls all in their late teens, and all wearing really skimpy bikinis. Yes, this was going to be a colony for bikini clad girls. No, it was more than that. A major disaster had befallen the world, and the only living things to have survived it were pretty 18 year old girls, and the only clothing that they had available to them were these really skimpy bikinis. And they would all be so please to see him here, a man. They would need a man here to help them with things. Such as getting these bikinis off again. And, of course, to repopulate the species. Yes, it was going to be a hard, but noble, but mainly hard, very hard, task, but he would be more than up to the challenge. Yes, this was going to be a good world, one that he was going to like.

He closed his eyes as he sat up. He imagined what the scene about him was going to be like. Lots of pretty, sexy, bikini clad girls, all walking up to him slowly, and silently, because it had been so long since they had last seen a man that they had forgotten what one looks like. He braced himself to witness this scene, which he knew was there (or, rather, was hoping to will into being there). He opened his eyes.

There were no bikinis. No 18 year olds. No pretty, sexy girls. No girls of any description. No people of any description. There were no animals, and no plant life. There were no buildings. There wasn't even an ocean. But what there was here was sand. Lots of sand. Lots and lots and lots of sand. Sand everywhere. As far as the eye could see, there was sand. If sand was your thing, if you loved sand, if you lay awake at night dreaming of sand, then this was the place for you.

Ryan hated sand.

He looked around him, and then he saw Lisa, who was laying in the sand. So, at least she was here with him. He got up and walked over to her.

She looked like she had been crying. He knelt down and asked, 'Are you OK?'

'Yes, I'm fine. Or at least I will be. You couldn't give me a hand up, could you?'

'Yeah, sure.' He reached out his hand, which she took, and he helped her up to her feet. Once she was up he said, 'So, here we are, a new world. Do you know where this is?'

Lisa looked at him, and said, 'Ryan, all that's here is sand. To every horizon there is just sand. There are no landmarks here. And it's the middle of the day, and so there are no stars to be seen, apart from that one big one over there that this planet is going around. Ryan, do you have any idea how many places there are in the multiverse that fit that description? What were you expecting me to use to try and work out which one of them this is?'

Ryan was really taken aback by this, he had never seen Lisa act like this before. He stood back from her and said, 'I'm sorry, I just thought you might know... There was no need to bite my head off you know.'

There was a pause, and then Lisa held her head in her hands and said, 'Oh, I know, I know, I know, I know, I know. I'm sorry Ryan, I didn't mean to do that. It's just, seeing him again. That man, that wonderful, glorious, but troubled man. It's put me a little on edge. I'm sorry. Let's start again.' She took another look around her. 'There's still only sand, though.'

Ryan was silent for a moment, unsure if it was safe for him to speak. But, after convincing himself that the danger had passed, he said, 'Why would we have been sent to a place like this? There isn't anything that we could possibly do here.'

'We could build a sandcastle.' Lisa smiled at him.

Again, Ryan was surprised, but he couldn't help laughing. 'Yeah, I suppose we could, if we had a bucket and spade!'

'You don't need a bucket and spade to build a sandcastle. You could just use your hands!'

'Yeah, but it'd be a pretty rubbish castle!'

'Yeah, it would be, wouldn't it?' She smiled at him, came over towards him, and said, 'Come on, let's start walking. Maybe we'll see something somewhere out here.' They were about to set off, when she stopped them. She knelt down, took off her shoes and socks (which she then held in her right hand), took Ryan's right arm, and then they started walking.

She asked him, 'Are you sure you don't want to take your shoes off? There's nothing like walking bare feet in the sand.'

'Yeah, but I'd rather keep them on out here. We don't know what's lurking out there.'

'I'm sure it's quite safe.'

'Yeah, well, we'll see.'

They continued walking on. The sun overhead was very hot. Ryan hoped that they wouldn't end up walking for too long before they found some source of water. However, he didn't hold out much hope of that. This place looked like it hadn't seen a drop of water in a very long time. Still, he was aware that sometimes deserts did get hit with a great storm every once in a while. Just over the horizon he started to try and convince himself that there was a great storm cloud headed towards them, and it would come at just the right time to cool them off and give them something to drink, and then disappear again just before it became too much for them, and then they could dry off in the sun. But then he realised that there was about as much chance of that happening as there was of a crowd of bikini clad pretty sexy 18 year old girls coming running towards him from over the next dune.

But he did wonder just what they would find. He was sure that they would find something on this world. Otherwise, why would whoever it was that was sending them to all of these places have brought them here? They must have been here for some purpose, and for that to be case there had to be something else on this world other than sand.

They continued walking on for some time, not talking about anything in particular. Then Lisa stopped them and said, 'Did you feel that?'

Ryan thought for a moment, and then said, 'No, I didn't feel anything.'

'It's coming from the ground...' Lisa broke away from Ryan, and started smoothing out the ground with her feet, before standing perfectly still. She then said, 'There it is again!'

Ryan got down on his knees, and placed his hands on the ground next to Lisa's feet. There was definitely a faint vibrating sound coming from somewhere under the ground. Then it stopped for a moment, before starting up again, only this time feeling stronger. He looked up at Lisa and said, 'You're right, there is something there.' He turned back to the ground, but now the vibrations were getting so strong that he didn't need to place his hand on the ground to feel them. His whole body could feel them. 'There's something coming this way!'

'Quick!' said Lisa, 'Get out of the way! I think I just worked out where we are!' She pulled Ryan up to his feet, and then they started to run away from the spot that they had just been standing in.

A few seconds later they heard an almighty noise behind them. They stopped running, turned around, and looked. They saw a vast vehicle before them, that had clearly tunnelled its way up to the surface, emerging where they had been standing. It was about 30 feet long, including the

massive drill that it has at the front. It also had a set of caterpillar tracks along each side, and a glass domed top at the front, just behind the drill.

It drove up towards them, and then turned so that it was sideways on to them, before it came to a halt. Ryan turned to Lisa and said, 'I hope they're friendly...' Lisa didn't say anything in reply - Ryan didn't think that was a good sign.

A large door then opened at the side of the vehicle, reaching out and down to the ground, revealing a set of steps. Then a group of men marched out of the vehicle. They were clad from head to foot in armour, and they were all wielding large guns. Ryan knew that this definitely wasn't good.

One of the men said, 'Hands in the air!' His voice had a muffled, electronic sound to it. Ryan and Lisa didn't react at first, and so the man said, 'I said, hands in the air!' He pointed his gun towards them, and then they complied with his instruction, with Lisa dropping her shoes on the ground.

The man then said, 'What are you doing on the surface?'

Without thinking Ryan said, 'We've only just arrived here!'

'Don't get smart with me! We've been patrolling this area all week. If you had just surfaced we would have detected you. Now I'm going to ask you again, what are you doing on the surface?'

Ryan stayed silent. He hoped that Lisa had now been able to figure out where they were, and would know of an answer that she could give these men that would satisfy them. But, to his dismay, she also stayed silent. Ryan thought to himself that this did not look good. This did not look good at all.

Ryan thought that they were about to get themselves shot. Usually, when men point guns at you, demand answers from you, and you don't provide those answers, someone may decide to use one of those guns on you. Then he thought that maybe they won't shoot him, maybe they'll just hit him with the butt of one of their guns. Which meant that he might soon find himself in considerable pain.. Then he thought that they might go on to torture him to try and get the answers that they wanted from him, answers that he wouldn't be able to provide. If he told them the truth it would be highly unlikely that they would believe him. Ryan couldn't see this ending well at all.

The man eventually said, 'Take them inside!' The other men came and rounded up Ryan and Lisa, and ushered them into the vehicle.

The inside of the vehicle was very dark, and very cramped. They were ushered through the vehicle, and Ryan was surprised by how many corridors it had inside of it. It hadn't seemed as

big as this from the outside. He assumed that they must have made excellent use of all of the available space when they designed this vehicle.

They were eventually taken to a room and literally thrown inside it. The room was tiny, only about four feet across, and one and half feet across, and his head came very close to the ceiling. Both Ryan and Lisa were thrown into this cupboard like room, and the door was closed behind them. It was then completely dark in the room.

'Well,' said Ryan, 'This is cosy.'

'Try not to get too comfortable, and you might want to brace yourself.'

'Why?'

'We'll be going down...'

At first Ryan thought that Lisa meant that they would be going down as when a criminal goes down after they had been caught, but then he realised what this vehicle that they were in was, and he grasped her full meaning.

Lisa then said, 'Come here...'

She grabbed him, and they went towards one side of the room. She crouched down onto the floor, and dragged him down with her, before holding onto him. He held onto her as well.

Then they felt the vehicle start to move. At first it seemed to be going quite slowly, but it soon started to pick up speed. It then lurched at a 45 degree angle, and Ryan found that they were now at the bottom of the room - the side facing the front of the vehicle. He quickly realised that Lisa must have figured out where they were on the vehicle, and knew what the best position for them to be in as the vehicle started its descent.

As the vehicle went down Ryan could feel it twisting and turning in the ground. He had no idea how far down they were, but, judging by the speed that the vehicle seemed to be going, he presumed that they were now quite far down.

Ryan asked Lisa, 'OK, so, do you know where we are now?'

'Yes, and it's not good news. This planet is called Monton, and it is a very long way from Earth - something around the two million light year mark. We must be quite far into their history if they're now living below the surface. The world above used to be lush and green, and the Montonians were able to evolve and flourish in this environment. But then they had a series of natural disasters, which included their planet being pulled in closer to its host star, due to the gravitational pull of a rogue planet.'

'What on Earth is a rogue planet?'

'Well, you're aware that, one day, your sun will run out of fuel, and start to expand, yes?'

'Yes...'

'Well, when it expands, it will swallow up Mercury and Venus, and the Earth will become scorched, but narrowly avoid being swallowed up. But that's as far as the sun will go. All of the other planets will survive. Eventually, the Sun will completely burn itself out, and it will no longer have a gravitational effect on the remaining planets. They'll then wander off into space, and become rogue planets

'One such huge planet, slightly larger than Jupiter, came through this system, upsetting the orbit of Monton, bringing it closer to its sun, and thus warming up its surface. What was once lush and green turned into the barren desert that we saw up there.

'But the Monton's were nothing but resourceful. They had spotted the rogue planet long before it came into their system, and they were able to project what was going to happen, and therefore prepare for it. They knew that there was nothing that they could do to prevent the orbit of Monton from being affected - they had no means to generate enough energy to do that. But they knew that the planet itself would survive. It would be too hot for them to live up on the surface - where we were was actually one of the cooler places of the planet, and during its winter as well.'

'That was winter?! I'd hate to visit their equivalent of the Caribbean during its summer.'

'Indeed, you'd barely last ten minutes in that environment. So, what the Monton's did was construct vast underground cities. There's about two billion people living below the surface of this world. They pumped down water from the oceans of the world long before their sun started to boil them away. They use geothermal vents for their energy needs, and their even able to grow food down there - although I just hope you like mushrooms.'

Ryan didn't like mushrooms, almost as much as he didn't like sand.

Lisa continued, 'I estimate that, by around this time, they must have been living under the ground for around two thousand years or so.'

'Two thousand years?! They've been able to survive under the ground for over two thousand years?'

'Yes, and they will do for much longer yet. They've even started to evolve further to adapt to the conditions. There are now a lot of people here with eyes that are better suited to the relatively poor light conditions down here. In fact, if they were to ever to go to the surface there would have to wear extremely stung protection to protect their eyes, like those soldiers had in their helmets.'

'But, I'm guessing that not many people come up to the surface these days, judging by the welcome that we received.'

'Indeed. A large part of Montonian society is highly suspicious of people who dare to go up to the surface, when they have everything that they need for a comfortable life down here.'

'So there are people who do go to the surface?'

'Yes, a few -'

The vehicle suddenly lurched to one side, and Ryan and Lisa were thrown against a wall. But they could feel that the vehicle was starting to slow down, and so Ryan thought that they must now be getting close to their final destination.

He asked Lisa, 'Please tell me that there's a way that we can get these guys to be friendly towards us, that will get them to let us go.'

'I'm sorry, but I don't think there is - we were found on the surface, and so we are highly suspect in their eyes.'

'So, what do we say to them when they start to question us?'

'I'm still working on that one...'

There was another lurch as Ryan felt the vehicle come to a halt. He pulled away from Lisa, and stood up. He braced himself for whatever it was that was going to come next.

Before long, the door was flung open, and there were three of the men outside, although they were now without their helmets. They looked very much like humans, although their eyes seemed to be larger than normal.

One of the men said, 'Get out. Now!' Ryan and Lisa complied. Once they had left the room they were ushered through the vehicle again until they left it.

They found themselves in what looked like a vast underground car park, only there weren't cars here, only rows and rows of these vehicles. They were ushered into a smaller, more car like vehicle, and then they were driven off through the complex.

They left the car park, and started to go down a ramp that then went into a spiral, as they descended even deeper into the ground. They went round and round the spiral so many times and so quickly, that Ryan was starting to feel sick.

Eventually, they left the spiral, and the road levelled out. To his surprise, Ryan now found that they were in a bustling street of some kind. He couldn't see how far up the cavern that they were in went up, but it seemed to be quite a way. There were many people walking by in all directions around the vehicle, and buildings that wouldn't have looked out of place on any street of any modern city back on 21st century Earth.

They sped through this street, and then turned off into another street. Ryan now realised that this was an entire underground city. He wanted to ask Lisa how big she thought the city might

be, but he thought that it was probably best that he didn't say anything whilst they were still in the presence of these men.

After about ten minutes of this the car came to a halt. The men got out of the car, and then opened the door that was next to Ryan. They ordered him and Lisa out of the car.

They found that they were now in front of a relatively small, non-descript building, with no indication from the outside of what the building might be used for. He also caught his first glimpse of the vast lights that seemed to be miles above the city that lit up the underground city.

However, he didn't get long to take in their surroundings, as they were soon ushered into the building. One again, they found that they were being ushered along various corridors, with no idea as to where it was that they were going. But, before long, they were brought to a halt.

Before them was a large desk. The men that had brought them here stood to the left and right of Ryan and Lisa, and they held onto their shoulders so that they could barely move. Behind the desk was what Ryan considered to be a real brute of a man. He had short black hair, and a large black moustache. He sat back in his chair, his right hand on the desk, and his left hand stroking his chin.

He looked at Ryan and Lisa for a while, not saying a word. Ryan just wished that he would say something. The ever increasing silence was now starting to make him feel extremely uncomfortable. At least if this man said something to them they would be making some progress to whatever resolution was going to await them at the end of all of this.

Eventually, the man sat up, looked to the men, and asked, 'So, where did you find these two?'
'Up on the surface, sir!'

'The surface, eh? Well, their eyes look like they'd be well suited to the surface. But, as for this one - ' He was indicating Lisa. 'Look how pale her skin is. She wouldn't last long on the surface without getting a very severe sunburn.' He then turned to Lisa and asked, 'How long had you been on the surface for?'

'Not very long at all, we were only there for about an hour or so.'

One of the men that had brought them here said, 'That's not true, sir. We didn't detect anyone else surfacing in that area recently.'

'I see...' said the man behind the desk. He sat back in his chair and continued to stroke his chin. He then said, 'You see, this now presents me with a puzzle. You say that you didn't detect anyone surfacing in that area recently, and I trust you. You wouldn't make an error about something like that. But this girl's skin is still pasty white, which corroborates her story about only having been on the surface for a short period of time. Now, the puzzle is, how do we reconcile these two irreconcilable facts...' He sat back as he appeared to ponder this puzzle.

Ryan could feel the tension that was in the air. He could sense that the men who had brought them here were starting to feel anxious. He felt that they thought that they had just done a routine pickup of people who had ventured to the surface, bringing them to their boss, expecting to be rewarded. Only now it was turning out to not be so straightforward after all.

The man behind the desk then said, 'OK, now, there is obviously some sort of story here, whatever the explanation for your appearance on the surface is. So, I want you to tell me that story. And I want the truth. I don't care how fantastical it is, I just want you to tell me the truth. Now, which one of you would like to start?'

Ryan looked at Lisa, and she nodded at him. He turned back to the man behind the desk, and then he said, 'Lisa and I have been on a journey, a journey that has only recently brought us to this place.'

One of the men interrupted and said, 'Another lie sir, there are no traces of any vehicles in that area of the surface.'

The man behind the desk responded, 'Let the man finish. I want to hear what his story is, and then I will decide what I'm going to do with them.'

That last phrase made Ryan feel uneasy. He knew that his story was going to have to be a good one. He continued, 'You said you didn't care how fantastical our story was, and so here goes. We're not from your world, we're not from Monton. I am from a planet called Earth, which Lisa here tells me is about two million light years from your world. Some higher being has been transporting us from place to place, and, for some reason, they have now brought us here, to your world, in this time. And, so, yes, that's what explains what we were doing on the surface, why Lisa's skin hadn't yet been burnt by the sun, and why you found no trace of any vehicles...'

Ryan stopped talking, and another prolonged silence filled the room. Ryan wondered what was going through the mind of the man behind the desk, and he continued to look at them and stroke his chin.

Eventually he said, 'So, you're aliens then, from outer space?'

'Er, well, yes, I guess we are...'

There was another brief pause, and then the man continued, 'So, tell me this then. How come you can speak our language so fluently, if you've only just arrived on our world?'

It was Lisa who answered this question, saying, 'But that's just it, we're not speaking your language. Whatever or whoever it is who's brought us to your world has given us the ability to understand your language, and, at the same time, is enabling you to understand us when we speak to you in our language.'

'I see...!' He went back to stroking his chin.

After another pause one of the men said, 'What are you going to do with them, sir? They're clearly talking nonsense.'

The man behind the desk gave this man a dirty look, as if to say that he had spoken out of turn. He then said, 'But is it nonsense? Yes, their story is certainly a strange one, but do you have a better explanation as to why they were on the surface where you found them, given the facts that we have?' He looked at the man, as if to invite him to answer his question, but no answer was forthcoming.

The man behind the desk looked at Ryan and said, 'Your story is certainly a fantastical one, although it does fit the facts as we know them. But I'm afraid that I'm going to have to think about this some more. And so tonight you will be my guests.' He looked up at one of the men, and said, 'Take them downstairs.'

'Yes boss,' said the man, then he said to Ryan and Lisa, 'Come on you two, move!' he shoved Lisa in the shoulder, and she gave him a look that could kill, to the point that he even backed off a little. But then she started walking with Ryan in the direction that they wanted them to go.

They were led out of the room, and down a couple of flights of stairs. At the bottom there was door to a room, which they were led into. The room had a single bed in it, and nothing else. Ryan looked at one of the men and said, 'Hey, there's only one bed in here!'

The man just shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Not my problem!' The men then left the room, locking the door behind them.

Ryan looked at Lisa and said, 'Well this another fine mess you've gotten us into!'

'Sorry Olly!'

Ryan smiled. He then asked, 'So, what are we going to do about the sleeping arrangements?'

'You can take the bed, I'll be OK.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah...'

It was at this point that Ryan noticed that Lisa was still in bare feet. He realised that she had dropped her shoes when they were first met by the men, and she hadn't had a chance to pick them back up again. He said, 'Look at your feet! You can't be going around in bare feet in a place like this!'

'Oh, that, don't worry, I'll be fine.'

'Well, at least sit down on the bed for a bit.'

'No, seriously, I'm OK.'

'No, I'm sorry, I have to insist. Come and sit down...'

Ryan led Lisa to the bed, who seemed slightly reluctant to follow, but came along after all. They sat down, and Lisa lifted her legs onto the bed and sat with her legs crossed.

Ryan then asked, 'So, what do we do now?'

'There's not a lot that we can do but wait and hope that that man believes our story.'

'And what if he doesn't?'

'Well... then I guess we'll just have to jump off that bridge if we come to it.'

'I like your optimism!' There was a pause, and Ryan lay back on the bed. Then he said, 'So, who could we possibly be here to help? Maybe it's that man behind the desk. Over the years he's become a hardened criminal, taking anyone who dares to go up to the surface. Then, one day, a lovely redhead who isn't burnt by the sun comes into his office, and his heart softens and he changes his ways.'

'Oh, ha ha...' Lisa's sarcasm could be clearly heard in her voice.

'And maybe there's a girl that he knew from his childhood, his sweetheart. But she didn't like his life of crime, and so they could never be together. But we help him to turn away from a life of crime, and he goes back to his sweetheart, and they head off into the sunset to get married - or, at least they would if there was a sun down here.' Ryan smirked as an image formed in his mind. The man had been quite a large man, and he imagined the man's sweetheart being a thin, short girl. The perfect couple.

'Yeah, maybe,' said Lisa. 'Or maybe it's someone else entirely. You should know by now that there's no way for us to be able to figure out who until they come to us.'

'Yes... although, when we were in Aberystwyth, we did have to stalk Ben for a bit. Maybe that was just a fluke, I still think we should have followed that girl...'

'I think you need to stop going on about that half-naked 18 year old girl. In fact, I think you're becoming just a little bit obsessed with her.'

'I am not!'

'Oh, I think you are. I think you need to forget about her and move on. Face it Ryan, she's gone...'

'But I don't want to forget about her...'

'I think you have to...'

'But I don't wanna! She's so pretty...'

'Oh, boys! What will we ever do with you!'

'I could think of a few things that she could do with me...'

Lisa playfully slapped him, 'Oi! That's quite enough of that! Keep your fantasies to yourself if you don't mind!'

'Oh, OK...'

'Well, there's not much else for it, and so I suggest we get some rest whilst we can. It might be a while before that man calls for us again.'

Ryan had to admit to himself that he could do with some sleep. He then said, 'But what do we do about the one bed?'

Lisa thought for a bit, and then she said, 'I suppose we could top and tail?'

'What's that?'

'You take one side of the bed, I take the other, with our feet by each other's head.'

'OK, I bagsy the side next to the wall!'

'That's fine.'

They rearranged themselves on the bed. As they did so Ryan said, 'I hope your feet don't smell of cheese!'

'Oi! Don't be cheeky!'

Once they were in position, Ryan had to admit that there wasn't even the slightest hint of cheese in the air.

They settled down, and things then went quite. Ryan then said, 'Good night Lisa!'

'Good night Ryan.'

There was a pause, and then Ryan said, 'Lisa...?'

'Yes...'

'I'm glad I met you...'

There was another pause, and then Lisa said, 'I'm glad I met you too.'

Ryan then closed his eyes, and slowly started to drift off to sleep. He hoped that he would have a good dream whilst he slept, which may or may not have included a certain half-naked girl.

He did dream that night, but it wasn't the dream that he had wanted to have. Instead, he was back in the fiery landscape once more. This time there was a strong wind blowing, only it seemed to be blowing at him from every direction.

He then heard Shadow Zero's voice reverberating through the air. He said, 'Soon, Ryan! It will be soon!'

'What do you mean?' Ryan shouted. 'What will be soon?'

'Your decision, Ryan. It's not far off now. Soon you will have to make a decision that will change everything forever. And I will be there with you, Ryan! There will be no escaping me!'

'What decision will I have to make?'

'It will be the most difficult decision that you will have ever made in your life! And you will have to deal with me before your journey is over!'

'Deal with you? Why, what will you do? What is it that you're planning?'

Shadow Zero laughed, maniacally. 'Oh, Ryan! Ryan, Ryan, Ryan! You have no idea what it is that I have in store for you! No idea at all! But I look forward to it! I look forward to meeting with you again! Oh, I am not going to regret this! Oh Ryan, you fool! The one who was responsible for all of this! The one whose fault all of this is! The one who is responsible for everything! Oh, it is going to be so good to see you get what's coming for you!' He then laughed again, before saying, 'And it will be soon, Ryan! Very, very soon!' There then followed more laughter.

Before Ryan could say anything in response, he awoke with a start. He could feel that his heart rate had quickened, and he was in a cold sweat.

He was in the bed on his own. He looked around the room, and he saw Lisa sitting crossed legged on the floor. She looked at him and asked, 'Are you OK?'

'Yes, I think so...'

'Was it another bad dream?' Ryan nodded. 'Try not to worry about it. There's nothing that you can do about it here.'

'Yeah, I know...' Ryan badly wanted to know what Shadow Zero had meant. What decision was he going to have to make? Why was everything his fault? And what did he have planned for when they were to next meet?

He then looked at Lisa and asked, 'Why did you get out of bed?'

'I couldn't sleep...'

Ryan then thought that he had never actually seen her sleep, and now started to wonder if she ever did. But he tried not to push her on this point.

He then asked, 'Do you know how long I was asleep for?'

'A few hours, I think. It's a bit hard to tell how much time has passed down here.'

'Have you heard anything on the other side of the door?'

'No. Either he's still deciding, or they've forgotten about us for the time being.'

Ryan then asked, 'Lisa, do you think that we might be getting near the end of this journey, that we haven't got that much further to go?'

'What makes you say that?'

What made him say that was Shadow Zero saying that he was going to have to make a decision very soon that was going to change everything, but he didn't want to tell Lisa about him

for some reason. He felt a great sense of shame well up within him whenever he thought about possibly telling her. He didn't know why he felt shame. As far as he was aware he didn't have anything to feel ashamed about. But, none the less, shame is what he felt.

Instead, he just said, 'Oh, no real reason. It just that after meeting that writer chap I thought that we had turned a corner, that things were going to change, that we might soon be on the home straight.'

'Well, we might be. But it's probably best not to think about it. Just take one step at a time. Just focus on what it is that we're doing now, and then we'll get to the end in good time.'

'Yeah... But what is it that we're doing now? We're just sitting around doing nothing.'

'That man is bound to call for us eventually.'

'You just said that there was a chance that he had forgotten about us!'

'He won't forget about us forever. He'll call back for us at some point, you can be sure about that.'

'Yes, but when...!' For Ryan, waiting around in this room was starting to make him feel the same way as he felt when he was waiting around for a bus that just would not come. He didn't want to be standing around still, going nowhere. He wanted to be on the move, to be going somewhere, to be actually getting closer to the end of this journey. He wanted to get off of this world as fast as he could so that he could find out just what Shadow Zero had in store for him, and just what was this decision was that he had to make.

He got up, and walked across the room towards the door. He placed his ear against it to see if he could hear anything that might be going on on the other side, but he wasn't able to hear a thing. He then walked back over to Lisa, and sat down next to her. 'So,' he said, 'I guess we wait...!'

They waited for a good few hours before the door was finally open. It was opened by the same men that had brought them here in the first place. One of them said, 'The boss wants another word with you. On your feet!' This time Ryan was only too happy to comply. They were finally going to be able to get on with things.

They were marched through the building again, until they were in the room with the desk again, and the man was once again sitting behind it. This time, there was no long pause before he started talking, as he said, 'Ryan, Lisa, I have to admit that your story was a very strange one indeed. However, I am now prepared to accept it as the truth. You see, I have my own unusual way to obtain information from prisoners. Some other people of my rank might resort to brute force, and even torture, to try and obtain information. However, if you make a man feel enough

pain he'll confess to anything. You could even make him confess to scorching the surface of our desert world. No, I do not do these things. My methods can take a lot longer to obtain the information, but the information that they do obtain is always far more reliable. You see, I have been observing you whilst you were in that room. I was able to see and hear everything that you did and said. My methods involve locking prisoners up together, and listening to what they say to each other when they think that no one's looking. At first, some of them don't feel able to speak freely. But, eventually they let their guard down, and speak the truth. And, in these circumstances, I can always tell when they start speaking the truth. And I could tell that you two were speaking truthfully straight away. You really are beings from another world. Oh, and Ryan, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I am not a hardened criminal whose childhood sweetheart still pines for him. I am a respectful member of His Majesties Fifth Army, and I am happily married with five children.'

Ryan didn't say anything in response to this, he just looked at the floor guiltily. But he still thought the image of this guy being with a short slim girl was funny. However, he was careful not to start smirking here, as it would almost certainly be taken then wrong way.

The man continued, 'Oh, and Ryan, 18 year old girls? Really? Don't you think that's a bit sick?'

Ryan was a little taken aback by this. Yes, he was 30, but he didn't think that 18 was that young. It was hardly paedophilic.

Lisa then said, 'I should probably explain. Ryan, Monton goes round its sun a lot slower than the Earth does. One Montonian year is about the same as five Earth years. So, basically, he thinks you have a think for 90 year olds.'

'Oh, right..'

'When, in fact, you have a thing for girls who are a little under 4 on this world.'

The man said, 'Oh, right, I understand now. And just how old are you, Ryan?'

'I'm 30 - well, 30 earth years. That makes me about 6 on your world.'

'A 6 year old who's interested in a girl who hasn't even reach 4 yet? Well, I suppose that is better, but I can hardly say that I approve...'

Ryan looked to the floor again, and he could feel that he was blushing.

The man then said, 'Now, I feel bad about all of this. I know what your names are, and even a little bit about you. But I haven't yet introduced myself. My name is Cronton, and I am the commander in this area. Whilst you are on Monton you will be my guests - my proper guests, not my prisoners. But, that said, we can't have you wandering about the place too freely. People will start to ask questions, and it will not be so easy to convince them as it was to convince me. But

we will escort you, and show you around our city here. Do you yet know what it is that you have to do here?'

Lisa then answered, 'We would have been sent here to help someone with an issue that they have. We have no idea who this person might be, or what their issue might be. However, we do know that we won't have to seek them out. They usually find their way to us. Once we meet them, we do what we have to do, and then we'll be on our way.'

'And how is it that you travel?'

'Oh, that's a little complicated to explain. Just know that you won't have to worry about transporting us back to the surface in order for us to leave your world.'

'Now, that is very intriguing. You must tell me all about your world and the things that you're able to do. I'm not sure what things are like on your world, but you are the first and only proof that we have that life exists outside of our world. Many people have speculated over the years that there might be intelligent life out there in space, but many more were convinced that we are all that are here.'

Ryan then asked, 'Have your people ever actually tried to contact other worlds? Have you been sending out radio signals, or listening out for transmissions?'

Cronton looked confused, and then said, 'I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean...?'

Lisa then explained, 'Ryan, radio was never invented here. In fact, the Montonians only produce very little electricity, nowhere near enough for radio transmissions. This world's technology hasn't developed in the same way as your world.'

'Oh, OK. But, if they don't have much electricity, what was creating those lights above the city?'

'Magma. Magma is the main source of energy on this world. It obviously provides their heat, but they have found ways to contain some of it, and use it to generate light, as well as provide a means to power their vehicles. The Montonians are a very resourceful people, quite unique in some ways as far as the multiverse is concerned. The human race could learn a lot from this world, if they were to ever come here.'

'And is that ever likely?'

'I'm afraid not, the worlds are just too far apart, there is no way for them to make the journey, even if they knew to come out here. But, one day, they will all come together...'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh... don't mind me. I was just wandering off into my own little world there...'

There was a brief pause, and then Cronton said, 'Right, well, I think that we have spent quite long enough talking in this rather decrepit place. I never did like these anonymous army

buildings. I said that you would be my guests, and it's about time that I started to treat you like guests. You will come with me to my house, and anything that I can do to assist you, within reason, I shall do. Now, let us go. Follow me...'

Cronton got up from behind his desk, and started to lead them out of the room. They walked through the building again, only this time at a more gentle pace than when they had been brought inside from the car that has brought them here. He took them to a different exit to the building, which Ryan guessed was at the other side of the building from where they had entered it.

Outside of the building they saw another car, only this one was larger than the one that had brought them here. Cronton opened one of the doors, and invited them to get inside.

Before Ryan did so, he looked up at what was above them. He could see the great lights above the city again, and he could barely believe his eyes when he saw that they were indeed powered by magma. He could see the molten rocks moving in the light, creating a very strange effect in the process.

He then got into the car. It was very spacious and comfortable inside, but the windows were blacked out, and so it wouldn't be possible to see the city as they drove through it. Cronton sat in the back of the car with Ryan and Lisa. Ryan wasn't able to tell who would be driving the car.

They set off with a jolt, and Ryan could tell that they were going at quite some speed. He wondered if he would ever get a chance to actually see the city properly, and to travel through it at a more sedate pace, during his time here.

Cronton then said, 'Please, if you will, tell me something about your world. What was it called again?'

Ryan answered, 'The Earth.'

'Yes, that was it. Tell me of the Earth. What is it like?'

'Well, it's very different from this world. We do have deserts on our world, but only in certain areas. Much of the world is green, and temperatures vary throughout the world, from very cold at the polar ice caps, and very hot at the equator.'

'Whilst we just have hot and very hot!'

'Yes... We have vast oceans on our world, but still plenty of land. We call ourselves humans, and there's seven billion of us - at least, there were in my time. I'm not sure where in time we are now...'

'Seven billion people... Now that really is a lot...'

They continued talking about the Earth as they travelled through the city. Ryan was wondering just why Cronton was so interested in the Earth, but then he realised that if an alien suddenly turned up on the Earth anyone that they met would want to know all about their world.

After about half an hour the car came to a halt, and the door was opened. They all got out of the car, and Ryan got another chance to look around. They were away from the bustling streets of the city that he had briefly seen when they had first arrived in this place. There was no other traffic or people around where they were now. They were parked out outside a large mansion, but it had a slightly surreal look to it. All around and above it was the brown sky, lit by the many suns of magma. There was no vegetation growing around here. Why Ryan ever pictured in his mind a mansion that was away from the city he always pictured it with vast gardens around it. There was a lot of empty ground around this mansion, but they could hardly be described as gardens. The ground was all brown and barren, as though this was some sort of post-apocalyptic landscape, which, in a way, Ryan supposed this was.

He looked behind them, and he saw that the mansion was at the top of a hill that overlooked the city. The city itself stretched as far as the eye could see. It was lit by many of the magma suns, and he could see a lot of traffic moving through its many streets. It all seemed like a very odd sight indeed.

Ryan turned to Cronton and asked, 'How many people live in that city?'

'Two billion.'

'Two billion?! But, isn't that the whole population of your world?'

'Yes, it is. When the cataclysm befell the surface there were only sufficient resources to construct one habitat beneath the surface. All of the population from above the surface were able to relocate to this vast city. Not a single person lost their life as a direct result of the cataclysm, and that is something that we will always be proud of.'

'Where there any struggles when everyone came down here? I mean, were there clashes between different groups of people?'

'Not really. All of the various people of our world knew that we had to work together if we were to save our civilisation. Everyone helped each other out. We all stuck together, and we got through it, together.'

'Ah, I see. Blitz spirit.'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, don't worry about it. It's an Earth thing, or, more specifically, a British thing, when all the people of Britain banded together when they were being bombed by the Germans during the Second World War.'

'Your planet had wars that encompassed the whole world? What a terrible thing that must have been.'

'Yes, they were. They were a long time in our history now, but we will never forget them, or the sacrifices that people made so that we could be free.'

'As we won't forget the sacrifices that our ancestors went through so that our civilisation could continue to survive.' They looked out over the city together for a moment, and then Cronton said, 'Let us go inside.'

He led them into the mansion. It was all quite different to the building where they had been before. There was a vast reception area, with two staircases leading up, with an expensive looking carpet covering all of the floor.

Cronton said, 'I have some business to attend to, and so I will take you to my daughter and leave you in her care.' He then looked at Lisa and said, 'I believe that her feet are around the same size as your own, and so she should be able to find a replacement pair of shoes for you.'

Lisa said, 'Thank you.'

He nodded at her, and then he led them up the stairs. They then went through a lot more corridors, something that Ryan was now getting used to on this world. The people of this world seemed to like going down corridors a lot.

Eventually Cronton led them into a room, where they saw a girl sitting on a sofa, reading a book. She had fair skin, long brunette hair, and was wearing a long black dress. She appeared to be in her early twenties. She looked up when they all came into the room, and she had a puzzled expression on her face when she saw Ryan and Lisa in the room.

Cronton then said, 'Sophron, we have some guests with us today. Ryan, Lisa, this is my daughter, Sophron.'

Lisa said, 'Pleased to meet you.'

Sophron just looked at them, and then she looked at her father and asked, 'Who are these people, father? And why have you brought them here?' The way she spoke, and the sound of her voice, reminded him of Lady Mary from 'Downton Abbey', which he personally considered to be no bad thing.

'Ah... Well, that's a little tricky to explain. Strange as this may sound, and I know that this is going to make me sound a little crazy, but Ryan and Lisa are not from Monton. They come from beyond the stars, far above the surface. Ryan here comes from a world that is known as the Earth.'

'Really? Space aliens arrive on our world, and you decide to invite them home for tea?'

'Yes, well, I know how unusual this all is. But they're speaking the truth. Lisa's skin is as fair as your own, and yet she was found on the surface. She claims that she had been there for less than an hour, and yet there was no evidence of anyone reaching their way up to the surface at that time. But, as you can plainly see, her skin has not been burnt, almost as if, like you, she had never been to the surface.'

Sophon looked back at Lisa, as she appeared to be considering her father's words. Then she said, 'Very well, if you say that they are aliens then they are aliens.'

Cronton said, 'Very good. Now, I have some business to attend to. Can I leave Ryan and Lisa with you?'

'If you must father.'

'OK, thank you. Oh, and could you also find a pair of shoes for Lisa.'

Sophon looked down at Lisa's feet and said, 'Do they not have shoes on your world?'

Lisa said, 'Yes, they do. I just lost mine on the surface, that's all.'

'Very well.' Sophron looked to her father and said, 'You can leave them with me father, and I'll find some shoes for Lisa.'

Cronton said, 'Very good.' He then turned to Ryan and Lisa and said, 'I'll see you again for lunch.' He then nodded, and walked out of the room.

Once he had gone, Sophron said, 'So, you two are really from outer space then?'

'Yes,' said Ryan. 'I suppose that this must be as strange for you as it is for me. Lisa and I have been travelling for quite a while now, and this has to be the most unusual world that we've seen so far.'

'I see. And why are you travelling?'

Ryan thought for a moment about how best to answer this. He thought about telling her that they were meant to end up helping someone in this world before they move on again, but then he chose against it. For all he knew, it may have been Sophron that they were here to help. Perhaps she was the eldest of three daughters, but, because of the laws of this world, she wasn't able to inherit the mansion when her father passed on. They have found who the next heir is, a distant cousin, and she wanted to marry them, but there were obstacles in their way. Or maybe that was just one of the plot line from 'Downton Abbey'. He wasn't sure. Either way, he felt that it was probably best that he didn't say what it was that they were on Monton for. Instead he just said, 'Well, why not? Travel broadens the mind!'

'Well, not on Monton, at least, not down here. One part of the city looks pretty much like any other part. There's really not much point in going there. In haven't been myself for many years.'

'So, you've just been staying here then?'

'Yes, and why not? Everything that I need is here. Father is able to provide for all of us. There's really no need for me to go anywhere else...' There was a pause, and then she started to laugh, 'Oh, listen to me! I was almost convincing myself! That's the story that father believes. It comforts him to think that I stay in this place all day, every day, year in, year out. I had to stop myself from laughing when he said that I hadn't been up to the surface.'

'So, you have been up there yes?'

'Yes, I and many others, and on many occasions.'

'But your skin is as pale as Lisa's is. Don't you get burnt in the sun?'

'No. We often go up at night, and when we do go up during the daytime they provide us with protective suits, so that our skin doesn't get exposed to the sun, and the light doesn't damage our eyesight. But you were up there without any such protection. I can understand you not getting burnt through not having been there long, but how do your eyes cope with the light?'

'On my world we live on the surface. Your world is a little brighter than what we're used to, but it's not that hard for our eyes to be able to cope with it. To us it's just a bright sunny day up there, although a little hotter than what we normally get on Earth, or at least on my part of Earth. I'm from London, it often rains there.'

'I'm sorry, what do you mean? I don't understand what "rains" means?'

'Oh, it's, er, when water, that has gathered in clouds in the sky, condenses and then falls to the ground.'

'OK, I vaguely remember being taught something like that when I was younger. I think we used to have something similar on our world when we all used to live on the surface.'

'So, do you often go up to the surface? And what do you do when you're up there?'

'Well, sometimes it's just nice to go up there and look at the stars. Seeing the same brown sky above you all of the time can be really tiring. But we do much more than that. There's a group of us who think that it may be possible for our people to one day live on the surface again. We've been conducting experiments and the results are looking promising. My father may have painted you picture of a harmonious society beneath the surface, but the reality is far from that. The city is becoming crowded, and many people feel that it will not be able to support our society for too much longer. The only way that we can continue to survive is if we can find another place for our people to live in. Expanding the city further isn't an option. The rock that surrounds the city is getting to be too hard to cut through, and we're getting dangerously close to some magma chambers on some sides of the city, and if we're not careful our world will be facing a second cataclysm.'

'And you think going back to the surface is the answer. But how can you survive up there?'

'Protecting us against the sun isn't as hard as it might seem. There's a protective shield that we can build that can help to keep out the heat, and keep the light at a level that our eyes are comfortable with. Water will be hard to manage, but some of our people have designed solutions that we believe will work. It's fairly similar to how we manage down here, only on a smaller scale. But the real challenge will be power. It will be too hard and dangerous to pump up magma to the surface. However, we believe that the future will be electricity. We only have small amounts down here, but we think we've found a way to get as much electricity as we want back up on the surface. One of our people has developed a panel which they believe can take light from the sun, and turn it into electricity.'

Lisa then said, 'Now, that really is impressive...'

'Yes, I know. Tomorrow, we plan to test it out.' She paused, and looked at Ryan and Lisa with a cheeky look on her face, and then she said, 'I don't suppose you'd fancy coming up with us?'

Ryan said, without any hesitation, 'Yes, of course we'd like to come up with you.'

'Excellent. It really is a lot of fun, and we'll be doing vital work for the future of our society.'

'But there's still one thing that I don't get. When we were on the surface we were brought down here by armed guards, who said that they had been on patrol at that time, and were looking out for people who were going up to the surface. I got the distinct impression that people generally aren't welcome on the surface. But why is that? If going back up to the surface is going to ultimately prove beneficial to your people, then why aren't they being allowed to go up there? Why is everyone being forced to stay down here?'

Sophon's expression changed to one of disgust and contempt, as she said, 'That would be down to our so called great king. When our people came down below the surface everyone united under one king. At first things were fine, and everyone worked together so that we could survive the cataclysm. But they made the mistake of letting the royal family gain too much power, and before anyone realised what was happening, it was too late. The royal family ended up ruling over us absolutely. Our current king is one of the most ruthless yet, who executes people far too easily. The royal family controls the water supply, the food supply, the air cycle systems, and the magma suns. Basically everything that our people need to survive. But if we could find an alternative, a way for our people to go back up to the surface and live there, then they will be a threat to the absolute power that the royal family has. And the royal family doesn't want that, and so they keep everyone down here.'

'I see. But there are still people willing to work for the authorities, to keep people from going to the surface. Why would they do that? What's in it for them to stop other people from making progress?'

'Ah, but that's not what they're told. What they're told is that we're subversives, that we want to start a war, which is absolutely not what we're about. They're not told of the technological advances that we're trying to make. They're just told that we want to tear society apart. And they're also given handsome rewards for doing the work of the societies. How else do you think father is able to give us a house like this?'

'Right, I think I get it all right now. Count us in! Viva la revolution!' Both Sophron and Lisa gave Ryan a very strange look. He then said, 'Don't me, that's just an Earth thing. As you were...'

Sophron shook her head, and then said, 'We won't go up until tonight, but you can stay here today.' She then turned to Lisa, looked at her feet, and said, 'Wait here, I'll if I can find you some shoes, and some socks to go with them.'

Lisa said, 'Thank you.'

Sophron smiled, and then left the room.

Once she had gone, Lisa turned to Ryan and said, 'This world is truly becoming more amazing than I had realised. I had thought that only the Earth would have been capable of developing such technologies. I knew that the technology on Monton was advanced for the type of world that Monton is, but this really is something else. They're on the verge of developing solar energy! This could revolutionise this world!'

Ryan then said, 'Viva la revolution...?'

'Ryan, I'm serious. This doesn't just mean a major change for Monton. This is only the second civilisation in the whole of the multiverse that I've encountered that has technology anywhere this level, the only other one being the Earth. And both of them have been within the same universe. It makes even me wonder if there are any more that are out there.'

'You mean you don't know everything? I thought you knew of all of the worlds that there were. You certainly seemed to know a lot.'

'Yes, well, there is an awful lot that I do know about. But there are limits to what even I know, Ryan. I don't know absolutely everything that there is to know, and that's something that I'm glad off. If I did know absolutely everything that there is to know then there would be nothing left to discover, and that would make life very boring.'

'I see... So, Monton is now turning into a very special world for you then?'

'Yes, it is. And I wonder just where this latest development will take it...'

At that point Sophron came back into the room, holding a pair of shoes that looked a little like trainers, and a pair of socks. She gave them to Lisa and said, 'Here, hopefully these will fit you.'

'Thank you.' Lisa took the shoes and socks, and put them on, 'They appeared to fit her perfectly.

Ryan then turned to Sophron and asked, 'So, how many are you in this resistance movement of yours?'

'It's hard to tell. No one person knows just how many people there are in total. Some say it could be as many as a hundred million spread out throughout the city. But we only ever go up to the surface in small groups. Tonight there will only be four other people with us. We have to be careful not to be caught going up to the surface, which is why we keep our parties small.'

'And your father really has no idea where you go?'

'None at all. Father and I see very little of each other he never notices when I leave. With a house this big it's easy to convince him that I was just hiding in another part of it. He never seems to think about what it is that I do all day. As if anyone could just spend their life sitting around in this house doing nothing. What sort of a life is that?'

'Yes, quite... So, what will you be doing on the surface tonight?'

'Preparing our panel for its first use. It's going to be a very dangerous trip. Obviously, we can't test it during the night, and so we're going to have to stay up there until sunrise. But we won't be staying there long during the daytime. We're just going to stay there long enough to verify that the panel works, and then we're going to make our way out of there. Coming back will be more dangerous than going up - there'll be more patrols about at that time of day. But, if we're careful, we should be OK. Are you sure that you still want to come along?'

'Yes, Lisa and I wouldn't want to miss this for the world.'

They spent the rest of the morning with Sophron showing them around the mansion. To Ryan, the inside of the mansion looked pretty much as he would have imagined the inside of a mansion on Earth to look like. They even had servants to wait on them, although they never actually spoke to any of them. Ryan wondered what stories these servants had to tell.

Eventually, they were called into lunch with Cronton. When they entered the dining room he had a woman sitting next to them. He stood up and said, 'Ah, Ryan, Lisa, I'd like to introduce you to my wife, Yenna. Yenna, these are the guests I told you about.'

Yenna stood up and said, 'It's a pleasure to meet you.' Ryan noted that she didn't offer to shake hands with them, but then he thought that maybe that was just an Earth thing. Whilst there were some parts of this mansion that reminded him of Earth, he reminded himself to remember that this was not Earth, and that some things would be different here.

Yenna then asked, 'It is true? Are you really from another world?'

Ryan said, 'Yes, indeed we are.'

'Fascinating, and, if you don't mind my saying, a little unusual. When I woke up this morning I didn't think we'd be having aliens around for dinner.'

'And this is all a little unusual to us as well. We're sort of travelling in a random way, and so we'd have no idea that we'd end up on your world, which is turning out to be a truly fascinating place.'

'Please, be seated.'

They all sat down at the table. Cronton then asked, 'So, are you any closer to finding out what you have been sent to Monton to do?'

'No,' said Lisa. 'We haven't had any indication of that as yet. But I'm sure all will become clear to us before too long.'

'Well, whatever it is, I believe that it was a good thing that you ended up being sent to me. If that had not have happened who knows who you would have ended up with in the city.'

Ryan asked, 'How often do you go into the city?'

'I'm there most days, but only ever for work. It's not somewhere I would ever want to be out of choice.'

'And what is it that you actually do? I've gathered that you're some sort of army man, but what does your actual job entail? What would have happened to us if we turned out to be citizens of your world when we were first brought to you?'

'Well, if you had been citizens of our world that had been found on the surface, then that would have most likely meant that you would have been subversives, and enemies of the state. We would have used you to try and find out as much information as we could about your plans, about whatever it is you would have been trying to do to bring down the order that we have within our society. Then, depending on how involved with the subversives you were, you'd either have been sent to the labour camps, or you would have been passed onto my superiors for further questioning. Although, to date I've yet to have had the need to do that. I've never come across anyone important enough from our enemies to warrant that. Although, that may be about to change. I've been getting reports that one of our senior enemies is getting close to us, one that we have given the code number 642.'

'Oh, right, and what has 642 done?'

'It is not so much what they have done, but what it is that they are planning to do. It is believed that they are planning on making a public announcement very soon to the general populace. An announcement calling on the people to rebel against their king. An announcement calling for a civil war! Clearly, that is something that we can't allow. We intend to track 642

down, and stop them from making their announcement. Maybe that is why you have been sent to our world - maybe the reason that you are here is to help me to track down 642 and stop them...'

'Yeah, maybe...' Ryan still wasn't sure why it was that they were here, but he was fairly certain that that wasn't going to turn out to be it.

At this point on of the servants came in with what was to be the first course, which was some sort of spicy soup. Ryan couldn't tell what was in it, but that was hardly surprising because this was an alien world, which would therefore have alien foods and alien ingredients. Regardless of this, the soup still tasted good, and Ryan was able to eat all of it.

They continued talking as they ate. Cronton asked, 'I trust that Sophron has been looking after you?'

'Yes,' said Lisa, 'She has. She's been showing us around your house. It's very impressive.'

'Yes, well, it's all the result of hard work. I've been in the army, keeping the peace, for over 6 years now - I believe that's 30 of your years. And this house is part of the reward for me and my family.'

They spent most of the rest of the lunch with Yenna asking Ryan about what life was like on the Earth. She seemed to be genuinely fascinated by it all, and commented on all of the similarities and differences they had.

For the main course they all ate some kind of meat, with something vaguely reminiscent of potatoes, although Ryan didn't think that they tasted as nice a potatoes did. He couldn't think of anything on the Earth that the meat could have been compared to. He didn't think it tasted all that nice, but he still ate all of it, although it was more out of politeness than out of any hunger.

There was no dessert, and Cronton and Yenna left the others. Cronton once again had business to attend to. Sophron led Ryan and Lisa to one of the sitting rooms.

Once they were there, and the door was closed behind them, Ryan asked Sophron, 'So, do you know anything about this 642? Do you have any idea who they are or what it is that they'll be announcing?'

'No, not at all. But then there are always rumours flying around the place. It wouldn't surprise me if 642 didn't actually exist and turned out to be something that the authorities have chosen to believe in so that they can have something to focus on.'

'Has that happened before with other reports that the authorities have had?'

'Yes, on occasions. I sometimes hear of father talking about some big important person that they're about to catch, then, suddenly, he stops talking about them, and they're never mentioned

again. But sometimes we do hear of people being caught and punished for their actions, with pictures of them appearing in the newspapers. Although there is some doubt about just how important these people are. It's believed that amongst our people that the authorities often trump up just how important these people are, and they're in fact just people from the lowest level of our movement, who were foolish and careless which is why they got caught.'

'Do you know who any of the big fish are?'

'I'm sorry, but what do you mean by "fish"?''

'Sorry, another Earth term. What I meant was do you know who any of the important people in the movement are?'

'Oh, right, and, no, I don't really know anyone who's that high up in the movement. Only the ones who have been working on the energy panel, and they're not really that high up. They have the brains to develop the panel, but they're not really anywhere near the leadership of the movement, although I believe that they are in contact with them.'

'So, what is it that you actually do in the resistance? What role do you play?'

'Oh, I don't really do that much. I just go up to the surface to enjoy being up there, and I help out with small things here and there. The resistance needs all of the people that they can get, and so I do what I can to try and recruit others as best I can. I try to figure out who is genuinely in favour of what it is that we believe in, and who may be spies that are trying to infiltrate us. They're always easy to spot, and they never get far.'

'Tonight I'll mainly just be helping to get the panel set up, and then witnessing it hopefully working. Once I've seen it working I can spread the word to others. They'll know that there is now a real potential of a future for us back on the surface.'

They took things easy for the rest of the day, with Ryan and Lisa telling Sophron about their journey so far. Sophron seemed fascinated by the places that they had gone, the people that they had seen, and the things that they had done. She seemed particularly fascinated by the concept of a total solar eclipse. When Ryan had first met her he had got the impression that she was just a girl that stayed at home all day, living off her daddy's millions, but that certainly wasn't the impression that he had of her now. She was proving to be an incredibly intelligent person, with a very enquiring mind. He was able to explain to her how solar eclipses worked, and she was able to fully understand it all, even though Monton didn't even have any moons of its own. Ryan found that he was starting to become quite taken with Sophron, to the point that he found that he was going to be quite sad when the time came for him to leave her.

And so he was now finding himself in two minds. On one hand, he wanted to get on with the journey, to find out the answers to all of the questions that he had, including why he and Lisa had been sent on this journey in the first place, and how he came to be here. But, on the other hand, he was now starting to get to really like Sophron, and he wanted to try and get to know her some more. She seemed really nice, and really intelligent, and he liked spending time with her, and part of him didn't want to get to the point where he would have to say goodbye to her. And that's even if he got the chance to actually say goodbye to her, and didn't get suddenly transported to some other point in time and space.

In the end he decided that there was nothing that he could do about it, and he would just have to take things as they came. Deep down he knew that there wasn't any chance for anything to happen between him and Sophron. They were from two different worlds, and she wouldn't be able to come where they would inevitably have to go. The only thing that he could do was to try and put her, or at least the feelings that he was starting to develop for her, out of his mind, and focus on the task in hand. He also knew that that was going to be a lot harder said than done.

After a few hours had gone by, Cronton had popped in to see them to say that he was going to have to leave them for the rest of the day, and wouldn't be able to join them for dinner. He had to head off to deal with a very important work matter, but he wouldn't dwell on what it was. Later on, Yenna came by to say that she wasn't feeling too well, and so she wouldn't be joining them for dinner either.

Once she had left, Sophron said, 'This is all good. It will be easier for us to slip out unnoticed when we go off to meet up with the others. I'll call down to the kitchens and say that we only want a light supper in our rooms, and then, once we've had that, we should be free to go.' She went off to the kitchens.

When she was gone, Ryan asked Lisa, 'Do you think that we're here to help Sophron in some way?'

'Yes, it seems to be the most likely thing that we're here to do. And it's something that I'm more than happy to do. I'm really fascinated to see how their solar panel works, and to see if it can work as effectively as the ones on Earth work. If they can get it to work that well then the implications that it will have for this world will be phenomenal.'

Sophron quickly came back, and it wasn't too long before their supper was brought up to them. It consisted of some sort of sandwiches, only made from some sort of bread substitute that was harder in constitution, and Ryan couldn't tell exactly what was inside of it, but he suspected that it was more of same meat that they had had for their lunch. It wasn't hugely appetising, but he ate it anyway.

Once they were done they put the plates to one side, ready for the staff to come and collect them later, and then Sophron said, 'OK, I believe it's time that we started to make a move. Follow me. getting out of the house will be fairly straightforward, but once we're outside we'll have to run, and run in silence, until we're out of sight of the house. We don't want anyone to spot us. But first, we'll have to pay a visit to my room.'

She led them through the house, until they came to her bedroom. There was another room off to the side of this, and she went in there whilst Ryan and Lisa waited in the bedroom. A short while later she came back out again, this time dressed in something that looked like a black tracksuit, which of course made sense to Ryan. The long black dress that she had been wearing before wouldn't really have been appropriate for running along from the house and then going up to the surface.

Sophron said to them, 'OK, we have to be very quiet now. If any of the staff see me wearing these clothes they'll start to get suspicious and ask awkward questions. But I know the best route to take through the house.'

She led them out of the room, and they started to walk down the corridor, slowly and quietly. The fact that all of the floors were carpeted was proving to be a real advantage to them. They walked along until they came to a narrow spiral staircase, which they started to make their way down. Sophron said, 'This staircase is hardly ever used. Most people in the house just stick to the main staircases.'

They were making good progress down the stairs, when Sophron suddenly stopped them all, and called for all of them to be silent. She appeared to be listening out for something. Then Ryan heard it as well. There was someone else that was coming up the stairs. They had no choice but to turn around and go up themselves, and turn off at the first door that they came across. They all went inside, but Sophron crouched by the door, which she kept open ajar. They all heard the figure walk past. They were walking along slowly, and they sounded as though they were very heavy. After they had heard them go by, they waited a good few minutes before they opened the door and emerged back into the stairwell. Sophron said, 'It was one of the servants. I'm not sure what he was doing on the stairwell, but we should be safe now. It didn't look as though he noticed us at all.'

They then slowly started to make their descent again. It didn't take them long until they got to the bottom, where they then made their way down another corridor. Once again they had to duck into a room to avoid being seen by someone. This time it was Yenna that was walking past, and, once again, they were able to avoid being spotted.

They continued on their way, but they didn't come across anyone else. They went through a few more corridors, which became smaller, narrower, and didn't have any carpets on them. Eventually, they came to a large wooden door. Sophron opened it, and Ryan saw that it opened up to the outside of the house, as he could see the surreal brown sky once more, reminding him of just how alien this world was.

They stepped outside, and Sophron closed the door behind them. She then turned to Ryan and Lisa and said, 'OK, now we have to run in that direction.' She indicated a road in front of them, that went to the right of the house, before turning left as it went down a hill, and out of sight of the house. 'We have to run as quickly and as silently as we can, until we're out of sight. Are you ready?'

'Yes,' said Ryan. Lisa just nodded.

'OK,' said Sophron, and then, with a cheeky smile on her face, she said, 'Try to keep up!' She then darted off down the road.

Lisa ran off after her, and then Ryan followed. He found it really hard to keep up, so hard in fact that he had to let them continue off in front of him. Sophron was way out in front, and Ryan was impressed at how fast she was going. He reckoned that if she had been on Earth she wouldn't have had any difficulty in being an Olympic sprinter, and would probably give a few of the male athletes like Usain Bolt a run for their money. Lisa, unlike Ryan, wasn't seeming to have any difficulty in keeping up. Ryan didn't know how she did it, but then, nothing much surprised him about Lisa any more.

Eventually he saw them disappear around the corner, and he did his best to try and keep up with them. It reminded him of doing cross country runs back at school, where he often finished near the back of the field, although, that said, he did, at least, make sure that he did finish the race, which he considered to be an achievement in itself.

After what seemed like an age, he turned round the corner himself, where he saw Sophron and Lisa waiting for him. Sophron looked at him, still with a cheeky look on her face, and said, 'What took you so long?'

Ryan was struggling for breath, as the run, although it was only a relatively short one, had thoroughly tired him out. But he was able to get out the words, 'I'm doing my best here. I'm not used to running so fast. Not even when I'm trying to catch a train...'

'What's a "train"?'

Ryan tried to answer, but he was still out of breath, and so Lisa said, 'It's a form of transport back on the Earth.'

'Oh, I see. Well, not really. But you really are a bit unfit, aren't you Ryan? What's wrong with you?'

Again, it was Lisa who answered, with, 'It's not his fault. Remember, whilst you both look like the same species on the outside, on the inside you're not. Montonians are better equipped at running than humans are. There's no way Ryan had any chance of keeping up with us.'

Sophron then said to Lisa, 'So you are not human yourself?'

'Well, er, no, not really...'

'So, what are you?'

'Now that would take far too long to explain. Just know that I'm good at running as well.'

By now Ryan was starting to get his breath back, and so he asked, 'We don't have to run any more do we? I'm not sure how much more I can take.'

Sophron answered, 'We don't have to run any further, but, if we do, we'll get to where we're going faster.'

Ryan thought for a moment - would he rather get there faster, but exhaust himself, or save his breath, but get there in slower time. He then said, 'I vote for walking. There's no point in running there if it's going to kill me in the process.'

Lisa then said, 'If Ryan wishes to walk then I think that's what we should do.'

Sophron said, 'OK then, let's walk. But not too slowly - they won't wait for us forever.'

Ryan was relieved to hear that they had decided on walking. As well as not having to over-exert himself, it also allowed himself to be able to spend a bit more time with Sophron. He knew that it would make little difference as far as he and Sophron was concerned - he was still going to have to leave her whether he liked it or not - but he liked spending time in her company, and so he wanted to be able to spend as much time with her as possible.

They started to walk off. The road now went down steeply, as they could see the city in the distance. Ryan asked Sophron, 'What should we do if a car should happen to come up this road?'

'Oh, don't worry about that, we're perfectly safe. Only father ever goes along this road, and he left for the city a while ago and won't be back until much later. No one will bother us here.'

'So, you've done this often then?'

'Yes. It must be hundreds of times now. It's almost become routine for me. But I love it every time. Even though I've been up to the surface many times now, I never get tired of it. Each trip is like an adventure, and I've never lost that sense of excitement.'

'How did you come to be involved in this whole movement in the first place?'

'It was through one of the servants. I had noticed that he was often missing at night. And so one day I started to follow him, and I saw him leave the house by the same door that we did just

now. I saw him run off down the road and around the corner, but chose not to follow him. The next day I called him in so that I could have a word with him. I asked him where it was that he had gone the night before. At first he was reluctant to tell me. Then I gave him the option of either telling me, or being handed over to my father to deal with him. Well, then he started talking, and he told me that he had gone to meet up with a group of others in order to go up to the surface, and that this wasn't the first time that he had gone.

'At first I was appalled when I heard this. I had always been taught that it was dangerous to go up to the surface, that the intensity of the sun up there would be far too strong. I was told that my skin would burn, and that I would be blinded by the light. But here was this servant in front of me, who had just told me that he had been up to the surface many times. And yet there was no sign of his skin having been burnt, and he could still see perfectly well.

'I then asked him how this could be, and he explained to me the protective suits that they wore up there. I then went on to ask him why he would want to go up to the surface at all, what was the point of it all. There was nothing on the surface that our people needed. It all seemed utterly pointless to me. He then described what it looked like up there, how beautiful the sunlight could be during the day, and how wonderful the sky was at night when all of the stars came out. And then he mentioned that there were some people who thought that it might be possible for our people to one day live on the surface again.

'He then went on to beg me not to report him to my father. He told me that he wasn't any sort of subversive, and that he had no intention to do anything that might tear our society apart. He had only wanted to see the surface, and then he had only wanted to see what he could do to try and help our society.

'I considered what he had said carefully. Now, like I said, I had been told that I would have been burnt and blinded if I went up to the surface, but I could see from this servant that it was possible to go up to the surface and return unscathed. If the authorities were wrong about that, I started to wonder about what else they might be wrong about. And so I told him that I wouldn't report him to my father, but only on one condition - that he took me with him next time.

'This surprised him somewhat. It wasn't the reaction that he had been expecting. But once he had got over this shock, he agreed to take me up with him in a few days time.

'The days went by quickly. I found that I was actually quite excited by the prospect of going up to the surface. The servant had made sound like the most wonderful place, although I was still well aware of the risks that were involved.

'On the day itself the servant asked me if I was ready to go, and I said that I was. He then asked me what it was I was going to wear. I felt such a fool as I hadn't given that any thought.

The only clothes I owned were all expensive dresses, which are hardly suited for a venture such as this. Fortunately, he had thought ahead, and so he had gone and bought me these clothes that I'm wearing now. Now, that was strange indeed - a servant using his own money to buy clothes for his lady. I tried to insist that I pay him back, but he refused. He said that I had already paid him when I chose not to report him to my father.

'We snuck out after everyone else had gone to bed, and he led me down the route that we're now taking. We met up with the others that he went to the surface with. He had told them in advance that I would be joining them. The servant had told them that, at first, they had been suspicious about taking me with them. They thought that I might have been acting as a spy for my father. But he had told them that I had caught him, and could have reported him to my father, but didn't. He was able to convince them that I was no spy.

'They took me up to the surface, which at first I found to be such a strange sensation, travelling through the ground like that. Once we emerged on the surface it was night time up there. I had no need to wear a protective suit on that occasion. It was strangely cool up there. And everywhere around me I could see stars, so many stars! I had only ever heard about them in nursery rhymes from when I was a little girl. And now I was actually looking at them! They were more beautiful than I had ever imagined...

'The next time we went up was a few days later, and on that occasion we went up during the daytime. This time I had to wear a protective suit, which was large and unwieldy. I didn't particularly like wearing it - it wasn't very flattering - but I understood why it was that I had to wear it. On that day I got to see the sun for the first time, and the world looked completely different again. I could see the sand on the surface clearly - it seemed so strange after all of this rock down here. I found myself longing to walk in it in bare feet, that somehow seemed instinctively natural to me. But I was told that I couldn't do that during the day unless I wanted the sun to burn my feet. But the next time we went up during the night I took the opportunity to take off my shoes and socks and walk bare foot in the sand, and it was wonderful...

'By then I was hooked on going up to the surface. I went up as often as I dared. The world up there is just so different to the one down here. We - the servant and I - met up with other groups, and often went up to the surface with them. We soon learnt of the resistance movement, and of the plans that they had to try and see if we could live on the surface again, and we started to get involved with them, and did what we could to help.

'I wasn't always able to go up with the servant. My father would often arrange for functions to take place at the house, and I had to help out with them, and so the servant went up without me. It was on one such trip that he was caught by a patrol. I never got to see him again...

'But by this time I was fully involved with the groups, and I started to make my own way to the surface, and I've continued to go up there to this day.'

Sophron finished speaking, and, for a few moments, nobody said anything. Then Ryan said, 'You mentioned the servant a lot, but you never told us his name. Is there a reason for that?'

There was another pause, and then Sophron said, 'His name was Regrain. And he was more than just my servant. He was my... I try not to think about him anymore if I can help it. It's too upsetting. I never knew what happened to him. I just hope that his life was spared and that he's working on a labour camp somewhere, and that life isn't too hard for him.'

There was silence amongst them again, and this time Ryan thought that it would be best that he didn't say anything. He wasn't even sure what it was that he could say. He felt a lot of sympathy towards Sophron, and he wished that there was something that he could do to help her feel better, but there was nothing that he could think of.

They continued walking on for some time, in silence. They were still going downhill, but they didn't have that much further to go until they got to the bottom, and, from there, it wasn't far until they entered the city.

Once they got to the bottom of the hill, instead on going on towards the city, which is what Ryan had been expecting, Sophron led them towards the right. They were now walking along a path that ran between the city and the hills. The pathway started to get narrower, as the buildings started to get closer to the hills. As they did so they started to block out the light from the magma suns, and the path became very dark.

They went down this path for a little while, and then, on their right, they saw a small door cut into the side of the hills. Sophron said, 'They'll be in here. Come on...!' She unlocked the door with a key that she had in her pocket, opened the door, and they all stepped inside.

Once inside Sophron closed and locked the door behind them. There were at the start of a long and narrow passageway, lit by what looked like candles on either side. Sophron walked in front of Ryan and Lisa, as she led them down the passageway. There was another door at the end of the passageway, but this one wasn't locked.

They went through it, and found themselves in a fairly small cave. There were four men in the cave, as well as a small vehicle with a drill at one end.

The men all looked up at them, and then one of them said to Sophron, 'We were starting to wonder if you were going to show up. Who are these people?'

'This is Ryan and Lisa. It will take too long to explain exactly who they are and where they came from, only that I know with absolute certainty that they are not spies. In fact, they have actually been to the surface themselves.'

'Is that so...' said the man, looking at Ryan and Lisa suspiciously. 'And how is it that you are so certain?'

'Haven't I always been right about these sort of things in the past?'

There was a pause, and then the man said, 'Yes, you have been, but that doesn't mean you can't get it wrong this time.' He looked right into Ryan's eyes, and then said, 'I don't like the look of this one. He looks a little funny to me.'

Ryan then said, 'You don't look that great to me either.'

'Oh, look, it has a mouth on it!' The man walked right up to Ryan and stared at him straight in the face. Ryan didn't back away and stared right back at him.

Sophron then said, 'Hey! There's no need for any of that! Ryan and Lisa are not spies. They are friends, and they are here to help.'

The man then said, 'Well, Sophron, if you're wrong about them, it will be on your head.'

Lisa then place a hand on the man's shoulder. He turned around to look at her, and she said, 'Please, I can assure you that we're no threat to you. You have nothing to fear from us. We're friends, and we're here to help.' She looked at him in his eyes, and Ryan could noticeably see a change in the man's demeanour.

The man then said, 'OK, fine, they can stay, But, Sophron, next time I'd appreciate it if you could let me know beforehand if you're going to be bringing anyone else along.'

'Yes, of course, I'm sorry. But this one was a bit last minute, as I said Ryan and Lisa only arrived here today.'

The man turned back to Ryan and Lisa and said, 'So, you were on the surface recently. What were you doing there?'

Ryan answered, 'Not a lot to be honest, just looking around, trying to work out where we were.'

'And do you have any protective suits?'

'No, we don't. But we weren't there long. Plus our eyes can handle the light fine.'

There was a pause, and then the man said, 'You two are very strange if you don't mind my asking. And a little stupid.' He turned to Lisa and said, 'You especially. What were you thinking, going to the surface with skin like yours? If you'd been up there for too long you'd have been burnt to a crisp.'

'Yes, you're right. I'll be more careful in future.'

'Yes, I hope you are.'

He stepped away from the two of them, and then Ryan walked up to the vehicle they had. Whilst it wasn't especially large, it was larger than the door that they had just walked through. He asked, 'If you don't mind my asking, how did you get that thing in here?'

Another of the men answered, 'We didn't, at least, not like this. We built it in this cave.'

Ryan was impressed by this. The Montonians were proving more and more resourceful the more he got to know them.

This man then said, 'I think it's time we had some proper introductions. My name's Begran, he's Aerian.' He indicated the first man that had spoken to Ryan and Lisa, and then, indicating the other two men he said, 'He's Cryvern, and Desiran. I hope you're not going to be getting in the way at all today. We've got a very important experiment to carry out at sunrise, and we can't afford any slip ups.'

'Yes,' said Lisa, 'Sophron told us about it. It all sounds fascinating. I'll be really impressed if it does all work.'

'Yes, and we're confident that it will. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get the digger loaded up.' He then turned around, and, with the others, started loading equipment into the vehicle.

Ryan turned to Lisa and said, 'You really are excited by this, aren't you?'

'Yes, very much so. It would mean so much if this were to actually work.'

They stood back as everyone else loaded up the vehicle. Once they were done they all started to get inside the vehicle. It was a little crowded inside. Ryan could see that there were eight seats in the vehicle, although one of these now had a lot of equipment on it. It was a tight squeeze, but they were all able to make it inside. Ryan was briefly reminded of when he used to go on holiday with his family, and his father would put a load of stuff in the car, including in the space between him and his brother in the back seat. Some of those journeys weren't terribly comfortable, especially as he got older and taller.

Once they were all inside they closed the doors, and Ryan felt they were all in some sort of metal coffin. But he had confidence that they would be able to get them all back up to the surface as they had done this many times before.

Begran then said, 'I hope you're all ready. Hold on to something, here we go!'

Ryan found that he had very little to hold on to, but he grabbed hold of a handle on the door to his right. The vehicle set off, and went up a ramp, and into the wall at the side of the cave. He could see the earth going past the window to his right, and it was quite a strange thing to witness.

The vehicle went at quite a speed, but it wasn't as fast as the army one that had brought him and Lisa down from the surface. It then started to turn to the left, and Ryan realised that it was going in a spiral pattern up to the surface.

Everyone was silent during the trip, but then it would have been hard to have a conversation over the noise that the vehicle was making. Ryan also had a sense of excitement about him, even though he could pretty much imagine what the surface was going to look like at night. He reckoned that what Lisa was feeling was rubbing off on him. He also felt that he was making some progress on his own personal journey. He had a feeling that he wouldn't be returning to below the surface again before he and Lisa left Monton. He felt bittersweet about this, as it also meant that he was getting closer to the point where he would no longer be able to see Sophron.

It took them around 45 minutes to get all the way up to the surface. It was quite a strange sensation when they emerged on the surface. The earth disappeared from the windows, to be replaced by a view of the night time desert, and, at the same time, the vehicle tilted forward as it started to go along the surface. Ryan did his best to look up at the sky, but the vehicle was shaking about a bit, making it hard for him to do so. But, despite this, he could see far more stars than he had ever seen on the Earth.

They drove along for a bit, and then they went round a fairly large dune and came to a halt. They then started to get out of the vehicle, and Ryan was relieved at this as he was starting to feel a little cramped.

Once outside he gave his legs a good stretch, and then got a proper look around at the night sky. There truly were a lot of stars in this sky. Lisa came up to him and, apparently sensing his wonder, said, 'Monton is in a different galaxy to the Earth, and in the middle of a star cluster. That's why you can see so many stars the sky. There are a lot of stars that are within just a few light years of Monton, and many of these have inhabited worlds going around them. If, one day, Monton can develop its technology to a similar level that the Earth manages to, then they could go out and visit these worlds and these people. The other world's technology is nowhere near as advanced as Monton's is, and never will be, and so it will all be down to Monton. At first I never thought that Monton would ever be able to have the technology to achieve that, but if they're making the breakthrough to be able to develop solar energy, then that means that they will have the capacity to go on and develop all sorts of other technologies, which, one day, in the far future, may include space flight. I know that they are a very long way from that, but this is definitely an amazing step in the right direction.'

Sophron came up to them and said, 'So, which one are you from?'

Lisa answered, 'The Earth's star would be somewhere in that direction.' Lisa pointed to a spot of sky that had quite a few stars in it. 'But we can't see it from here with the naked eye, it's too far away and too faint, and part of whole other galaxy.'

'So you really have come a long way. How did you manage such a journey?'

'It's a little complicated to explain...' Lisa just left it at that, and Sophron didn't enquire further.

By now the men had fully unladen their vehicle, and were starting to set up their equipment. Ryan now saw the solar panel for the first time, and he was surprised when he did see it because of how familiar it looked. It looked just like any typical solar panel that he might have seen on the Earth, and yet, here there were on an alien world.

Sophron explained, 'They're going to position the panel so that it faces the sun when it rises. They'll be able to detect if it's generating any electricity, and how much, but, for a little something extra, they have this.' She reached into a bag, and brought out something that looked like a light bulb. 'This will produce light when you feed it with electricity. There are a few of these in use in the city, but not many. Electricity is scarce down there, and so people prefer to rely on the magma suns and candles for light.'

Ryan and Lisa stood back whilst everyone else went about setting up all of the equipment. He noticed also that, right now, it was fairly cool on the surface, chilly, even. Then he realised that it was because there was no cloud cover, and so all of the heat that the surface had been subjected to during the day was now being lost into space. He remembered from school that even deserts on Earth could get cold at night.

Before long the equipment was ready, and the men stood back. Begran then said, 'OK, and so now, we wait. It'll be another couple of hours before sunrise. Once the sun does start rise, and its light reaches the energy panel, we'll quickly take our readings, and then, no matter what they say, we'll have to dismantle everything quickly. We had no room to bring protective suits up to the surface with us, and so we'll have to get back under ground as fast as we can. We also have to get Sophron back quickly before she's missed.'

'So,' said Ryan, 'What are we going to do now?'

'Now, we can relax and enjoy ourselves. Breathe in the fresh, clean, desert air. Enjoy the feeling of coolness against our skin - you don't get coolness like this down in the city. We get to truly live when we're up here on the surface.'

He went back to the others, and they started to get some blocks of something from out of the vehicle. They started to arrange them in a pile on the ground, and then they set them alight. In no time at all they had themselves a campfire going. They then went back to the vehicle, and brought out some sticks which had what looked like meat on them, and some containers of liquid.

The men handed out the sticks to everyone, including Ryan and Lisa, and some of the liquid as well. Ryan could taste the liquid, and found that it was some sort of alcoholic beverage. They all then started to toast their meat sticks over the fire.

Ryan sat down by the campfire next to Sophron. He felt that his time with her was now slowly coming to an end, and so he wanted to spend as much time with her as he could. As he sat down next to her, she looked at him, and they exchanged a smile.

The men started talking about their lives back down in the city, sharing many jokes amongst each other, although Ryan struggled to really follow all of them. He ate the meat on the stick once it was cooked, and it tasted far better than the meat that he had had back at Cronton's mansion.

Once he had done that, he lay back in the sand, and looked up at the stars. Sophron lay back too, next to him. He looked to his right, right into her eyes, which looked like two more stars. She looked back at him and smiled. Then, to his utter surprise and delight, she leant over, and they kissed.

She then said, 'I don't know what it is about you, Mr Alien, but I can feel something strange about you, something that I don't get from any of the men of my world. I've only known you a day, but I feel like I've known you my whole life.'

Ryan felt something similar about her. She seemed to be really familiar to him, but he couldn't tell how. All he knew was that he felt really happy when he looked into her eyes, when he was near her, and especially when they had kissed.

They moved closer together, and they placed their arms around each other as they looked up at the stars. Sophron asked, 'Do you know how long you'll be on Monton for?'

'No, I'm sorry, I don't. But I have a feeling that it won't be for too long. We've never stayed for more than a few days at any of the other places we've visited.'

'Couldn't you make an exception for here? You don't have to rush off anywhere, do you?'

'I'm afraid that that's out of our hands. Lisa and I don't actually get to choose when we get to move on. It just sort of happens when we're least expecting it. There have been other people that we had left behind without getting a chance to say goodbye to. So if I do suddenly vanish, know that it has nothing to do with you, that I didn't want to leave you.'

'I don't suppose you could take me with you?'

'I wish I could, but I don't see that there's any way that I can. Trust me, I absolutely would take you with me if I could.'

'So, how does it actually happen? What do you do when you move on to the next place?'

'It's different every time. I might walk through a door and find that I've ended up on another planet, or I might trip over and fall in London on Earth, and then land on sand in the middle of a desert on an alien world. There's no way to predict when or how it will happen, and I just have to go with it.'

'But something, or someone, must be causing it.'

'Yes, Lisa and I think that there is someone behind this all. We have no idea who it could be though, or why they send us to the places that they send us to. I'm actually trying to get home, and trying to work out how I came to be on this journey in the first place. I have a feeling that it won't be too much longer before I start to get some answers to that.' Ryan thought about telling Sophron about Shadow Zero, and the things that he had said to him, but then he decided that it would probably be best if he didn't do that. Sophron didn't need to know about him.

She then said, 'Well, whilst you are here on my world, I'll be glad to keep you company. Lisa won't mind, will she?'

'No, not at all. There's nothing happening between me and her.'

'Good. Stay by me, and don't forget me when you leave.'

'I won't. I could never forget you.' Ryan got a sense of de ja vu, as though he had heard those words before. But the feeling quickly passed.

They got closer still, and looked back up at the stars. Sophron said, 'I never get tired of this view. If only all of the people in the city got to see it as well.'

'Don't your people have any pictures of it at all?'

'No, none at all. I think some were taken down to the city before the cataclysm. But they have all been destroyed or lost, and then banned by the authorities. We've taken some ourselves, which we've shared with our supporters, and we've used them to try and recruit more people to our cause. But the vast majority of the population within the city have no idea that this view awaits them up on the surface. Do you have the same view back on your world?'

'No, not at all. Our cities are all up on the surface, and they produce a lot of light themselves. This causes something that we call light pollution. This is where the light from the surface at night makes it hard to see the stars in the sky. So we don't get to see too many stars when we're in the cities, and certainly not in my city, London, which is a fairly large city by Earth's standards - it had about seven million people in it - although there are cities larger than that on the Earth. But even when we're away from the cities and in the rural countryside, we'd never get a view like this. Our part of our galaxy doesn't have as many stars in it as you have here, and so this is quite a sight.'

'Do you think your people would ever be able to come here, and see this sight for themselves?'

'No, it's too far away for them to travel. Lisa and I have come here by a very unusual method, one I don't fully understand, as you know, and so it's not an option for the rest of humanity. But many people of my world imagine what such a view would look like.'

'Really?'

'Oh, yes, Humans can be very imaginative. We write stories all of the time, some of which take place on what we would consider to be fantastical worlds such as this one. In my time no one had yet found evidence of alien life being out there on other worlds, but that never stopped anyone from thinking about what life might be out there, what other worlds would be like. Many pictures of possible aliens and alien worlds have been created. We also have things called films and TV programmes. These are like plays, but they're a series of recorded images and sounds. Sometimes these are enhanced and changed into things that could never possibly be seen in real life, and these films and TV programmes sometimes take place on alien worlds. But, all of that said, it would totally blow the mind of any of the people of my world to actually come out here and see such a sight for themselves.'

'And so would you say that your mind has been blown?'

'Oh, absolutely.' And Ryan meant that. Even though he was now starting to get used to going to place to place, this view that he now saw above him still astounded him. He would never forget it for as long as he lived, even though he knew that after tonight he would probably never see such a sight again.

Ryan and Sophron continued talking for the next couple of hours, and all of the others left them alone. Ryan didn't know what Lisa was doing during this time, as he was too busy focussing on Sophron. He didn't know why he felt the way he did about Sophron after having known her for just a little time, but he now did have very strong feelings for her. That seemed a little odd for him - it wasn't like him to fall in love more or less at first sight. Fall in lust, maybe, as he had with the half naked 18 year old girl back in Aberystwyth, but not head over heels in love like this. He felt that there was something missing, some piece of the puzzle that, if he had it, would make it all make perfect sense to him. He racked his mind to try and find this piece, but it, like so much else, was still lost in the fog that still persisted in his mind.

Eventually the sky began to brighten, and the vast star field started to disappear. Sophron said, 'The sun is starting to rise. The experiment will start soon. I'd better go and help the others.'

'OK...' They both stood up, and brushed off the sand from their clothes.

Sophron turned to go back to the others, but, before she did, she turned back to Ryan and said, 'Now, don't you go disappearing on me, Mr Alien.'

'I'll try not to!' They smiled at each other, and then she went back to help the others with their equipment.

Lisa came over to Ryan and said, 'So, did you have a good time last night?'

'It was alright.'

'Oh, I think you found that it was more than alright.'

Ryan smiled, 'Yes, it was lovely. I wish it wasn't all going to end so soon. I have a feeling that we won't be on Monton for too much longer.'

'Yes, I get the same feeling. But try not to despair. You've explained all of this to Sophron, yes?'

'Yes, as best I can. She knows that we have no control over when it is that we get to move on, and that it's possible that we might get moved on before I get a chance to say goodbye to her, and that it won't be possible to take her along with us.'

'OK, good...'

They fell into silence, as they watched the others work. Ryan then got thinking again. Shadow Zero said that he was soon going to have to make a decision, a decision that was going to end up changing everything. He wondered if that decision was going to have something to do with Sophron. Was he going to be given the choice of either continuing on with his journey, or of staying here with Sophron? If he were to be given such a choice he knew that it would indeed be a very difficult one, and one where he wasn't sure which way he would go. On the one hand he wanted to get back home, and get all of the answers to the questions that he had. But, on the other hand, he wanted to stay here with Sophron, and help her and her friends with their cause. He knew that such a life was not going to be easy, but he didn't care about having a life that was easy, if it meant that he got to spend it with a girl that was as lovely as Sophron. Yes, if that was the decision that he was going to find himself presented with, it would prove to be a very hard decision indeed.

The sky was now starting to get very bright, and it wouldn't be too much longer now before the sun would start to appear over the horizon. He could see that the others were now just about ready. They were standing by their equipment, and Sophron's bulb was in place. They were all looking out towards the direction of where the sun was about to make its appearance. Some of them were bracing themselves to cover their eyes. Ryan suspected that the level of light was already starting to get a bit much for some of them.

Then he saw the sun emerge from behind the horizon. The shadows quickly fell away, and its rays fell upon the solar panel. Ryan didn't need to see their readings to see how effective the panel was - in no time at all Sophron's bulb was shining with the brightness of a hundred watts.

'Yes!' exclaimed the men in unison. Then they went and checked their readings. Begran said, 'It's even better than our best estimates had predicted. It works perfectly! Perfectly! Gentlemen, and ladies, of course, this is it! This is the moment that everything changes for us forever! This day will go down in history! By developing this technology further we'll one day be able to return our people back to the surface.'

Aerian then said, 'It's good that the energy panel works far better than was expected, but our work here today is not yet done. That sun is only going to get higher and more intense, and so unless we all want to become toast, we had better get this dismantled and packed away quickly.'

'Yes,' said Begran, 'I agree. Let's get to work.' They all then started to dismantle the equipment.

Lisa came up to Ryan and said, 'It's amazing. They've really done it! I have to admit that part of me was sceptical that this was going to work, but it has worked, and quite spectacularly! This is going to revolutionise their world, and, possibly, one day in the far and distant future, it might also have an impact on all of the populated worlds in this part of the multiverse.'

'Yes,' said Ryan. 'It truly is very impressive. I'd never thought that one solar panel that size could make a bulb shine that brightly.'

Sophron then came over to Ryan and, taking his hand, said, 'Isn't it fantastic? It all worked perfectly! We going to change the world, Ryan! We're going to change the whole world!' She then hugged Ryan, and he was only too glad to hug her back.

Ryan was feeling really happy in this moment. However, that feeling of happiness didn't last too long, as he started to feel some strong vibrations coming from under his feet. Everyone else felt them too, and they all knew exactly what it meant. And they also knew that there was nothing that they could do about it. They all gathered together, and awaited the inevitable. Sophron was holding onto Ryan's hand tightly.

A moment later, one of the army's vehicles emerged on the surface. It pulled up alongside everyone else, and powered down. Then its door opened, and a group of armed men in helmets and armour all came out, with guns pointed at the party. Then, one figure walked out of the vehicle between all of the other men. His armour was different to the other men, and he wasn't carrying a gun.

He looked at everyone, and then he said, 'It saddens me to see you here...' The voice sounded a little familiar to Ryan, but he couldn't quite figure out who it was. He didn't have to wait long

to find out, however, as the man then removed his helmet, and Ryan could see that it was none other than Cronton. He was looking right at Sophron, with a look of great sadness on his face.

As soon as Sophron saw him she exclaimed, 'Father! What are you doing here?'

'I was going to ask you the same thing, my dear. Try not to look so surprised. I've known for quite some time that you've been sneaking out of the house without my leave to do so. I had hoped that you were just going out on a joyride, up to the surface to see what it was like. But now I see you here with these others, doing who knows what with that equipment, but I know that it can be no good. What I want to know is why, Sophron? Why would you do this? Why would you want to help those intent on bringing about the downfall of our great society? Hasn't our society treated you well? You live in one of the best houses that are available. I work tirelessly to provide for you. You want for nothing, and yet this is how you repay me! Why, Sophron? Why?'

'It isn't like that, father! It isn't like that at all! What the authorities say is wrong! We have absolutely no desire whatsoever to bring about the fall of our society. In fact, we want to do quite the opposite. We want to save it!'

'What on Monton do you mean? Our society doesn't need saving from anything.'

'Oh, but it does. Are you completely unaware of just how crowded our city is? Our population levels have reached their limits! We won't be able to cope with any more. We either have to find somewhere else for our people to live, or we will have to find ways to limit our population, and I don't know about you, but I don't like the sound of that second option. And there's nowhere else for us to expand below the surface. The city is at its limits! But we've been working on ways that our people can return to the surface. Today we were conducting an experiment that has proven that we can create vast amounts of electricity on the surface.'

'If you truly were conducting an experiment, as you say, then why come up to the surface to do it? Couldn't you have just conducted it back down in the city?'

'No, because we needed the sun, father. We have found a way to turn sunlight into electricity!'

'Don't be absurd!'

'It is not absurd, father! Come and see for yourself if you don't believe me.' She walked over to where the equipment was still set up, and her bulb was still shining brightly.

'What is this...!' He knelt down beside the equipment, and looked in particularly at the bulb, although he had to shield his eyes, such was its intensity. Ryan surmised that the bulb would not have been unfamiliar to him as they had some electricity back down in the city. But what would have been new to him was how the electricity to light the bulb was being generated. 'How is this even possible?'

Begran said, 'I'd be happy to explain exactly how it all works to you, and anyone else, if only you give us a fair hearing, listen to what we have to say. This could change everything for our people. With all of the other things that we've been working on, we believe that we now have enough technology to enable our people to start to populate the surface once more. There would be no limits to where we could live, apart from how much surface area there is on our world. We could start to expand out, have some space to breathe in, instead of all being cramped up inside the city. It will be a better life for our society. We truly want to help it, not destroy it.'

Cronton stood up, and he started to stroke his chin again. Ryan felt that he would be reasonable about this. After all, he had been reasonable with Ryan and Lisa when he heard about how they had mysteriously appeared on their world, seemingly from nowhere.

Cronton then said, 'On the face of it, this truly does look remarkable. But you have gone about all of this in completely the wrong way. You have done all of this under the nose of the authorities. You should have come to us with your ideas, and we would have then considered them fairly.'

Aerian then said, 'With all due respect, no you would not! Do you seriously think that anyone in authority would have wanted to hear about this? They've all been brought up to think that going up to the surface is bad, perverse even. And the king certainly wouldn't have allowed it. It would be a threat to the power that he enjoys - and abuses! He doesn't care about doing the right thing by his people, he only cares about keeping them where he can control them, locked up in that vast underground prison!'

'How dare you speak of such things! You expect me to believe that you don't want to go about bringing the end of our society, and yet you speak of such treasonous things!'

'Treason it may be, but that doesn't stop it from being true. The king has not done right by his people, and it's about time that people stood up for themselves and said so.'

There was a brief pause, and then Cronton said, 'I don't have time for this. It was only by chance that we came across you lot. We had had reports that 642 was on the surface, rallying their supporters ahead of the announcement that they're about to make. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?'

There was another pause, and then Begran said, 'No, we know nothing of this. We don't even know who this "642" even is.'

'Yes, and you expect me to just believe you, I suppose?' Cronton then turned to his men, and said, 'Round them up!'

They then heard a female voice shout out, 'I wouldn't do that if I were you!'

The voice came from the top of the dune that they were next to. They all turned around to look at who it was, and Ryan got another surprise. Standing on the top of the dune, in a long black dress and bare feet, was Yenna.

Ryan quickly looked back at Cronton, and, from then expression on his face, it seemed that the shock was even greater for him. It had left him speechless.

Yenna started to walk down the dune towards everyone else. Once she was at the bottom, looking at Cronton, she said, 'Don't look so surprised. I know that you will find this all a little hard to believe at first, but you will quickly get used to the idea. I have been observing these people. I had become fully aware of the experiment that they had been conducting, and what the impact could be for our society if it proved to be a success. I had every faith in them, and I am delighted to see that they have succeeded.' She then walked right up to Cronton, and looked him straight in the eye as she said, 'I look forward tom including it in my announcement later on today.'

Ryan could almost see the penny drop as the implication of this last sentence dawned on Cronton. Cronton then said, 'You're 642?'

'Yes, I do believe that that is what you people refer to me as.'

'But, Yenna, why? How could you? You've been lying to me? How long has this been going on for?'

'Don't worry, it started after you and I married. I didn't marry you in order to get information to pass onto the resistance if that's what you're worried about. But I have been involved in the movement for quite some time now, as I'm sure that your reports will confirm.'

'But, our society...'

'Oh, Cronton! Haven't you been listening to a thing! We are not planning to bring down society! Yes, we are opposed to the king and the other members of the royal family, but we are not opposed to society! We have found a way to bring people back up to the surface, and we should be allowed the chance to do so! Surely you can see that we're trying to help our world, not destroy it.'

There was a pause, as Cronton appeared to be mulling all of this over. He appeared to be severely conflicted with all of this new information. But he then said, 'Yenna, I'm sorry, but I can't allow this. I can't go against our king, not after everything that he has done for us. I'm going to have to report this in. Men! Get to work!'

Ryan then had an overwhelming urge, one that he could not suppress, and he shouted out, 'Stop!' Everyone did indeed stop, as they all turned around to look at him. He then walked up to Cronton, and said to him (but at a volume so that everyone present could hear him as well), 'Yes,

Yenna, Sophron, and everyone else here may have broken your laws, but that doesn't mean that you have to report this in. No one here has actually done anything wrong. They wanted to come up to the surface, and see it for themselves, and why shouldn't they? What harm would that have done? But your laws don't allow that. Then they wanted to try and find a way for your society to come back up and actually live on the surface again. Is that really such a bad thing? Why shouldn't they be allowed to pursue such a goal? You say that they should have discussed their ideas with the authorities, but would they have really have listened? Would they really have been open to their ideas? From what I've heard, I think not. They appear intent on keeping everyone in your society trapped in the city beneath the surface. Not because they think that it's the best thing for the general populace, but because they think that it's the best thing for them to stay in power. Which means that your society isn't free.

'On my world we have a great many governments, with about 200 countries. In my country, the United Kingdom, we are free. We are free to go where we want, we are free to develop our society, and we're even free to criticise our government if we wish. We can go on the streets and protest about them if we wish, provided we do so peacefully. And, ultimately, if we want to, we can remove them from power through an election. We chose for ourselves how we want to be ruled, and how we want to live our lives. But not all of the countries on Earth are like this.

'Before I left, we had had something on my planet that became known as the Arab Spring. This is where the peoples of some countries who were not free, openly challenged their governments. There was one country, Libya, whose authorities chose to fight their own people, who they considered to be rebels. The authorities tried to keep their dictator in power. But the rebels, with support from the outside world, overcame the authorities, but not without much loss of life. The regime was brought down, and the dictator was killed. But the people of Libya are now free, and they should hopefully have a bright future ahead of them.

'Don't make the same mistake that the Libyan authorities did. Yes, you may go ahead and report this is, but that won't make the issue go away. There are still a vast number of people within your society who want to bring about change. You won't be able to suppress them forever. News of what has happened here today, of the discovery that has been made, is bound to get out and spread amongst your people. And if your king tries to suppress the will of your people, then he will be running the risk of them rising up against him in a revolution, a revolution that is bound to end up with a lot of lives being lost.

'You need to start listening to the people. Hear what it is that have to say - really hear it. And then you need to work to try and change the way your king sees things, to try and convince him that keeping society trapped beneath the surface in order for him to hold onto power is not the

way to go forward. If he tries to hold onto power by force, he may end up losing it anyway, and a whole lot more.

'You all need to think long and hard about what you're going to do next. The future of your whole society may just depend on it. Whatever path you take, the road ahead of you won't be easy, but try and do what is right, not necessarily by you, or by those you work for, but by your society as a whole. Remember, that society is bigger than any one individual, even your king. You all need to come together. Your society has already achieved so much by surviving the cataclysm that befell your world. Don't throw things away now. If you work with each other once again, instead of against each other, then there is still so much more that you can achieve.

'That's it. That's all I have to say.'

Silence fell upon the group. It was clear that they were all taking in what Ryan had said, Cronton most of all. All of the eyes of everyone there turned to look at Cronton - the decision here was ultimately his. He started to stroke his chin once more.

Eventually he said, 'You have spoken well, and I have to admit that I don't like what it is that I hear. But I can detect the truth in your words. I will need to speak to my superiors about this -' There was a sound of uproar amongst Sophron and her friends, before Cronton raised his voice and said, 'But it is only so that I can tell them about your invention, and your desire to live on the surface once more. I will not reveal your names, at least, not until it is safe to do so. If you really want to go about and bring change, you can't remain an underground organisation forever.'

Yenna then said, 'And what about the announcement that I plan to make?'

'I think that you should go ahead and make it. Let people know of the advances that you have made, and how it would be possible for those to live on the surface once more. As long as you don't incite any hatred or violence, I'm not going to stand in your way.'

'Thank you, my love. I always knew that you'd be able to see the sense in things.'

'Yes, well, try not to get too excited, and that goes for all of you. Just because I'm not going to be handing you in, it doesn't mean that you all have a long road ahead of you. No matter how great the advances that you've made, it will still be a long time before you will be able to start bringing people to live on the surface again. Remember, we still have the king to try and convince, and the other members of the royal family. That will not be an easy task, but I can think of a few people that I can talk to who may be able to start things off. We need to try and manage this in a way that will not cause unrest within our society.

'Anyway, no matter what we do and when, one thing that we should all do now is get back to the city. That sun is still rising, and soon things are going to start getting very uncomfortable up here.'

Sophron then said, 'Thank you, father.'

'Thank me later! Let's get you back to the surface before you start to burn.'

Sophron smiled at her father, and hugged him, before turning back to her crew, and helping them to dismantle their equipment, ready for the trip back. Cronton turned to his men, and ordered them to get back inside of their vehicle.

Yenna turned to Ryan and said, 'Thank you for your words, I think they made a great difference. Was all that about that country on your world true?'

'About Libya? Oh yes, I'm afraid it is. It's leader had the opportunity to step down peacefully, and find a way to hand over control of the country to its people, but he chose to fight them instead. A large portion of the world condemned him for this, and some countries, including my own, got involved and aided the rebels, mainly through air strikes.'

'Fascinating. You will have to tell me more about it once we're back down in the city.'

Ryan then realised something, and said, 'Well, Lisa and I may not be returning to the surface. We were sent here to provide some form of help, and I believe that we have now done that. There's a good chance we'll be moving on soon.'

'Oh, don't you know when you'll be leaving yet?'

'Unfortunately not. It always seems to get sprung on us.'

'Well, if I don't see you again, thank you once more for what you've done for us. We still have a very long road ahead of us, but I believe that you have helped us to turn a very important corner.' She smiled, and then started to walk over towards Cronton.

Ryan then turned to Lisa and said, 'Well, it looks like we've done good again...'

'Yes, we have.' She then started to stroke his arm, and asked, 'How are you doing? Is everything OK with you?'

'Yeah, I'm fine...' He was feeling generally OK, at least physically, but emotionally he was being pulled in various directions. It would soon be time to move on with his journey, and get closer to finding the answers that he sought. But it would also soon be time to say goodbye to Sophron, and that was something that he did not want to do. He had only just found her, and got to know her, and yet he was now going to have to leave her. He felt that under other circumstances, if they didn't have to part with each other, then they may have been able to have a real future together, whether it be on Monton, or back on Earth, or out there in the stars.

Lisa seemed to be able to detect what Ryan was thinking, as she said, 'Go and say goodbye to her.' She smiled a smile of compassion at Ryan, as the sun lit up her eyes and her hair.

Ryan nodded, and turned to go over to Sophron, who was now just watching as her companions placed the last of their equipment into their vehicle. She turned round, and smiled, when she saw Ryan walking over towards her.

She hugged him, and said, 'Thank you, Ryan. Thank you so much.'

'That's OK, I was happy to help.'

'What will you do now? Do you think you'd be able to stay for a bit longer?'

'I wish I could, I hope I can, but it's not up to me. I could be gone at any moment. But, for now, in this moment, we do have each other.' He looked down, deep into her eyes. 'Life can be so cruel sometimes, bringing two people together before splitting them apart again so soon after. But the memories will always remain. I will never forget you, Sophron, never.'

'And I will never forget you. I don't know what it is about you that drew me to you so, but I can still feel it, whatever it is. It was like we were meant to be, you and I. And so it feels so strange that you now have to go.'

'I know, but let's try not to think about that now, let's just try and live in this moment, this moment where we still both have each other.'

They looked out towards the sun, which was now comfortably above the horizon. It's warmth was a comfort on their faces after the coolness of the night. The world seemed so bright, and so new. Ryan didn't want this moment to end. In this moment, he was feeling something that he had seldom felt.

He was feeling happy. Truly, unimaginably, happy.

But that happiness was tinged with the sadness with what was destined to happen next. But he tried to but that out of his mind. In this moment, in this instance in time, on this far away world, with Sophron in his arms, he, Ryan, was happy.

And he wanted to hold onto that feeling of happiness for as long as he was able to.

He turned back round to look into her eyes again. He leant in, and, closing his eyes as he did so, he kissed her.

She was now his whole world. All he could feel was her. Her arms around him, her breasts against his chest, her hair brushing his arms around her back, her tongue in his mouth. In this moment, she was his whole world.

And then his world disappeared. Her could no longer feel her. Her arms were no longer hugging him, her hair was no longer in contact with his arms, she was no longer kissing him. There was nothing but empty space in front of him. He held his hands to his face, and kept his eyes closed. He knew what this meant, and what it was that had just happened.

And it made him sad.

He gave himself a moment, and then he moved his hands away from his face, and opened his eyes. He found that he was in a cafe somewhere. He could see outside that it was sometime during the day, but inside the cafe it was quite empty.

Lisa came up behind him, and placed a hand on his shoulder. He placed his hand on it, as she asked, 'Are you OK?'

'To be honest, no, I'm not.' He turned around to look at her, and then he continued, fighting back the tears, 'Why? Why, Lisa? Why is this happening to me? Why am I being torn apart like this? Why can't I get home? Why can't I just be happy?' He lost his fight against the tears, as some of them started to fall down his cheek.

Lisa hugged him, and said, 'It will be OK, Ryan. Everything's going to be OK.' She pulled back, but still held onto his arms. 'Come on, there's someone here that I would like you to meet.'

She led him to a booth over in a corner of the cafe. There was a man sitting in the booth. He was of Caribbean appearance, and looked like he was in his fifties. He was almost completely bald, and his clothes were fairly casual, although he still looked reasonably smart. He was drinking a cup of coffee, and reading a newspaper.

He looked up as he saw Ryan and Lisa approaching, and when he saw Lisa a huge smile appeared on his face. 'Ah, Lisa!' he said, with a very warm and comforting voice, 'It's so good to see you again!'

'And you. I thought you had died...'

'Well, what can I say. I'm not that easy to kill. I'm sorry if that comes as a disappointment.'

'Not at all!'

The man then turned to look at Ryan, and said, 'And who's your friend here?'

'This is Ryan. Ryan, this is my very good and trusted friend, Mr Ian Woon.'

Ian stood up, and, offering his hand, said, 'Ah, Ryan! It's good to meet you!' Ryan shook his hand, and then Ian continued, 'Please, do come and sit down. I've heard a lot about you.'

As Ryan sat down he said, 'You've heard of me? From where?'

'Oh, from around. All sorts of news passes through this place. There's not much that escapes me.'

'OK... And, if it's not too strange a thing to ask, whereabouts are we, and, er, when are we?'

'Don't worry! Given your current circumstances those are not strange things to ask at all! You are now currently in London, in Elephant and Castle to be precise. And the year is 2011. I know that year means "home" to you, but I'm afraid to tell you that you are not quite there yet. But, do not fear, you haven't got too much further to go now.'

This gave Ryan some relief. Being told that he wasn't too far away from home now gave him some hope. He felt like he could now just about make out the light at the end of the tunnel. He then said, 'So, what happens now? Am I here to help someone?'

'No, there is no one here for you to help. See this as a short stop off, a chance to take stock, and to receive a little help for yourself. I know that you have a lot of questions, a lot of questions that still need answers. You will not get many here, but, fear not, they are coming soon. Before too long, all will become clear for you.'

'Do you know where it was that we've just been?'

'Yes, I know all about your time on Monton. You did a lot of good there, Ryan. I know that it may not have felt as much, just making a speech, but that one speech changed the minds of a few people. Just a few people, but that was all that was necessary. Because those few people went on to speak to a few other people, and changed their minds as well. And they went on to speak to a few more people, who then told a few more, and so on. Before too long, the minds of a great many people had been changed. They were even able to change the mind of the king. It was not easy for them to do so, because he was an old and stubborn man. But they persisted, and dealt with him gently and appropriately, and he eventually came to see the error of his ways. Ultimately, it was when he himself agreed to go up to the surface, and see the stars in the night sky above his world, that he ultimately decided to give more freedom to his people, and to allow them to repopulate the surface. There was no bloody revolution on Monton. Sometimes, it is possible for just one man to make a great difference, when he is in the right place at the right time, and knows the right words to say.'

Ryan was pleased to hear of all of this, but there was something in particular that he wanted to know. He asked, 'And what of Sophron? How is she?'

'Ah, yes, the delightful Lady Sophron. Well, she was a little upset when you moved on, but she knew that it was not your fault, that it was out of your control. She went back to the city with her father, and continued her work to bring about change to her world. Part of that change involved freeing those that had been detained previously for their part in the resistance movement. You may remember her telling you about how she started going up to the surface, when she was introduced to it by one of her servants, who she had become very close to before he was captured. After he had been captured he was sent to a labour camp, and there he remained for many years. He worked hard whilst he was there, kept his head down, and survived. When the changes started to come about, he was freed, and was reunited with Sophron. And, without going into all of the details, they lived a long and happy life together.'

Ryan smiled. He felt a slight sense of happiness that Sophron did eventually end up being happy, even if it meant that he himself couldn't be with her.

Ian then continued, 'And she stayed true to her word, Ryan. She never did forget you. She told all of her children, her grandchildren, and even her great grandchildren about you. And others spoke of you as well, as you became a legend in that part of Montonian history. You were never forgotten, Ryan.'

Ryan smiled once more, and felt slightly humbled. He then said, 'That's all good. And, so, what now? Where am I off to next?'

'Hold your horses there, my friend. Try not to be in such a hurry to move on. I'm know that you're keen to continue on with your journey, and I can understand that. But sometimes hurrying isn't the best course of action. Yes, it is true that you are now nearing the end of your journey, but you are only just about to start the most dangerous phase of it. Things are about to get a lot harder for you. I believe that you have encountered a man who calls himself Shadow Zero, yes?'

'Yes, I have. Do you know who he is?'

Ian appeared to just ignore Ryan's question, as he said, 'He told you that you would soon have to make a hard decision, a decision that will change everything. That decision will soon be upon you. Try not to be afraid of it, Ryan. And, when it does come, think carefully, and choose wisely. Once you have made that decision, whatever it is that you decide, you will not be able to go back and change that decision. Do you understand? The story can go down one of two paths when you come to make that decision, and once you have made it, it will be set in stone. The story will go down one of those two paths, and there will be no turning back.

'But try not to be afraid. In have faith in you Ryan. I have a whole lot of faith in you, and I have every confidence that you will make the right decision.'

'Can you tell me anymore about it? Can you give me any more clues as to what it will be?'

'I'm afraid not. But do not be concerned. It will come when it will come, and then you will have to choose. You will only be able to make your choice in that moment, and not before. This is not a decision that you can plan for far in advance. You still have some way to go before you can make that decision. Just keep going on your journey, keep moving forward, and then, in good time, you will reach it. And then it will all be up to you, Ryan. But I believe you will do well.'

Ian fell silent, and Ryan pondered the words that he said. He was still feeling really apprehensive about what this decision might be, what it might entail, and what his choices might

be. But Ian had told him not to worry about it, and so, in this moment, he decided that he would try not to. He would just wait and see what was going to happen next.

Ian then turned to Lisa and said, 'So, how are things with you? I see they let you out for a trip.'

'Yes, something like that.'

'But, are you well?'

'Yes, I'm fine. I'm better than fine. Everything is pretty good right now. I'm happy.'

'I'm glad to hear it, and I take it that you're looking after yourself?'

'Of course.'

'That's good. I see that you've been taking very good care of Ryan here. You're doing a good job Lisa.'

'Have you ever known me to do a bad one?'

Ian laughed and said, 'No, come to think of it, I haven't!'

'So, how did you manage to make it back?'

'Now, that is a very long story, far longer than the one we are in now. Maybe I will tell it to you one day, because it is a very interesting one. But not today. It will soon be time for you to move on.'

'OK, I look forward to hearing your story. Maybe I'll come and see you once this journey is over. Will you be here?'

'I always am, you know that.'

'Good, I'll come and see you again soon.'

Ian then turned back to Ryan and said, 'You're very lucky to have Lisa with you. You'll do well with her. And, as I said, it is now nearly time for you to move on. Try to keep a strong heart, Ryan. Things are going to start getting harder, but you are nearly at the end now. Keep strong, and you'll come through to the other side. Good luck, Ryan.' Ian offered his hand again, and Ryan shook it.

Ryan then turned to Lisa, and she said, 'Well, I suppose we'd better be off. It was really good to see you again, Ian. And I'll be back real soon.'

'You take care of yourself.'

'I will.' Lisa then turned to Ryan and said, 'Come on, let's go.'

They stood up to leave. Ryan looked at Ian, and nodded, and Ian nodded back. Ryan and Lisa then turned around, and headed outside.

Once they were outside Ryan asked, 'Who exactly was that?'

'It's a little hard to explain - I know some of us have been saying that a lot recently, but it's true. The simplest explanation I can give is that he is someone who is like me, but not quite like me. But I wasn't expecting to see him again - last year we all ran into some very serious trouble, and I thought that he had been killed, and so it was a surprise and a relief to see him again...'

'Do you know how he knows so much about me, and the journey that we're on?'

'I have a inkling about how he might know, but not all of the ins and outs. But you don't have anything to worry about. Ian is a very good man, who, like me, likes to help people. He is very much on our side. And it's good that we're nearly at the end, isn't it?'

'Yeah, I guess, although he also said that things were going to get a lot harder, and I'm not so looking forward to that.'

'I understand, but I'm sure you'll be fine. You just need to -'

At that precise moment they heard a loud explosion, and were thrown to the ground. The first thing that Ryan thought of was that this must have been a terrorist attack. Then he looked up, and he saw that they weren't in Elephant and Castle anymore - they had transitioned again.

They were in the middle of a vast city, with large skyscrapers reaching high up into the sky. Only many of these were either on fire, or looking derelict. They heard another explosion, this time further off, and some gunfire. He then realised that they were in the middle of a war zone.

He got to his feet, and, seeing Lisa next to him, helped her up to her feet. He asked her, 'OK, now where are we?'

'I'm not sure, but I think we'd better go and find some cover.' They started to run for the nearest building, which was too their left. The doors were open, and it appeared deserted inside.

Once they were inside they continued to hear the sounds of the battle taking place outside. 'OK,' said Ryan, 'So, we're in the middle of a war. I think we should try and find out where and when we are, who's fighting who, find out who the good guys are and side with them.'

'War isn't always as simple as that. Sometimes it isn't always apparent who's right and who's wrong. There is often blame on both sides.'

'Well, be that as it may, we still should try and find out who's fighting who, and why. And then we can decide what to do. Let's see what we can find out here...'

He took a good look around their surroundings, but he saw no obvious clues. It just looked like the ground floor of any typical building that he might have entered back on Earth. There was no signage to indicate where they might be. He then had a thought.

He turned to Lisa and said, 'How sturdy do you think this building is?'

'Why?'

'Well, we should try and find out where we are. It's too dangerous to go out there, we could get blown up and shot. There's nothing on this floor that will help us. So I think we should go up.'

'I'm not sure, what if this building gets hit?'

'The ground floor could get hit just as easily as any other floor - that first explosion we felt when we got here must have been right by here. I think we should go up. We might find something of use up there, or, at least, we may be able to get a better look at the city, and maybe you'll see something that you recognise to place where and when we are.'

Lisa thought for a moment, and, whilst she was thinking, they heard another big explosion outside. She then said, 'OK, let's go.'

They headed off into the building, found a staircase, and started to climb. Ryan's mind was starting to go into hyper drive. It had started as soon as they arrived in this world, as his instincts kicked in. Even though he knew that they were in mortal danger, he found himself mildly enjoying the excitement of this. Although, deep down, he knew that he shouldn't really be enjoying this, as this was a war. Each explosion and each gunshot could be signifying lives being lost.

They went up five floors, when they saw a floor that had a lot of books in it, still lined up neatly on shelves. 'This looks promising,' he said, 'Let's check it out.' They went onto the floor, and Ryan started to look at the books.

They all appeared to be in English, but didn't seem to pertain to anything on Earth. He then realised that whatever it was that enabled him to hear English when alien races were speaking their own languages was now enabling him to read the words in these books.

That said, a lot of the books didn't make an awful lot of sense. But then one caught his eye. It was as though it had been placed there deliberately for him to find. He picked it up, and then said to Lisa, 'Come and have a look at this.'

Lisa came over and took the book. It was entitled, 'A Complete History of New Monton - From the Ground to the Sky'.

Ryan asked, 'Are we back on Monton?' His heart skipped a beat, as he thought of Sophron once more, although he knew that if this was Monton then they were in a different part of its history, and that she wouldn't be here.

'Possibly,' said Lisa. 'Let me see.' She then opened the book, and quickly started to flick through all of the pages. It was quite a hefty book, and quite thick. Ryan reckoned it must have been about twice the length of 'War and Peace'.

She flicked through the whole book, and then said, 'I don't think we're on Monton, but we're not too far away from it.'

'Did you just read that entire book?'

'Yes. What can I say, I'm a fast reader!' Ryan felt that no matter how long he stayed with Lisa, she would always find a new way to surprise him.

'So, what can you tell from it?'

'Well, after we left Monton, word of the resistance and what they had achieved started to spread. Believe it or not, but it would now appear that we're about a hundred thousand years further into the future than that time.'

'A hundred thousand years, OK...!' Ryan wasn't that surprised by this - he was used to these transitions by now.

'Yes. The Montonian's king was able to be persuaded to make changes, although it did take a little while, and it was a slow process. People were allowed to go to the surface if they wished to do so, and many of them did. Although, at first, it was mainly done as a tourist venture, with people wanting to go up and see the surface for themselves. But people then started to build up on the surface. They started with a research centre and a visitor's centre next to that, and then expanded to a full colony. Then, over hundreds of years, more and more people went up to live on the surface. People still lived in the city below, but everyone was free to come and go from the surface as they pleased.

'Once they were fully established on the surface the Montonian's started to develop their technology further, and part of this inevitably led them in the direction of space exploration. Now, you may remember that I told you that there were a great many populated worlds nearby to Monton.' Ryan nodded. 'Well, the Montonians were able to reach these worlds - they discovered a way to get to them fairly quickly, as well as developing a form of suspended animation technology. The speed at which they've achieved this is impressive.

'Anyway, I believe that we are on one of those worlds, although I'm not sure which. The Montonians built up colonies on these worlds, as they at first lived in harmony with the native populations. But then they started to dominate them, and control them. Slowly but surely, the Montonians fully took over these worlds. The local populations were subjugated, and forced to co-operate with the Montonians.

'The book ends there, and so I'm not sure what happened next. But I suspect that this might be an uprising of some sort on one of these worlds. The local populations must have learnt from the Montonians - even though they themselves hadn't developed the same technologies as the Montonians, they were still just as intelligent as them, and so were able to adapt.'

'Right, so we're probably in the middle of a full scale rebellion. Given the state of the damage out there, I'm guessing that this isn't so good.'

'No, it looks like the Montonians are trying to put it down, and in a very violent manner.'

'So, we're on the side of the rebels, yes? Fighting for freedom, I can go for that.'

'Well, let's try and find them first before we agree anything too hasty.'

They then both looked up, as they saw two men running towards them. Their clothes looked dirty, and both of them were armed. As the men approached them they pointed their guns at them, and one of them said, 'Hands in the air! Who are you, and what are you doing here?'

Ryan and Lisa put their hands up. As they did so, Ryan turned to Lisa and said, 'Ever get de ja vu?'

The man who had spoken then said, 'I said, who are you and what are you doing here?!'

'Calm down! We're friends, I think. You're not Montonians, are you?'

'Of course we're not! What are you, thick?'

'No, no, not thick. We just, er, got here. Hello! My name's Ryan, and my companion here is called Lisa.'

'You're called Ryan and Lisa?'

'Er, yes, those are our names.'

'Ryan and Lisa?'

'Yes, that's right. Ryan and Lisa. Pleased to meet you.'

'Are you trying to be funny, mate?'

'Er, no, we're not trying to be funny. Why, is there something funny about our names?'

'You're really not doing much to convince me that you're not thick! Now, tell me what your real names are!'

'Those are our real names! Now, would someone mind telling me just what's going on here? Why is it that you don't think that our names are real?'

'Are you for real?'

'Yes, I am. Now, please, humour me if you will. What is it about our names that you've taken a disliking to?'

The man looked at Ryan in the eye, and Ryan suspected that the man could see that Ryan was being truthful with him. The man then said, 'You're really not from around here, are you?'

'No, we're not. Now, I think you and I got off on the wrong foot. Why don't we start again? Hi, my name's Ryan, and this is my friend Lisa. Pleased to meet you. I hope you're pleased to meet us, because I really get upset when I meet people and they take an instant disliking to me for no reason other than they don't like my name. Why don't you like my name?'

'Isn't it obvious? It's a Montonian name! Both of your names are! Everyone knows that! There are more Ryan's and Lisa's amongst the Montonians as there are grains of sand on their wretched planet!'

'Oh, right. I did not know that...'

'Yeah, named after two of their great heroes, they helped to bring them up from under the surface of Monton. They love them on Monton, but this is Tronia, and we hate them! If it weren't for them then the Montonians would have stayed under the ground on Monton, and never come up to bother us! Things were good on our world before they came along! In the past five thousand years they've managed to ruin everything here! Everything! This world used to be green and pleasant, now look at it! I wish I could go back in time and put a bullet into that Ryan and Lisa, and stop all of this from ever happening!' He then pointed the gun back at Ryan and said, 'And tell me why I shouldn't put a bullet in you now?'

Ryan looked down at the gun and said, 'Ah, right, I see. Yes, I think I can understand why you wouldn't have a subscription to the Ryan and Lisa fan club. Perfectly understandable, given the circumstances. But I'm sure if the original Ryan and Lisa had known that their actions would result in all of this happening then they would have tried to do something to prevent it. They were only trying to help, after all.'

'You sound like you do know about them, after all!'

'Well, I know bits, just one or two things. Not much at all really.'

'Enough! I had enough of this! No more talk - you two are clearly Montonian scum! Why else would you be called Ryan and Lisa? I should shoot you both down right here!'

Then the other man said, 'No, we shouldn't do that! If they are Montonian's then they might have some useful information that we can get out of them. At the very least we should try and find out what they're doing in this building.'

The first man said, 'So, what should we do with them?'

'Take them to the boss, let him decide what to do?'

'You know what he's like! He hates all Montonians almost as much as I do! He'll just shoot them dead on sight!'

'Maybe he will, but at least give him the option of interrogating them before we do away with them.'

There was a pause, and then the first man said, 'OK, whatever. But if he's pissed with us for not just killing them straight away I'm telling him that it was your idea to bring them to him alive.'

'That's fine. Now, let's get moving.' The second man pointed his gun at Ryan and Lisa and said, 'Come on now, let's get a move on!'

Ryan and Lisa started walking in the direction that the men were indicating. As they did so, Ryan said to Lisa, 'So it appears that we'll either be killed on sight, or tortured for information that we don't have, and then killed. Splendid...'

Lisa replied with, 'It could be worse.'

'How could it possibly be worse?'

'We could be dead already.'

'Good point, well made.'

They were marched through the building, and up the stairs to the eighth floor. Here they saw about seven other men. They were brought forward to one of these men, and when he saw them he looked at the men that had brought them here and asked, 'Who are they?'

The first man answered, 'Montonian scum, sir. We found them skulking around the library.'

'I see, and how do you know that they're Montonian?'

The first man jabbed Ryan in the back with his gun and said, 'Tell him your names!'

Ryan knew that this wasn't going to go down well, but he knew that he had no choice, and so he said, 'Ryan and Lisa.'

As soon as the words left his mouth all of the other men on the floor, apart from their leader, pointed their guns at them.

Their leader then asked, 'So why have you brought this scum to me? Why not just kill them and be done with it?'

The second man answered this question, saying, 'I thought that you might want to question them. They still haven't told us what they were doing in the library, and no Montonians have yet been seen on foot in this sector of the city.'

'OK. What weapons were they carrying?'

The two men were silent, as they looked at each other.

'They were carrying weapons, weren't they?'

The first man said, 'Well, er, no, not that we could see.'

'So, what did you find when you frisked them?'

The two men were silent again.

The leader sighed, 'You didn't frisk them, did you? Really, I don't know why we bother training you when you can't even get something as basic as that right!' He then turned to some of the other men that were there, and said, 'Frisk them!'

Two of the men came over to Ryan and Lisa, and one of them gave Ryan a very thorough frisking. He didn't see exactly what the other one did to Lisa, but he did look over in time to see her slap him around the face. All the guns were then pointed at her, but this didn't put her off as

she just stood right up close to the man who had frisked her, and looked at him straight in the eye, with a look of contempt and disgust in her eyes.

The silence was broken by the man that had frisked Ryan saying, 'He's clear.'

After a moment the man that had frisked Lisa said, 'Yeah, this one's clear as well.' He backed away from Lisa, and started to rub his cheek, which was turning red.

Their leader then said, 'Right, so it would appear that they had no weapons whatsoever, and yet they were found here, in our territory. Now, why would a couple of Montonians come here unarmed?'

Ryan said, 'What if we were to tell you that we're not Montonians...?'

'Don't be ridiculous! No Tronians would ever be given the names of Ryan or Lisa!'

'What if I were to tell you that were no Tronians either?'

'So, you're from one of the other worlds that Monton enslaved then, is that it?'

'No, guess again?'

'Don't get smart with me! Now, if you're not Montonian, not Tronian, and not from any other world that Monton controls, then where the hell are you from?'

Ryan stood up straight, and then said, loudly and proudly, 'I am from Earth!'

All of the men then pointed their guns at Ryan.

He said, 'Oh, come on! Enough with all the gun pointing!'

Their leader said, 'Are you seriously expecting us to believe that you're Ryan and Lisa of Earth?!'

'Well, I'm from Earth. I'm really not too sure about Lisa to be honest.'

'You're from Earth? The one world that is even more accursed than Monton?'

'Well, I know Earth isn't exactly the most perfect place in the universe, but I think that referring to it as accursed is going a bit too far.'

'Are you the same Ryan and Lisa that persuaded the Montonians to rise up from beneath the surface of their world to eventually spread their reign of terror throughout our world and other worlds that are near here?'

'Ah, now, I think there's something here that we can clear up. We didn't persuade them to come up to surface, so to speak. That's something that they wanted to do for themselves. When we were there only a relatively few Montonians had ventured up to the surface, and they had already developed for themselves the technologies that they needed to be able to recolonise the surface of their world. All we did was start the ball rolling to persuade the authorities of Monton to allow its people to realise their dreams.'

'And that is where you sowed the seeds that have eventually led to the ruin of our world!'

'No! That's not it at all! The people of Monton wanted to go back to the surface of their own accord, we didn't do anything to make them think that.'

'No, but you were responsible for getting their rulers to allow them to do so. Their king was perfectly happy to keep all of his people below the surface, even forcing them to do so. If you hadn't had come along then they would still be down there to this day!'

'But would they? Like I've already said, the desire to return to surface was already there and was already strong before we got there. Those feelings would have still been there even if we had never turned up. If we had not got involved in Monton's affairs these people would have still been working towards their goal of returning to the surface. The word of their achievements would have spread amongst the general populace. Their support would have only continued to grow, especially if things below the surface continued to get worse for them, which was more than likely. If their king did not relent and allow his people to be free, the chances are that they would have openly challenged him, which could have then resulted in a violent and bloody civil war. But, with enough will, the people would most likely have triumphed, and returned to the surface anyway.'

'Now I know that all of that is little comfort to you, and you don't care much for it. But I'm trying to say is that what Lisa and I did way back then is not directly responsible for what is happening now. It may have happened anyway, only maybe it would have taken a few years longer, with a lot of innocent lives lost back on Monton back then. All Lisa and I were trying to do then was to allow Montonian society change in a peaceful manner, without the loss of innocent life. That is what we set out to do, and that is what we achieved.'

'It saddens me to see your world like this, to see your people at war. It would appear that your world may have prospered for a time under the Montonians, given the fact that you were able to build this city.'

'The Montonians built this city!'

'Yes, but did you live in it?'

'Yes, of course we did. Where else would we live?'

Ryan ignored this question, and went on to say, 'And, before the war started, were you happy in this city? Did you enjoy any of the technologies that that Montonians brought to your people?'

There was silence in the room - Ryan could see that the Trojans didn't want to vocalise their answer to this question.

He then said, 'I'm guessing that you did. So, as much as you hate the Montonians, and quite understandably so, so be so quick to condemn everything that they've done. But, of course, you are now at war, and your city is devastated. Tell me, how did this war begin?'

'Their leader moved his gun down by his side - Ryan saw this as a very good sign. He felt that he was beginning to gain the man's trust. The leader said, 'It all started around ten years ago. The Montonians were taking more and more of the resources from our world to use to build things for themselves, back on Monton. Troia was no longer for Troians. We had become their slaves. They were imposing their laws on us, and we didn't want that any more. At first our leaders had asked for more autonomy for our world, to have a say in determining our own affairs. But the Montonians wouldn't allow this. They continued to watch over us. They built a vast colony on our moon, but refused access to that colony to any Troian. There are now around five hundred million Montonians living on our moon, and not a single Troian.

'Our people wanted to get their freedom back. They wanted to gain control on their world once more. They even wanted to claim control of our own moon. I hardly think that was an unreasonable demand. And so they started to fight for their freedom, and we've been fighting ever since.'

'I see... So you are fighting to be free, I can understand that. I'm sure Lisa will agree with me when I say that we'll do anything that we can to further your cause.'

There was a pause, and then the leader said, 'If you and Lisa went to Monton to help their people avoid a civil war all that time ago, because you didn't want to see innocent lives get lost, and if you so long lived as you appear to be, then why did you not step in and help when the Montonians started to oppress us and the other worlds? Or when the tensions between us were at their greatest? Or when the war itself started? Why have you only shown yourselves now, after so many lives have already been lost?'

'Well, first off, we're not that long lived - at least I'm not. To you, we were on Monton over a hundred thousand years ago. But for me, I only left Monton about an hour or two ago. You see, Lisa and I are travellers in time and space. Earth itself is actually a long, long, way away from here. Even the Montonians would struggle to ever develop the technology to ever get anywhere near it.'

'So, your technology is more advanced than theirs?'

'Well, no, not exactly. It's not quite like that. Lisa and I don't use technology to travel. We don't have a spacecraft, time machine, or a police box, or anything like that.'

'Sorry, what's a police box?'

'Oh, sorry, don't mind me. That's an Earth joke. What I'm trying to say is that we didn't come here via any sort of conventional means. We were sent here by some sort of higher power. We don't know who or what they are. All that we do know is that they send us to various places in various times, and then, whilst we're there, we're usually required to help someone in some way.

When we arrived in a new world it's never clear at first who it is that we're supposed to be helping, or how we can go about helping them, but then, in time, it becomes apparent to us, and we do what we can to help, which more or less ends in a positive outcome for all involved.

'Now, when we were on Monton, it soon became apparent that we were there to provide assistance to what were then know as the resistance movement. They had just developed their solar energy technology, and we about to start to spread their message of what it was they wanted to do for their society. As I've already said, Lisa and I helped that transition along, avoiding a bloody civil war from taking place.

'Now we have been sent here, to your world at this time. Why we were sent to this particular time, and not to an earlier one, I do not know. But all I do know is that we are almost certainly required to do something here to help your people in some way. I believe that there will be something that we can do to assist you in your struggle with the Montonians. Quite what that is I don't know yet, but, if you let us stay, I'm sure it will become clear before too long.'

There was a pause whilst the leader looked at Ryan and Lisa, and considered all that Ryan had said. All of the other men were looking at the leader, waiting to hear what he would say. The whole scene reminded Ryan of when he had spoken to Cronton back on the surface of Monton, and everyone there was waiting to hear what he was going to decide back then.

Eventually the leader said, 'I believe that I can hear the truth in your words. And you certainly don't have any weapons on you, which is most odd. But your story makes sense. No, I don't think you are Montonian, or that you're here to cause us any trouble.'

One of the other men said, 'Boss! How can you say that? You don't seriously believe all that crap, do you? They are clearly Montonian spies who have sent here to try and get information from us. Only they've come with the most ridiculous story that I've ever heard!'

'Exactly! Don't you think that if they were Montonian spies then they would have a story that was a bit more convincing? Don't you think that they would have adopted Troian names rather than the two most popular Montonian names that there are? The very fact that their story sounds so ridiculous, for me, makes it sound more convincing. The fact still remains - they have no weapons. They have entered a warzone without any weapons whatsoever. When was the last time you ever saw anyone in this city without some sort of weapon to protect themselves with? No, they are not from this world, and they are not from Monton. They have come from another place. They have come from the Earth - a world that we know little about, and a world that I fear we have much mis-understood.'

'Yeah, you may believe all of that, but I still don't trust them! And even if they are aliens from Earth I reckon that they're still here too try and cause trouble for us!'

'Well, that may be what you choose to believe. But you are not the leader of this unit, I am, and so it falls to me to decide what to do about them.' He then turned to Ryan and Lisa, and then said, 'But just what am I going to do with you? I can't just have you running about the city freely. For a start, it's far too dangerous. But I can't have you hanging around my unit either. You have no weapons, and I don't have any to spare. You may be here to help, but we're still fighting the Montonians. If you're unable to fight yourselves then you will be too much of a liability, and one that we won't be able to deal with.'

'I think I shall have to hand you over to my superiors. They may know how best to deal with you.'

Ryan then said, 'Your superiors? But what if they don't believe you about our story? What if they think that we are Montonians? They might just have us killed, and not won't do anybody any good, least of all us. Maybe we are here specifically to help your unit in some way. I hope you don't mind my saying, but I think you should let us stay with you. We won't be any trouble, honest!'

'I'm sorry, but no. You can not stay here. There is no conceivable way that you could help my unit if you are unable to fight for this unit. You will be a hindrance, not a help. No, my mind is made up. You will be taken to my superiors in the centre of the city, and they will decide what to do with you. I will put in a good word for you, tell them that your story makes sense. Maybe you find a way to help us from there, I don't know. But all that I do know is that you can't stay here with us.'

'Very well, if that's what you've decided then so be it. Take us to your leader!'

Lisa then said, 'I can not believe that you just said that!'

'Give me a break here - I've held off until this long!'

One of the other men then said, 'Whether they are who they claim to be or not, there's one thing that we do know about them for sure - they're certainly weird!'

Before they left, Ryan asked their leader, 'Just one more thing before we go, but I didn't catch your name at all?'

'I'm Commander Takrat, of the seventh Utilia Resistance Brigade. Utilia is the name of this once great city that we're in.'

'Well, hopefully, one day it will be great again.'

Takrat then said, 'Right, I'm going to personally escort Ryan and Lisa to the Centre. I want two people to come with me. Raktrak, Yeta, it's your lucky day. The rest of you, stay here and guard the building until we return.' The men all saluted, and then two men, who must have been

Raktrak and Yeta, stepped forward towards Ryan and Lisa. Neither of them had spoken during the earlier exchange.

Takrat started to walk towards the stairs, and indicated for Ryan and Lisa to follow him. They did, with Raktrak and Yeta following behind them. They all walked down the stairs in silence, and then, once they were on the ground floor, made their way towards the exit.

The sound of the battle that Ryan and Lisa had heard on their arrival in Utilia had died away, although they could still be heard in the distance. Takrat said, 'Don't let the quiet fool you - the fighting could start up at any time, and often with very little notice. Now, we'll have to move quickly, and stick close together. If we do run into any trouble, find cover as best you can until the trouble has passed. Is that all clear?' Ryan and Lisa nodded. 'Very well. Then, let's move out!'

They ventured outside the building. Some of the other buildings were on fire, and it looked like the fires had only recently been started, presumably as a result of the fighting that had just passed through the area.

They started to walk quickly through the streets. Takrat and his men had their guns poised, as they all looked carefully around them. No one said a word.

Ryan took in as much of the city as he could. There were a few clouds in the sky, and they had a golden tinge to them, as sunset was starting to arrive in the city. The sky almost looked beautiful, but the view was spoilt by the damaged and burnt out buildings that were in the skyline.

The streets themselves were also ruined. They looked like they could have once have looked similar to a city street on Earth. Ryan saw what looked like rails in some of the streets, and so he imagined that the city might have one day had a tram system in place, a system that had long since been destroyed. He couldn't tell what all of the buildings along the streets might have been, but he imagined them as busy shops and restaurants. A bustling city, that was now dead, having had its heart ripped out. He wondered where were all of the people who had once lived in this city. Judging by its size he reckoned that it must have once been home to several million people, but it certainly didn't have anywhere near that many people in it now. He wanted to know the answer to this question, but figured that this was not the time to ask Takrat about it. But he decided that he would ask him when he next got the chance to do so.

They went through the streets quickly. Takrat was clearly in a hurry to get to the Centre, and Ryan could understand why. It may have been relatively quiet in the streets at the moment, but he started to imagine that the nearby buildings may have had snipers in them, with guns that would be looking to be trained on them. Ryan didn't like that thought very much, and so he for

one would also be glad once they reached the Centre, where they would hopefully be accepted without too much trouble.

Suddenly, Takrat raised his arm, and stopped. Everyone else stopped behind him. Ryan couldn't see anything unexpected ahead of them. He started to listen carefully. Then he heard the sound of many feet marching towards them from a street that was in front and to the right of them. Takrat then urgently whispered, "Take cover!"

They all then went to the right, where they could see the door to a building that was open. They made a run for it, with Ryan and Lisa in front. Takrat stood back, letting them go past, as he kept an eye on the street from where the marching was coming from. The sound was getting louder - Ryan reckoned that they must now be pretty much upon them.

Raktrak and Yeta were following behind them, but were now a fair bit behind, as they were also looking behind them. Ryan and Lisa made it into the building. Ryan had expected Raktrak and Yeta to have quickly followed them inside, but they didn't. Ryan turned back, and looked out onto the street.

He could see them both lying in the street, motionless. They had clearly both been shot, although Ryan hadn't heard any shots being fired. He could also see Takrat shooting from behind a wall. Ryan instantly knew that it was hopeless - he didn't know how many men had been approaching them, but it had sounded like a lot, and certainly too many for Takrat to be able to handle by himself.

Despite this, Ryan said to Lisa, "We have to help him!"

He started to move back towards the door, but then Lisa took hold of his arm and said, "No, Ryan, we can't! There's nothing that we can do for him. There's no point in going back out there and getting yourself killed. We have to stay in here, and find cover. If we're lucky the Montonians won't have seen us, and we'll be able to get away. Come on, we have to get further inside!"

She was tugging at his arm, trying to get him to come with her. He looked back out onto the street again. He could now see Takrat sitting on the ground, with his back against the wall. They made eye contact, and Takrat nodded at Ryan. Ryan nodded back. Takrat then stood up, with a handgun in each hand. He ran out from behind the wall, presumably towards where the Montonians were, firing both of his guns.

Then Ryan saw him fall, lifeless, to the ground.

He felt Lisa tug his arm again, and this time he came with her. They went through a set of doors at the end of the reception area, and found themselves in what looked like some sort of ballroom. There was a stage at the end of the room, and tables and chairs scattered throughout

the room. They weren't arranged in any neat pattern - they were just all over the place, some of them on their side, and some of them upside down.

Ryan and Lisa ran through the room. They went to the far side, to the left of the stage, where they could see another set of doors. Ryan tried to open the doors, but they were locked. He threw his weight against the door, but he couldn't force them open.

They then heard shouting coming from the reception area - Ryan assumed that the Montonians had now come into the building. A shot of panic now went through Ryan. He felt as though they were trapped, and that there was no way out for them.

Lisa then said, quietly, 'Quick, under here!' She then went under one of the tables that was nearby, and Ryan followed her. The other tables that were nearby gave them some cover - they wouldn't be easily seen from the ballroom.

Ryan huddled close up to Lisa, and they held onto each other. Ryan could feel that even Lisa was trembling a little, and he didn't think that there was anything that could frighten her.

They then heard the Montonians enter the room. Ryan held his breath. He knew that he had to be quiet if they were to avoid detection, and he was worried that they would hear him and find them even if he breathed.

He heard one of the Montonians say, 'Make a thorough search of the place. Those Troians were coming in here for something, I'm sure of it. I can feel it. We don't leave this place until we find it!'

Ryan now felt himself trembling. He could hear that there were now several Montonians in the room. He could hear that they were starting to lift up the tables, and were throwing them around the room, as they conducted their search. He and Lisa held onto each other, and they both kept as still as they possibly could.

They could hear that the Montonians were coming nearer. Ryan felt trapped as there was nothing that he could do. He felt that it was inevitable that they were going to be found, and it was now only a matter of time.

He closed his eyes, and tried to put the sound of the Montonians out of his mind. As he did so, he found that he couldn't hear them any more - he genuinely couldn't hear them. He couldn't hear anything. He could still feel Lisa holding onto him, but he couldn't hear her breathing. He then heard a voice. It was very faint and far away, and he couldn't hear what it said. It then seemed to come nearer, or, at least, it got louder. It was saying, 'Ryan...' He recognised the voice - it was the same female Scottish voice that he had heard back at the eclipse.

The voice continued, 'Ryan, I'm here... Ryan, please...'

It was very close now. Ryan felt that he could almost reach out and touch whoever it was that was talking to him.

The voice then shouted, 'Ryan!'

Ryan opened his eyes with a start. As he did so, the Scottish voice disappeared, and he could once more hear the sound of the Montonians searching the room. He held onto Lisa tighter.

He was curious to know as to what and who the voice was, and how it was that he came to hear it. But he wasn't able to dwell on it for long, as he could hear that the Montonians were now upon them. He heard the footsteps of one of them walk right up to the table that they were cowering behind.

The table was lifted up and thrown across the room. The Montonian said, 'Well, look what we've found! You two, on your feet!'

Ryan and Lisa stood up and turned around to face the Montonians. Ryan could now see their uniforms. They were all dressed in black, including black gloves and black helmets. Even their beards were black. There were about twenty of them in the room. Some of them now pointed their guns at Ryan and Lisa - Ryan felt that this was starting to become a bit of a habit. He was now longing for the day when he didn't have a gun pointed at him, or when he wouldn't have to explain who he was.

One of the Montonians came up to him. He had a red armband on his right arm. This Montonian said, 'Who are you, and what are you doing here?'

Ryan said, out loud, and almost without meaning to, 'Here we go again...'

'What was that? I asked you who you are and what are you doing here?'

'I'm Ryan, this is Lisa, I'm from Earth, I came to your world a hundred thousand years ago and helped your people come back up to the surface, although it wasn't thousand years ago for me, it was just a couple of hours ago.'

Ryan thought that he was being clever, but his confidence had got the better of him. The Montonian slapped him around the face, and Ryan fell to the ground. As he hit the ground everything around him went black for a moment, and then he heard the Scottish voice say, 'Ryan!' once more, before he came to his senses and saw the ballroom again.

He rubbed his cheek, and then slowly got back up to his feet. As he did so the Montonian said, 'Do you think you're funny?'

'No. No I don't. You asked me who we were, and I told you.'

'You seriously expect me to believe that you are the Ryan and the Lisa, from a hundred thousand years ago?'

'No, I don't expect you to believe it. It is quite an unbelievable story. But the fact that it's an unbelievable story doesn't stop it from being a true story. I can't change the fact that I am Ryan from Earth just as much as you can't change whoever you are. I am Ryan and I am from Earth and I was on your home world a hundred thousand years ago and I did convince Cronton to speak to the authorities to try and convince them to allow your people to return to the surface and I did kiss his daughter Sophron just before I was taken away from your world and I wish that I wasn't right here right now because I don't want to be caught up in the middle of a war but I wasn't exactly given a choice in the matter but nevertheless here I am and here you are and we are both in this situation and I would very much like to find a way out of it in a way that is mutually agreeable to all which would also include me not haven't to experience any more pain if that is alright with you, sir!'

The Montonian slapped Ryan again, and Ryan went down again, although this time he didn't black out. This time he didn't hurry back up to his feet.

'Get up!' said the Montonian.

'No, why should I?'

'Because I'm ordering you to!'

'Will you hit me again if I do get up?'

'Well, that depends on you. If you stop talking nonsense and start telling us the truth then maybe I won't have to hit you anymore.'

'Well then I'm staying down here then, if that's all the same to you. I already have told you the truth and you don't believe me, and I don't think that I'm going to be able to convince you, and so I don't think there's not much point in my bothering to get back up again if all you're going to do is hit me.'

'On your feet!'

'Cronton was never like this, you know. When he didn't know who we were, when we were first brought to him, when all we were to him were two people who had been found up on the surface, he never hit us. No once. He didn't even threaten us with violence. All he did was lock Lisa and I in a room, and let us talk to each other. He listened in, of course, which, if you ask me was a little rude of him, but he only did it to find out the information that he needed without having to resort to torture. Pretty pointless, torture that is. You can never really rely on it. Cause someone to feel enough pain, and you could get them to confess to almost anything. Yes, it was me behind the grassy knoll in Dallas 1963. It was me who shot JR Ewing, and Mr Burns. And I killed Nanna Birk-Larsen! Yep, that was all me! Now, if you wouldn't mind, could you please take that red hot poker out of my arse.'

'I said, on your feet!'

Ryan looked up and the man, and then said, 'Or you'll do what? What could you possibly do to me down here that you won't do to me up there? At least if you hit me down here I won't have that far to fall. And, as we've established that you're more than likely to hit me again, I really don't see the point in getting back up to my feet. So, go right ahead, do what you like to me. If you're going to hit me again, let's get it over with. But I'm telling you, I am Ryan, I am from Earth, and I am the same Ryan that was on your world a hundred thousand years ago. You can either choose to believe that or not, but that is the truth.'

The man looked at Ryan, and he had a really filthy look on his face. After a moment he turned away and went back to his men.

Lisa came down and sat next to him. She asked, 'Are you OK?'

'Yeah, I'll live. I don't think that there's going to be any easy way to convince him.'

'Well, you can hardly blame him. Try looking at it from his point of view. How would you feel if you were back on Earth and you found someone one day who claimed that his name was Jesus and that he was the same Jesus that had been around two thousand years ago. You'd probably think he was crazy.'

'Yeah, probably... Hey, so, do you know if Jesus was real? Was he really the son of God? Is there a God?'

'Ryan, focus. We need to try and find a way out of this, and preferably in a way that doesn't result in us getting killed.'

'OK, but I don't know what we can say to convince them. They want the truth, and I'm telling them the truth! It's hardly my fault if they can't handle it!'

The Montonian with the red arm bands then said, 'I can still hear you, you know.' He came back over towards them. 'I think that you are either deliberately trying to play me for a fool, or you are genuinely insane. So, why don't we try this again? Who are you really?'

'I really am Ryan from Earth! Look, I'm sure you must have heard about us. From what I understand we're kind of a couple of heroes in your culture. The Troians told us that a lot of your people now have our names, which is kind of flattering, in a way. Now, what do your stories say about us? Do they mention anything about us disappearing suddenly without a trace? When I was last on your world I was in the arms of a girl called Sophron. We were kissing, and then, suddenly, she was gone. At least, that's what it was like from my perspective. From her perspective I would have been the one who was suddenly gone. Do your legends have anything to say about that?'

There was a pause, and then the Montonian said, 'Yes, yes they do. The Ryan of old did disappear in the manner that you speak of, at least according to the legends. But there was a lot of speculation around that, only a few people actually witnessed it. But why am I bothering to tell you this. Everyone knows what the legends say!'

Ryan then got to his feet, walked up to the Montonian, and said, 'Yes, I suppose they do. But just think for a moment, and open your mind. Just suppose that the legends are actually true, that the Ryan of a hundred years ago did disappear whilst kissing Sophron. Your legends should also say that he and Lisa also mysteriously appeared on your planet to start with. Now, if we could mysteriously appear and then disappear, if all of that was true, then doesn't it follow that we could also mysteriously appear in another time and another place? Say, a hundred thousand years later here on Troia? Because that is what has happened! I am that Ryan. She is that Lisa. We are not trying to mess you around. And we are most certainly not insane! Or least I hope I'm not. Although that would explain a lot.

'So, yes, anyway. That is the truth of the matter. Now, whether or not you choose to believe it is up to you. Please have a think about. Oh, and please don't hit me again. It really doesn't do either of us any good.'

Ryan looked at the Montonian in the eye. He was getting used to having to explain himself. He felt that he had done it once again - he had managed to convince yet another person to believe in his unbelievable story. They could then get on to the real business of trying to put an end to this war, which Ryan was convinced was the reason why they had been sent here.

After a brief moment, the Montonian said, 'I've had enough of this idiot. He's clearly trying to hide something from us. Frisk him, cuff him, and then carry on searching this place.' He looked at Lisa and said, 'And do the same with her.'

Ryan stood with his arms up and his legs apart, to make it easier for him to be frisked. He saw one of the Montonians go up to Lisa. Before he started to frisk her Ryan heard her say, 'Don't even think about trying anything funny!' Ryan got a very thorough frisking, but he could see that the man that was frisking Lisa only did it quickly. He looked like he felt uncomfortable doing it.

Once they were both frisked (and the Montonians had found nothing of interest), the Montonians placed Ryan's and Lisa's hands behind their backs and placed handcuffs on them. They were led to the side of the room, and made to sit on the floor. They were watched over by a couple of the men, whilst the others continued to search the building.

One of the men looked at Ryan and asked, 'Are you really the Ryan from the legend?'

'Yes, that's what I keep saying!'

'If that's so, then why have you come back?'

'I was sent here by someone else, presumably to end this war of yours.'

'And why did you come in this building? What is it that was in here?'

'We didn't come in here for anything! There's nothing here but us! The Troians, who we had only just managed to convince about who we were, were taking us to what they called the Centre, when we heard you lot coming. All we did was head in here for cover. That's all!'

The man nodded, and then said, 'I guess that makes sense.' He then looked at Lisa, and said, 'And you really are Lisa?'

'Yes.'

'If you don't mind my saying, you are even more beautiful than the legends say you are.'

'Thank you.'

He continued to look at her, as though he were taking in her beauty. Then his expression changed. It seemed as though he spotted something that surprised him. He moved closer to her, crouched down, and looked at her right in the eyes.

He then got back up, and went over to the Montonian in the red arm bands. He said, 'Sir, I think you'd better come and see this.'

They both came back over to Lisa. The red arm bands man said, 'What am I supposed to be looking at.'

'Look at her eyes.'

'Why would I want to do that for?'

'Just do it!'

The red arm bands man crouched down and looked into Lisa's eyes, and Ryan saw his expression change as well. The man said, 'It can't be...'

'Sir, they're blue...'

'But, that's impossible...'

'I know it sounds impossible, sir, but they are blue. We can both see that they are blue. And that's not all. I know you can see them too...'

'I... I can... I shouldn't... but I can see the gold specks as well...'

'Blue eyes with gold specks. You know what that means sir...'

'No... No... It can't be! I can't believe it! I won't believe it!' He got up and walked across the room.

By now the other men had stopped searching, as they could hear what was being said. They all then started coming up to Lisa, and all took it in turns to look in her eyes. Lisa for her part just looked back at them, although Ryan thought he saw her batting her eyelids at one or two of them.

Once they had all had a look, they gathered together in the centre of the room, and spoke to each other in hushed tones, too quiet for Ryan to make out what it was that they were saying.

As they were talking, Ryan shuffled up to Lisa and asked, 'What's going on here.'

'Take a look yourself if you like. Have a look at my eyes.'

Ryan leant in and looked at her eyes. He hadn't noticed anything particularly unusual about them before. They were certainly very pretty eyes, but nothing more unusual than that. He hadn't thought that there had been anything particularly different about them from the eyes of any other pretty girl that he had seen in his time.

But then he saw them too - the gold flecks. They were very faint, but as she moved her eyes the light would sometimes catch them, and her eyes would literally sparkle. 'Wow...' he said. 'What is that?'

'To you they may look a little unusual, but for me it's perfectly normal. They're just my eyes. But they are certainly unusual here. If my memory serves me correctly, neither the Montonians nor the Troians have varying eye colours. The Montonians have very dark eyes, almost completely black, whereas the Troians have brown eyes. I would be the first blue eyed person that they've ever seen.'

'I see. So, do you think that you can win them over with your eyes.'

'Well, a girl's got to use whatever she has!' She smiled at Ryan.

He then looked back over at the Montonians. This was now certainly starting to get very surreal. A moment ago he thought that he was going to get hit repeatedly as the Montonians refused to believe that they were who they said they were. Now, through the power of Lisa's eyes alone, it looked like they were going to be saved. That said, he did think it rather odd that they should react quite the way that they did just because of her eyes. Yes, they were quite different to what they would call normal eyes, but were they really that awe inspiring? He had seen some very pretty eyes during his time, but they alone had never provoked quite such a reaction in him. Yes, her eyes were a different colour, and yes, they had some gold specks in them, but to react like this to them? If he had seen something similar back on Earth - someone with an unusual eye colour with gold flecks in them - he would have just put it down to a freak of nature, or possibly contact lenses. Maybe they didn't have contact lenses here, he thought. But that still left the freak of nature explanation. There was definitely something very odd going on here.

After a while the man with the red arm bands stepped forward. He said, 'I'm very sorry, I'm not quite sure how to say this. You've got to understand, we've all been under a lot of pressure recently, and I hadn't noticed. If you had said something sooner...' He then got down on one

knee, bowed his head, and said, 'Please, forgive me! I didn't mean to cause you this offence, none of us did!' All of the other Montonians then got down on one knee and bowed their heads.

There was then a moment of very awkward silence. The moment went on. Ryan looked around, and wondered who would be the first person to end the awkwardness. This strange behaviour was getting more surreal by the minute, not that he was complaining. It now looked as though the threat of them being hit again was now over, which was definitely a plus point in his book. Now they might finally start to believe that they were who they said they were, and they could get down to business.

It was Lisa who eventually broke the silence. She said, 'Er, guys. I'm still in handcuffs. Would you mind helping me out here?'

The red arm bands man then said, 'Yes, of course, how foolish of us... Go help her out!'

One of the other men shuffled up to her. He appeared to be afraid to stand up. He went behind her, and took off the handcuffs. As he did so he said, 'I'm sorry, we didn't know...' He then shuffled back.

Before he got back to his place Lisa said, 'Aren't you forgetting something?' The man looked at her, and he appeared to be both puzzled and afraid. Lisa then said, 'What about my friend?'

'Oh, yes, of course, please forgive me...' The man then shuffled over to Ryan and took off his handcuffs. He seemed to bow at Ryan, and then shuffled back to his place amongst the other Montonians.

Ryan stood up, and rubbed his wrists. He walked over towards Lisa, who also stood up. They stood there for a moment, looking over the Montonians before them. Ryan then said, quietly to Lisa, 'OK, so, what's going on here then?'

'To be honest, I'm not exactly sure. We should just play along with it.' She then turned to the Montonians and said, 'Please, stand up.'

They did so, although they only did so slowly, most of them looking a little unsure. Then the man with the red arm bands came up to Lisa and, bowing his head, he said, 'I'm very, very sorry about this. Over the years people became less and less sure that you would actually return. Some people still held faith, and we all of course know the story. I just wasn't expecting it to be who would end up actually meeting you.'

Ryan then said, 'That's all fine. Now, whilst I may have been travelling with Lisa, I'm not so familiar with this story of which you speak. Would you be so kind as to tell it to me?'

'Well, er, I guess I could, but, Lady Lisa, surely it would be better if it were to come from you yourself?'

Lisa replied, 'No, I don't think so. I would like you to tell it to me.'

'Very well, if that is what you wish. As you know, yourself and Ryan were last on our world a hundred thousand years ago, when you helped our people begin their long journey back up to the surface. But you both vanished suddenly once your work was done. Regardless, our people were still able to triumph. Three hundred years later we were visited by a mysterious man. He never told us his name. He just appeared suddenly in the middle of our parliament chamber. By this point in our history the proceedings of our parliamentary sessions were being televised so that the general populace could witness them. This man's appearance was seen live, and, within moments of his appearance, most of the world's population were watching.

'At first the man didn't say anything. He just stood still in the middle of the room. He was an old man, with long grey hair and a long grey beard. It was believed that he was waiting long enough so that his words would be heard by as many people as possible. Eventually, he spoke. He said that he was an associate of yours, and that he had travelled a very long distance so that he could speak with us on that day. He told us that one day you would return. He said that he wasn't going to be able to tell us when that day would be. He said that we would be able to identify that it was really you not just by your red hair, but by your blue eyes, which would have golden specks in them. He said that we were not to mention her eyes to anyone who wasn't a Montonian. We didn't know what that meant at the time, for we did not yet know about the people who lived on worlds such as Troia.

'He then said that you would return to us, along with the one known as Ryan, at a time when we would most be in need of you. He said that when you returned to us that we should listen carefully to your words, and to choose wisely. He wouldn't say what it was that we were to choose, or give any further details about what it was that he was speaking about. He just told us to wait for your return, and listen to what it is that you have to say. He refused to answer any questions that were put to him. In fact, he seemed to just ignore the people that were around him.

'Then, he disappeared just as suddenly as he had appeared, leaving our people in a state of bewilderment. People didn't know what to make of it all.

'They tried to go back and watch the recordings of the session. However, on every single recording, that every Montonian who had made one had made, the recording was blank from the moment that the man appeared, to the moment that he had disappeared. There was no record anywhere of the man's visit, apart from what was in our own memories.

'There was much speculation about what it was that had happened. Some people thought that it was a trick of some kind, that a prankster had found a way to make themselves suddenly appear and disappear in the chamber. But these people weren't able to explain exactly how he

had done this, and they didn't have any explanation whatsoever for why all of the recordings were blank. There were some people who thought that the whole thing was some form of mass hallucination. But most people accepted that they had seen what it was that they had seen.

'From that point onwards the mysterious man and his visit passed into our legends, along with what you and Ryan had done for us previously. We then started to wait expectantly for your return..

'Then the years passed by, and more and more people started to disbelieve the legends. The generation that had witnessed the appearance of the man died out, and so there was no one left who could actually remember the event. We all had to rely on what we were told. More and more people started to disbelieve it. We all know of the story, as it is told to us when we are in school. But now there are very few people that actually believe it.

'But I feel that that will all start to change soon, now that you are actually here! I have to admit that I for one was a disbeliever, and always had been. But now that I have seen you myself, now that I have actually looked into your eyes, and seen that they are blue, and seen the golden specks for myself, I can that I was wrong to have ever doubted you. I hope that you forgive me...

'We now await for you to impart to us your words of wisdom, my lady...'

The man bowed his head, and stood back from Lisa. There was a brief pause, and then Lisa said, 'Thank you for telling me your tale. You told it well. Let me now consult with Ryan. I ask that you give us some privacy.'

'Of course, my lady, whatever you wish.' The man then gathered together all of the Montonians, and they went off to the far side of the room, leaving Ryan and Lisa alone to speak to each other.

'Well,' said Ryan, 'That was quite a story! It turns out that you're some kind of a God to these people! The Goddess Lisa!'

'Yes, only I'm no goddess...'

'Do you know who that man was that they spoke of?'

'I'm not sure. I think I know who it might be, but I could be wrong...'

'So, who do you think it might be?'

There was a pause, and then Lisa said, 'That's not important. What matters now is that these people are expecting me to pass onto them some words of wisdom, and I don't have a clue what to say!'

'But I thought you knew everything? Surely you can think of something to say to them?'

'I'm sorry, but I don't actually know as much as you think I know. And I really don't know what it is that I can say to these people.'

'Why not tell them that this war is wrong? That they should let the Troian people go free?'

'Yes, I could tell them something like that, but I would feel a little funny doing so. If we did that we might end up becoming legends in Troian history. They might start to worship us as well, and, in another hundred thousand years who knows what trouble that could cause.'

'Yes, but haven't we been making big changes to societies? Look at what we did back in Triceria, making them change their who constitution, all for the sake of love? And we already made a massive change to Montonian society!'

'Yes, and look at where that got us. No, I think we need to think twice before we start to make a change as big as that. I don't want these people to start thinking that I'm some sort of goddess that I'm not...'

'But surely that is what we are here to do? We know that we were brought here for a reason, just like we've been taken everywhere else, for a reason. We're supposed to be helping people, to be making their lives better. And what could be better than bringing about an end to a completely unjust and devastating war? We could bring about an end to this war, and free the Troian people. Surely you're not saying that the Montonians should just be left to continue to oppress them?'

'No, I don't think that they should be oppressing them. But I want them to choose for themselves to not do so, not to just do it because I told them to, because they think I'm some sort of goddess whose coming has been foretold for a hundred thousand years. I don't want that sort of power. I have never wanted it, and I never will. If they want to give me that power then I will refuse it. No, that is not what I'm about. I am not a goddess, and I do not go around telling people what they have to do. All I want to do is to help people, to help them to see things as they really are, to see their own lives from a different perspective.'

'So, what are you going to do? Whether you like it or not, you're going to have to say something. It doesn't have to be anything too life changing, but they are expecting you to say something.'

'Let me think for a moment...'

Lisa wandered away from Ryan, and he could see that she was deep in thought. He thought that it was a little strange that the focus had now all turned to her. Not that he minded, he didn't always like being the centre of attention. But all throughout this journey he had felt that it had been about him. It always seemed to be him that was having to take some sort of action to help people. Then there was the time when they were taken to St Luke's Hospice, and the time when they went to the last solar eclipse, where he seemed to have been unaffected when everyone else was frozen during totality. But now things seemed to be turning on Lisa. In the Montonian's tale

the man spoke of Lisa's return and described what her eyes would look like, but he didn't speak of Ryan. It was Lisa that they've been expecting all of this time. He was just a mere spectator, a sidekick. He was OK with that, he just felt that it seemed a little odd, and he wasn't sure how all of this was going to pan out.

Eventually, Lisa came back over to him, and then she called out to the Montonians, saying, 'Come here, I will speak to you now.' The Montonians all walked over towards them, and lined up in front of them. They all looked at Lisa with expectant looks on their faces.

She looked back at them, and then she said, 'People of Monton. I speak to you here, today, on Troia. You may live here now, but this is not your world. Before you came here this was already someone else's home. This world belongs to the Troians, the very people that you are fighting. However, I believe that you were once welcome here, and that, at first, you did improve the lives of the Troians. You shared your technology with them, and helped them to improve their standard of living. Now, you may think that I'm about to tell you to end your war with the Troians, that I'm going to dictate to you as to how to go about your affairs. I am not. That is not what I do. That is not who I am. But there is something that I do want you to do.

'Before we came in here, we were in the company of three Troian fighters. Three fighters that you killed. First, I want you to show some respect to their bodies. They were men, just like you. I want you to treat them as though they were your own men.

'These Troians were taking us to a place that they called the Centre. What I want you to do is to lay down your weapons, to leave them here. And then I want you to take us to the centre, with your hands up in the air.'

There was a stunned silence in the room. Then the man with the red arm bands said, 'But, my lady, such a mission would be suicide. As soon as the Troians see us they will shoot us on sight.'

'Have they ever been approached by a group of unarmed Montonians holding their hands up in the air before?'

'Well, no, they probably haven't...'

'Then how do you know how they will react?'

'Well, I, er...'

'Precisely, you don't know. Now, that is what I want you to do, and you will do it for me. Do any of you object to this?'

No one uttered a word.

'Very well. Now, let us go outside, and tend to the fallen Troian fighters.' She started to walk towards the exit of the ballroom. Ryan went with her, and the Montonians followed them.

They went outside, where they could still see the bodies of Takrat, Raktrak, and Yeta. Lisa turned to the Montonians and said, 'Here are the men that you killed. Tend to them.'

She stood back whilst the Montonians all filed past her. They first went to the bodies of Raktrak and Yeta, and prepared to carry them over to where Takrat was by the side of the road.

As they were doing this Ryan asked Lisa, 'Do you know what you're doing?'

'No, not really. I'm pretty much just making this up as I go along.'

'But surely you must have some idea of where you're intending to take this?'

'I'm hoping that I can get the Montonians and the Troians to speak with each other, so that they can get to know each other. Too often in war the opposing sides forget that their enemies are people too. On your world you might say that they dehumanise their enemies, which is how they feel that they can kill so many of them. I want both sides to see each other for who they really are, and then hopefully take things from there.'

'Well, good luck with that.' There was a pause, and then Ryan said, 'There's been something that's been puzzling me a little. These Montonians said that they were able to identify you as the real Lisa by looking into your eyes - to see that they were blue and had golden specks in them. They knew this through a legend that had been told to them. If that was the case, why did we have so much trouble trying to convince the Troians of our true identities earlier? Hadn't they heard of the legend as well?'

'I'm guessing that maybe they hadn't, or, if they had, they simply dismissed it. Remember, when the Montonian told us his tale he said that the man told them not to share it with anyone who wasn't Montonian. It meant little to them back then, but when the Montonians came out to the stars, and met people like the Troians, anyone who was a believer probably just did as the legend instructed - they didn't tell the Troians about me or the old man. There may have been Montonians who didn't believe, who may have mentioned it to the Troians, but those Troians would have been told of it as just a legend, a story, not something to be believed in. There may have been a number of Troians who knew about it, but probably very few that believed in it. Takrat and his men may just have been people who didn't know about it, or may not have known all of the details about it, and so wouldn't have thought about looking into my eyes to try and confirm my identity.'

'OK, I guess that kind of makes sense...'

Whilst Ryan and Lisa were having this conversation, the Montonians had brought Raktrak and Yeta over towards Takrat's body. They had lined them up together, side by side, with Takrat in the middle. They had closed their eyes, and folded their hands together on their chests. Some

of them had gone back inside the building, and were now returning with some of the tablecloths from the tables in the ballroom. They placed the tablecloths over the fallen men.

They then all stood in a circle around the men, and saluted them. Ryan assumed that this was a ritual that the Montonians performed to honour their own fallen, an honour that they were now giving to their enemies at Lisa's suggestion.

The Montonians then stood back from the fallen Troians, and then walked over to Lisa, lining up in front of her. The man with the red arm bands came up to Lisa and said, 'We have treated the fallen Troian soldiers as we would treat our own. We hope that this is to your satisfaction, my lady.'

'It is. You will now all lay down your weapons, and take us to the Centre. But, before we go, I want you tell me your name.'

'Of course, my lady. I am Captain Ryan Roston, of the 107th Utilia Security Unit.'

Ryan looked at him and said, 'Your name is Ryan?'

'Yes, please forgive me, but it is a common name amongst my people.'

'No, not at all. It's fine. It's a little surreal, but it's fine.'

Lisa then said, 'Captain Roston, if you could now command your men to lay down their arms, we can then get on our way.'

'Yes, my lady.' The Captain turned to his men and said, 'OK men, you know what we have to do. Place all of your guns and knives by the side of the road.'

The Montonians did what the Captain said, and he himself joined them. Ryan was surprised to see just how many weapons they had. Each man seemed to have about five guns hidden about their bodies, as well as three knives. They also seemed to have quite a bit of what looked like ammunition for the guns hidden away in what must have been very deep pockets.

Once all of their weapons were by the side of the road, the Captain came up to Lisa and asked, 'We are now disarmed. In what formation would you like us to walk in as we take you to the Centre?'

'You will walk in front of us in two lines. And remember to keep your arms up at all times. If you don't then it will be far more likely that the Troians will shoot at you when they see you.'

'Yes, my lady, as you wish.'

The Montonians they lined up as Lisa had instructed. Once they had done so Ryan heard the Captain shout out, 'Unit, move out!' They then started to move out, and Ryan and Lisa followed them.

They went at a fairly slow pace. Ryan could see that the men were trying to stay focused on looking forward, but he sometimes spotted one taking a look around them, presumably to try and figure out whether or not they were safe.

Ryan said to Lisa, 'I hope you know what you're doing.'

'I'm afraid that I'm really not sure. I'm just trying to do what feels right in my heart. I hope that it all works out, but, to be perfectly honest, I really don't know what is going to happen to all of us once we reach the Centre.'

They continued going through the city slowly. In the distance they could hear a few more relatively small explosions, and gunfire. Ryan started to feel that they were horribly exposed, but he knew that there was nothing that he could do about it. He just had to keep on following the Montonians, and just hope that everything worked out.

They appeared to be making their way towards a large building, which had a large flag flying from its rooftop. The flag had a deep blue background, a large red diagonal cross, and, on top of that, a yellow circle in the centre. The building looked in quite a state of disrepair, as though it had been attacked numerous times, but was still somehow standing.

They got closer to the building. As they did so, Ryan thought he could hear a voice on a loudspeaker somewhere, but he couldn't make out what the voice was saying, only that it sounded like it was giving orders of some kind. He thought that as they got nearer still he would be able to make out what exactly was being said via the loudspeaker, but he didn't get the chance.

They were suddenly all surrounded by another group of men, all of whom were armed. They just seemed to have appeared from out of nowhere, although they had in fact been hiding in all of the buildings that were around them. They appeared to be Troian as they had a similar look to them as Commander Takrat and his men.

One of these men said, 'Halt! Who goes there? And what is the meaning of this?'

Captain Roston said, 'We are the 107th Utilia Security Unit. We are unarmed. We are with two people known as Ryan and Lisa. As strange as it may sound, we believe that they are the original Ryan and Lisa that visited our world a hundred thousand years ago, and are spoken of in our legends.'

The Troian who appeared to be the leader laughed, and said, 'Now that just has to be about the most stupid thing that I have ever heard anyone say! If this some sort of ridiculous plan that you Montonians have come up with? Some bizarre way to infiltrate the Centre? Well, it's not going to work!'

'Wait!' called out Lisa. She walked up to the Troian's leader, and said to him, 'What he says is true. I am the Lisa that is spoken of in their legends.'

The Troian leader looked over Lisa, and then said, 'You certainly don't look Montonian, but you'll have to try harder than that if you think you're going to fool me!'

'No one is trying to fool you!'

Captain Roston said, 'Look into her eyes! I don't know how familiar you are with our legends, but one of them says that when Lisa returns she can be identified by having blue eyes with golden specks in them. This Lisa has those very eyes! Look at them for yourself if you don't believe me!'

The Troian leader looked into Lisa's eyes, and then he said, 'She does indeed have blue eyes with golden specks in them, and I have heard something about that legend. I have to admit that you may not be quite as stupid as I first thought. However, I am still not fooled. You could have done something to this girl's eyes to make them look like that. You appear to have thought carefully about your ruse, but it's not enough to get past me! Now, tell me what you're really doing here?'

'Lisa will have to tell you that. Our legends told us that we would have to listen to what she had to say to us. She told us to lay down our weapons, and to take her and her companion to the Centre, and that is why we are here.'

The Troian leader turned to Lisa and asked, 'Is that so? You were really able to get them to lay down their arms?'

'Yes. You can search them if you don't believe me.'

'Very well. Men, search these Montonians, as well as this girl and that man at the back.' The Troian soldiers then preceded to follow this order, and Ryan was frisked for the third time that day. He was starting to get used to it by now, but he longed to be back on a world where people didn't always assume that you were armed and had to search you in order to be sure.

Once they were done, and reported to their leader that everyone was, indeed, unarmed, he said, 'Hmm, I have to admit that this is all rather odd.' He turned to Lisa and asked, 'Why is it that you brought them here? We don't want their sort around here.'

'I can understand your sentiments. I know how hard this war has been on you and your world, and how much you dislike the Montonians. But have you ever actually met your enemy before? Have you ever sat down and spoken to him?'

'Yes, of course I've met Montonians before! I meet them almost every day! Normally at the end of my gun, or in an interrogation chamber.'

'But have you ever met them outside of those contexts? When you're not trying to hunt them down, or to obtain information from them?'

There was a pause, and then the Troian leader said, 'What is the meaning of this? Who on Troia are you? Why would I want to have anything to do with these bags of scum? This is war, I don't have time to meet people and talk to them. I have an enemy, and it is my sworn duty to eliminate them from this world, even if I have to die in the process. I don't know who you really are, or what you are doing here. But this, whatever this is, has to stop now.'

'And so what is it that you propose to do with us?'

There was a pause and then the Troian leader said, 'I'm not sure yet. My gut tells me that I should just kill you all now on the spot. Can you give me a good reason why I shouldn't?'

'Yes. I can't deny the fact that our just turning up here is more than just a little odd. If you just kill us now, you won't get any information from us.'

'Ah, so you have information to give then, do you?'

'What do you think?'

The Troian leader thought some more, and then he said, 'I'll take this one and that one -' He indicated Lisa and Ryan, 'To the General. The rest of you keep an eye on this lot. If they so much as fart, kill them.'

One of the men grabbed hold of Lisa, and another one came over and grabbed hold of Ryan. 'Alright!' said Ryan, 'I'm coming peacefully! There's no need to grab so hard, you now.'

The man just said, 'Shut up, scum,' and tightened his grip on Ryan.

The Troian leader led the way, with the men holding Ryan and Lisa pushing them through after him. They continued on towards the building with the large flag, which Ryan was now fairly certain was the Centre.

As they got closer they saw more and more Troian soldiers about, manning various lines of defence. The group had to go through a number of gates, with the leader saying that he was bringing in a couple of prisoners for questioning as they reached each gate.

Ryan thought that they were going to go all the way to the building itself, but they stopped some way short of it. The Troian leader said to his men, 'Wait here while I go to the General.' He then walked off into another, smaller, building nearby.

Ryan, Lisa, and the two men stood in silence. Around them they could hear the sound of men running from one place to another, and the occasional order being shouted out. There was now no sign of the loudspeaker that Ryan had heard earlier. They also occasionally heard an explosion in the far distance.

They waited like this for what seemed to Ryan to be a very long time. The man who had hold of him was still gripping him tightly, and Ryan thought that he was about to cut off his circulation. His legs were now also starting to ache. He wasn't sure quite what was going to

happen next, but he had a strange feeling that he wasn't in any danger. Despite the fact that he was in the middle of a war zone, and he was with people who weren't being particularly friendly towards him, he still had a sense of calm and safety around him. He couldn't work out why he was feeling what it was that he was feeling, but he was glad of this feeling.

Eventually, the Troian that had led them here came back with another man. He was a large man, wearing a long grey coat. He came up to Ryan and Lisa and asked the other Troian, 'Are these the two?'

'Yes sir!'

'Let me have a look at them.' He looked first at Ryan, but he didn't look at him for very long. He then looked at Lisa, and at her eyes in particular. Ryan surmised that he must have heard about the Montonian legend, and want to verify Lisa's eyes for himself.

The large Troian then asked the other, 'Have they been searched?'

'Yes sir! No weapons were found.'

'Did you find anything else?'

'Er... Not that I'm aware of. Should there have been something else that we should have been looking for?'

'Not to worry, you weren't to know. But I want you to search the man again - see if he has a key on him.'

Ryan had forgotten all about the key that he had obtained all the way back on Triceria. it had been in his pocket the whole time, but he hadn't given it much thought. Now he realised that it was about to have some significance, although he wasn't sure quite what that would be.

The man holding him searched him again, and took the key out from his pocket. He handed it over to the large man, who then inspected it carefully.

Once he had done so he said, 'Very good, very good indeed. You have done well to bring these two to me alive. Leave them here with me. I will look after our guests. Men!' He called out behind him, and five other men emerged from the building, all of whom were also wearing long grey coats. He then turned to the men that had brought Ryan and Lisa here and said, 'Go back to the Montonians. Kill them all.'

'No!' cried out Lisa.

The large man said, 'Shut it!' and then he struck Lisa around the face. She flinched, but she did not fall down. But she gave the man a look so filthy that Ryan wouldn't have believed it possible for her to do.

The man holding her handed her over to one of the men in the grey coats, whereas the man holding Ryan just let him go. The three men that had brought Ryan and Lisa here then turned around to go back in the direction that they had come from.

Lisa shouted out, 'You can't do this! It's murder! It's cold blooded murder! They have no means to defend themselves! They're no threat to you!'

The large man then turned to her, and went right up to her face, 'I said shut it! I know who you are, but you have no authority on this world, my dear. I am the one in charge here, and if I say that Montonian scum must die, then they will die. You will now be quiet and listen.'

Ryan thought that Lisa would have something to say about this, but she fell silent, but she still gave the man a dirty look.

They all stood there in silence. Eventually, Ryan figured that the other men had had enough time to get back to the Montonians. They waited a little longer. Then, in the distance, but still undeniable, they heard twenty individual gun shots ring out. Ryan could see Lisa flinching at every one. He figured she must have been feeling guilty - she had led those men here, hoping to start brokering a peace. Instead, she had led them to their deaths. She had never looked so vulnerable to him before.

One the last shot had rang out the large man said, 'Good, now that we have disposed of that little problem, we can get to business. I am the General. You do not need to know my name - if you ever need to refer to me you can just refer to me as the General. I'm going to take you inside the Centre, and I expect your very best behaviour whilst we are in there. Oh, and you can have this back.' He gave the key back to Ryan, who put it back in his pocket. 'You'll be needing that later.' He turned to the man holding Lisa and said, 'You can let her go now.' He did so, and Lisa started to rub her arms.

He then turned around, and started to walk towards the large building that was the Centre. 'Follow me!' he said, and Ryan and Lisa did so, with the other men in grey coats walking behind them.

Ryan whispered to Lisa, 'Are you OK?'

'No,' she replied, and Ryan could see a single solitary tear roll down her cheek. 'I've seen so many wars in my time, and yet they're always the same. No one has any respect for anyone who isn't on their side. They always just have to kill senselessly.'

Ryan put his arm around her to comfort her, and she seemed to be receptive to this. He really did feel sorry for her - he agreed that there was no good reason for those men to be killed.

He was now really unsure as to what they were doing on this world in this time. He had thought that it was to try and somehow end this war, and in a way that favoured the Troians.

Now he wasn't so sure. After seeing the way that the Troians had treated their prisoners of war he wasn't so sure if he wanted to back them. However, there was still the fact that their world was being oppressed by the Montonians, who had refused to give the Troians their freedom. There was blame on both sides in this war.

Then there was the legend that the Montonians had spoke of, where they were to listen to whatever it was that Lisa had to say, even though she was completely oblivious to this legend herself, and so was left completely helpless as to what to say, which had now resulted in the deaths of twenty unarmed men. Quite what the legend was supposed to mean was now a complete mystery. What more could Lisa possibly say, especially as they were now in the hands of the Troians?

And now there was this business of the key, which clearly meant something to the General, but what? Whatever it was, it seemed to have been enough to spare them their lives, but Ryan was now starting to feel a little uneasy about this - his strange sense of well being was now starting to wane. The Tricerians back on Pyna had no clue as to what the key was for, but now Ryan felt that the lock that it was meant to fit would be somewhere on this world, possibly even in the Centre itself. He started to wonder what lock it would open, and what would be behind that lock. He dreaded to think what this might now be. But he hoped that it would be something good, something that would bring about an end to this senseless and bloody interplanetary war, and would then allow himself and Lisa to leave this place forever, and never return.

They walked on, and then entered the Centre. The man at the door just let the General in without asking him any questions. Clearly, the General commanded a lot of respect around here, so much so that he didn't even need to have a name.

Inside, on the ground floor at least, the building was clean, polished, and modern. By looking at it you wouldn't think that it was in the middle of a devastated city that was now a complete war zone.

The General led them towards a stairwell. Ryan had expected that they would have gone up. He believed that that was where all of the important people went. The General was clearly a very important person, and, not that he was feeling too arrogant, but he believed that Lisa and himself were also very important people at the moment. And so he had every expectation that they would go up. But they did not go up. Instead, they went down.

The lighting was very poor going down the stairs. All of the lights were red, and there weren't that many of them. They only provided just about enough light for them to be able to see the stairs and avoid tripping over themselves.

They went down several flights of stairs. Ryan was just starting to wonder how many basement floors this building had, when they reached the bottom of the stairs the General then led them through some doors, and into a corridor. Ryan thought that he was good with corridors, he had become quite familiar with them during the whole of this journey.

The corridor was slightly better lit, and it had a few white bulbs amongst all of the red ones. They couldn't see any other people on this floor, and the whole place was eerily quiet.

The General eventually led them through a door that was right at the end of the corridor. On the other side of the door was an office with a large desk in it, and two chairs in front of it. The General said, 'Please, do sit down. You are guests here.' Ryan and Lisa sat down in the chairs in front of the desk, and Lisa was still giving the General evil looks.

The General went and sat behind the desk. He then said, 'I suppose you're wondering what it is that you are doing here, and why I have brought you here instead of just killing you. I have been waiting a long time for this moment. All of Troia has been. It is a great honour for me that it will be I who will tell you what it is that you need to know.'

'As you have already heard, the Montonians have a legend that dates back a hundred thousand years, involving a mysterious man who appeared one day in their parliamentary chamber. This man foretold your return, and how to identify you - blue eyes with golden specks. Well, the Montonians are not the only ones who have a legend.

'Ours, however, is a bit more recent. It dates back around two thousand years, when things between Monton and Troia were still fairly good. However, Troia still had its own army and defence force, populated only by Troians. Only we acted more as a police force rather than an army. By that point the Montonians had managed to unite all of the various peoples of Troia under one banner. We still had to report to them, but, on the whole, the army was left to manage its own affairs. The Montonians had their own army on Troia, to keep our people in check.

'Two thousand years ago the heads of the Troian army had gathered together for a meeting. There was nothing particularly special about this meeting. It was a standard, routine meeting, that took place every month, and they were expecting to discuss boring matters such as recruiting, training, and the budget that the army had. The meeting had been going for about an hour when everything changed.

'In the middle of the room, a man had just suddenly appeared. A few of the Troians in the room were familiar with the Montonian legend, and they were able to confirm that this man in their room matched the description of the man that features in the Montonian legend, the man that all Montonians at the time were able to see as his image was broadcast to the whole of

Monton. However, this meeting of the Troian army chiefs was a private meeting, and only those that were in the room saw this man.

'He stood on the desk in the centre of the room. He looked around at each of the men in the room in turn. Each man reported that they felt a sense of dread when this man looked at them, as though he was able to look deep down inside of their hearts, and see them for who they really were.

'Once he had finished looking at all of the men he jumped down off of the desk and to the far side of the room in a single bound. All of the Troians turned to look at him. He then started to speak.

'He told us of a great secret that Troia had, a secret that even the Montonians didn't know anything about. A secret that the Montonians must never know about. He told us that within Troia was an artefact from an ancient civilisation, one that had visited Troia a long time in the history of the world, long before our people had evolved. This artefact would be found deep underground. he provided the Troians with details of how exactly they could find this artefact.

'He advised that this artefact had been left here as a gift for the future Troian people, namely, ourselves. That the purpose of this artefact would become clear at the hour that the Troian people would most be at need. All the Troians were aware of the first legend about Ryan and Lisa, and how they helped to bring the Montonian people back to the surface. The man told the Troians in that room that one day they would return, only, this time they would appear on Troia, to make amends for the consequences that their actions back on Monton caused.

'He said that they would first be found by the Montonians, and that they would be able to recognise that it was the real Lisa by the fact that she would have blue eyes with golden specks in them. He advised that Montonians would bring them to a group of Troians. He then said that what would happen next would be unknown to the Montonians, but which was now going to share with the Troians in that room.

'He said that Ryan would have a key on him. A key that matches the description of the key that you have in your possession. This key would be necessary to activate the artefact, and that only the barer of that key would be able to use it. That barer must be kept alive at all costs, and that it was also important that Lisa is kept alive as well. He said that when Ryan and Lisa arrive on Troia, they must be taken to the artefact, and that Ryan must activate the artefact, which will then free the Troian people from their burdens.

'He then added an important caveat. Unlike Monton, this prophecy had to be kept a secret. Whilst the Montonian prophecy would become widely known amongst the Montonian people, the Troian prophecy would be known only to a select few. It would be known only to high

ranking generals within the Troian army. Whenever a soldier was to be promoted to the rank of General, they would have this prophecy told to them. They would have to swear not to share the prophecy with anyone else, and especially not to any Montonians. The penalty for sharing the prophecy with anyone who was not a general within the Troian army was death. It is with great pride that I can say that no one has ever fallen foul of that rule. In fact, this is the first time that the prophecy has been told to someone who is not a Troian General, although, given the circumstances, I believe we are safe in making an exception here.

'After the man had told the Troians in the room all of this, he simply vanished into thin air. At first the Troians were unsure what to make of what had just happened. But they used logic and reason. They had all seen the man with their own eyes, heard him with their own ears. They couldn't deny to themselves that he had just been there, and that he had told them the things that he had just told them.

'They worked out that there was a simple way that they could go about trying to prove what the man had told them. The man had told them exactly where to find the artefact, and so all they had to do was go and look for it.

'Back then Utilia was only a very small town. This building did not exist back then, and the site where it stands was still undeveloped countryside. The Troian generals went out to this site, and brought with them a team of labourers. The labourers all started to dig on the site. They dug for a long time, and they dug deep. Deep down into the ground. None of the labourers knew what it was that they were digging for, they were all just glad for the work. These were hard times economically for Troia, and most people took whatever work they could find.

'Eventually, they found what they were looking for. They found the artefact! It was a momentous occasion.

'Now, the generals heeded the warning from the man about not sharing the details of the prophecy with anyone who was not a general them self. But now all of these labourers had seen the artefact for themselves. The generals couldn't tell them what it was, or the importance of it. But they felt that they couldn't let them go free, because if they did they would tell others about it, and then, before long, word would spread out amongst the general populace, and people would begin to start asking questions, questions that the generals were forbidden to answer.

'And so the generals did the only thing that they could do in the circumstances. They had the labourers executed.'

Lisa then said, 'That was a cold, heartless, thing to do. That was unjustified. That was wrong.'

'Yes, you're right, on the last point at least. That was indeed wrong, and a little short sighted of the generals at the time. They had now located the artefact, but they now needed to work out

what to do with it. It couldn't be moved from its location, no matter what they tried. And so they decided that they would need to build something around the artefact. They then had to find some more labourers to build this building, when they could have just used the ones that they already had, if they hadn't have killed them. And, of course, as soon as the second group of labourers had finished their work, they, too, had to be executed. It was the only way.

'Over the centuries more and more work was done on the building, which eventually became this building, the building that we now call the Centre. Everyone who has ever worked on any part of the building that has a direct connection to the artefact has had to be executed afterwards. Which is why we were always careful about how we selected people to carry out the work. If we ended up executing too many people, uncomfortable questions would be asked. We always advised people that once someone had been given the honour of working on the Centre, they would be given some better housing for themselves far in the east. And so that way we were able to avoid having to reveal any information that we were prohibited from doing so.

'And that brings us up to now. The artefact is still here, in this building. In fact, we are not that far away from it. Over the centuries our generals have been studying the artefact, and it does indeed have a place for a key. Your key, Ryan. The day has now arrived when you will use the key to activate the artefact, and liberate our world from the Montonians.'

The General was then silent, and Ryan started to ponder his words. He had thought that the Montonians had been really bad when that took over Troia and oppressed its people. But now he was hearing that the Troians weren't all that great either. They seemed all too willing to just believe what they were told, and to execute innocent people who hadn't done anything wrong, people who had just been trying to make an honest living for themselves. They had been doing this for two thousand years, and now they were wanting him to activate the artefact.

Ryan felt very uneasy about this. He didn't like being told what to do. He never had done, and he wasn't about to start now. Yes, he had been given this key all the way back on Triceria, and now he was almost at the lock that the key would be used on. But he still didn't know what exactly was going to happen when he used the key on the artefact.

He also wasn't too sure about this mysterious man that kept turning up in legends. This man, whoever he was, seemed to be telling the Montonians one thing, and then double crossing them with the Troians. It was this man that was saying that Ryan had to use the key, but Ryan didn't think that he would be able to trust him, even though he had never met him and had only heard about him from these legends.

But, whoever this man was, he certainly seemed to be powerful. He seemed to be able to appear and disappear at will, and even had the ability to travel through time. Not only had he

appeared on Monton and Troia, but he may have even been on Pyna at one point in order to leave the key in Triceria, ready for Ryan to collect. He may also have been responsible for leaving the artefact on Troia in the first place.

Ryan felt incredibly uneasy about this whole affair, and he just wanted it to be over as soon as possible.

After this moment of silence, the General then said, 'It is time. We shall go to the artefact now. There will be another general that who will be very pleased to see you.'

He stood up from behind his desk, and turned around so that he was facing the wall. He seemed to place his hand on something that was on the wall, but Ryan wasn't able to get a good look at this. The wall then started to rise up. Behind it was what looked like a lift.

The General opened the door to this lift, and then turned back to Ryan and Lisa and said, 'Come, this will take us to the artefact.'

Ryan then said, 'Could you just give us a minute first?'

'I think not. We have waited a long time for your arrival. I am quite keen to get on with things.'

'Well, I'm sorry, but if you've waited this long, then I think you can wait a little longer!'

'Don't get impudent with me!'

'Look, do you want me to use this key or not?' The General had no answer to this. Ryan continued, 'If you want our co-operation then I think you can grant us this request for a moment together.'

The General looked at Ryan, and then he said, 'Very well. You may step outside if you wish. There will be nowhere for you to go on the other side of that door, so try running off anywhere. I'll have the means to detect where you are if you do.'

'Don't worry, we'll come back.'

Ryan and Lisa then stepped outside. They closed the door behind them, and then Ryan said, 'What do you make of this guy? Personally, I don't trust him at all. He seems like a thoroughly nasty piece of work. And I don't much like the sound of this artefact that he wants us to activate.'

'Yes, I think I agree with you. He is a horrid, horrid man. He had no real reason to have those Montonian men killed, no reason whatsoever. It was completely unjustified.'

'And what do you make of this so called second legend. Do you think he might just be making it up?'

'No, I don't think he is. I'm usually pretty good at being able to tell when someone is lying to me, and I don't think he is. He also knew that you had a key on you before he had you searched

himself. Plus why would he have bothered telling us all of that, and then try and get us to go in that lift to go and see the artefact? I think there really is something down there, and that your key will activate it.'

'But should I use the key? Should we just put blind faith in these legends that we keep on hearing about? We don't even know what this artefact does?'

'I can't answer that I'm afraid. It would appear that only you can use the key and so it will be your decision to make.'

'My decision...!' Then Ryan suddenly had a thought, and said, 'Shadow Zero and Ian Woon both told me that I was going to have to make a very important and difficult decision soon. This would appear to be it.'

'Yes, that would appear to be the case.'

'What do I do Lisa? What's the right thing to do here? What would you do if you were me?'

'Ryan, no. I can't make this decision for you. You have to think carefully and decide for yourself. But I'm sure you'll do fine.' She took hold of his hand. 'You just have to look into your heart, and do whatever it is that feels right.'

'OK, thanks. You're right...'

Lisa smiled at him, and then said, 'Let's go.'

They went back into the room, where the General was still waiting for them. As he saw them he asked, 'So, are you ready to go now?'

Ryan answered, 'Yes, we're ready. Let's get this over with.'

'Very good. This way please...!' He indicated that they were to now get into the lift.

Ryan and Lisa got into the lift, and then the General got in behind them. It was a very tight squeeze in the lift. There was only just about enough room for the three of them. The General closed the door to the lift, and then he pressed a button. The wall in the office that had been concealing the lift came back down, and, with it, all of the light was cut out. It was now pitch black inside the lift.

Ryan assumed that the General pressed another button, and then the lift started to move. It started to go down, and it seemed to go fairly slowly. All three of them were silent during this descent. Occasionally, they would see a bright light go past them. Ryan felt his heart rate rise as each light went by. Each time he saw one he thought that they were about to arrive at the point where there were due to get off, and would therefore be closer to the point when he was going to have to make his decision.

Down and down they went. Deeper and deeper into the ground. Ryan recalled that, according to the General's tale, the labourers had dug down a very long way before they reached the artefact. He just hadn't been able to imagine just how far they had actually gone. It must have taken them an extremely long time, and that awaited them at the end of all of their hard work was an executioner.

Eventually, the lift began to slow down, as they reached the bottom of the shaft. It came to a halt, and Ryan felt his heart sink. They had arrived. They wouldn't have that much longer to go now.

The General opened the door to the lift and stepped outside, and Ryan and Lisa followed him. They found themselves at the end of another long corridor, which had dull yellow lights along each side. Without saying a word, the General started to proceed down the corridor, and Ryan and Lisa followed him.

As they walked down the corridor, Lisa took hold of Ryan's hand. He looked over at her, and she looked back at him. She had an encouraging smile on her face. He then looked ahead of him, of the General leading the way towards a door at the end of the corridor. Each step that Ryan took felt like a great thud, as he got ever closer to the decision that he would have to make.

The General pressed a button, and the door in front of them opened, rising up into the ceiling. They all passed through, and the door closed back down behind them. They were now in an almost circular chamber, which was about ten feet across, and had another door on the other side. To their right was a table with some sort of control panel on it, and opposite the table, on the other side of the chamber, was a large screen which had a lot of numbers on it.

Sitting behind the table was another man. He had a slender build, and short blonde hair. He appeared to be either in his late forties, or early fifties (at least, as far as Earth years went). He was wearing a long white coat.

This man looked up at the General as they all entered the chamber. He then said, 'Ah, General, I wasn't expecting to see you today. What brings you down here to see me?' He spoke with a very soft voice, one that Ryan would even go so far as describing as friendly.

'How is the artefact today?'

'The same as always. The readings are all the same, as they ever are. Who are these people that are with you? If you don't mind my saying so, they don't look like generals.'

'Well, that is because they're not.'

The man then stood up, and held his hand to his head as he said, 'You don't mean to tell me that you shared the prophecy with those who aren't generals? Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, this will never do.'

'Relax, everything is fine. Better than fine, in fact. Allow me to introduce you all.' The General turned to Ryan and Lisa, and, indicating the man in the white coat he said, 'This is General Filton, of the Science Division.' He then turned to General Filton and said, 'General Filton, this is Ryan and Lisa. The Ryan and Lisa. The girl with the blue eyes with the golden specks, and the man who has the key. The key for the artefact.'

There was a pause, and then Filton said, 'You don't mean... are you sure? Is it really them?!' He rushed around his table, and went up to Lisa. 'Let me see,' he said, as he looked into her eyes. 'Yes, it is her! I can see the specks! They are even more beautiful than I had imagined them to be.' He shook her hand using both of his, 'It is very good to meet you, my dear.' He then turned to look at Ryan, and said, 'And it is good to see you too. Do you have the key on you now?'

'Yes, I do.'

'I don't suppose I could have a look at it?'

Ryan took the key out of his pocket, and showed it to him, but he didn't let him get too close to it, and he still had a firm hold on it.

Filton looked at the key, and then said, 'Yes, that's it. That's the key all right. That will fit the lock perfectly! Oh my, this is all rather a lot to take in. I find it hard to believe that this day has finally arrived, and that I should be the one to witness the activation of the artefact! I suppose you know all about it of course.'

Ryan then said (whilst putting the key back into his pocket), 'The General has told us all about your prophecy, and that we, or rather I, am meant to use this key to activate your artefact. But I still have some questions that I would like to have answered, if you don't mind.'

'Not at all, not at all. Please, do go ahead.'

'Well, if you don't mind my saying so, you don't seem like much of a General to me. No offense. And what exactly is the Science Division? Since when did an army get directly involved in science?'

'Well, as I'm sure the General hear has told you, when we were first given this prophecy, we were strictly told not to share it with anyone who was not a general in the Troian army. However, the generals wanted to have the artefact analysed, so that they could try and work out what it was for, and how it operated. They didn't have the skills themselves to do this, and so they created a Science Division. It was only a very small division, of course. Any scientists that they wanted to use to analyse and monitor the artefact were assigned to this division, and given the rank of General. We're not like general's in the main army, of course. Far from it. But, under the laws and rules of the army, we are, indeed, Generals. This meant that they could tell us all

about the prophecy and the artefact, and they wouldn't have to kill themselves or us. It was a rather ingenious idea, don't you think?'

'So, you were given a rule, and, rather than stick rigidly to it, you thought you'd just find a way around it?'

'Well, I suppose that is one way of looking at it. But I'm afraid I would have to disagree with you on that point. The artefact needed to be examined to be sure that it didn't pose a risk to the general population, and so they had to find a way to involve us in it if they were to do that.'

'I see... And what have you found out about it?'

'Oh, we now know plenty about it! Oh yes, indeed. For example, I can tell that your key will fit the lock of the artefact perfectly, because we have done a very detailed study of the lock. We tried to make our own key to try and fit the lock ourselves. Our key did fit the lock perfectly, but, for some reason, it wouldn't turn it. We surmised that the lock would only respond if your specific key was in it, and if it was being turned by yourself, as was described in the prophecy. But we at least knew what the key would look like, and so if anyone tried to come to us with a forgery we would be able to spot them quite easily.'

'Yes, that's all well and good. But do you know what the artefact actually does? What will happen when I turn the key?'

'Oh yes, we know exactly what will happen. And I am so pleased that you are here and that we will finally be able to do this! I and my predecessors have waited so long for this moment, I can't describe how happy I feel at this moment!'

'Yes, yes, key here, Ryan here with key, Ryan puts key in artefact - what happens next?'

'Oh, sorry, I was getting a little carried away and emotional there for a minute. I do hope you can forgive me?'

'Consider yourself forgiven. Now, what does the artefact do?'

'Well, the artefact has a huge store of energy built up inside of it. It gets its energy from Troia itself. It has a feed down into the molten core of the planet. It also has a targeting mechanism. We are not able to have any control over this mechanism, but what its target is is clear. It is targeted at our moon. And, more specifically, at the Montonian settlement that is on our moon. Now, that really is amazing! We don't know just how long the artefact has been on our world for, but we believe that it must have been here long before the Montonians had ever heard of Troia. Whoever it was must have had incredible foresight if they were to know that the source of all our woe was going to be based on our own moon.'

'Yes, that is really impressive. But what does the artefact actually do? What will happen when I turn the key?'

'Ah, yes. Now, as you may already know, the Montonians use our moon as their main base of operations. It's where they launch their attacks on our world from. When you turn the key in the artefact, and activate it, it will use all of the energy that it has stored up. Using the channel that it has, that we have built around it, it will send a burst of powerful radiation up to the moon's surface. The Montonians won't know what hit them! They don't have the necessary shielding to protect themselves against this radiation. They have the necessary shielding to protect themselves from the radiation that is given out by our own sun, but the radiation that will come from the artefact really is something else. There will be nothing that they can do about it.'

'And what exactly will this radiation do?'

'Well, kill them of course.'

'Kill them... How many of them will die?'

'All of them.'

'All of them?! I was told that there were five hundred million Montonians living up there! Five hundred million! And you just want to have them all killed, just like that?'

'Well, this is a war, you know.'

'That's beside the point! How can you possibly justify killing so many people?!'

'They are our enemies. I can assure you that they've had no qualms about killing us. If they had such a weapon in their hands then they wouldn't hesitate to use it.'

'Yes, but just because you have it doesn't mean that you have to use it!'

The General then said, 'But we must use it. Don't you see? The artefact was given to us as a means to bring about an end to this war. Once we wipe out all of the Montonians who are on our moon they'll never come back! They'll never interfere in the affairs of Troia again! We will finally be free!'

'But could you live with the cost that would come with that freedom? Could you live with the fact that you had to kill five hundred million people so that you could be free?'

'Happily! Look at what would happen if we didn't use the artefact. The war would still go on. People would still be killed every day, and many of those people would be Troian. Who knows how long this war will go on for if we don't end it now? Who knows how many more people will be killed, and just what proportion of them will be Troian? We could end this war now. We will end this war now, today! Today is the day that our people will be free!'

'But five hundred million people...'

'I know it is a large number, and it will be a heavy price that the Montonians will have to pay. But, don't forget, they were the ones that brought about this state of affairs. They were the ones who invaded our world, and denied us our freedoms. They only have themselves to blame for

this. We want our freedom. We deserve our freedom. Our people have suffered for long enough. It is time for us to bring this war to an end. It is time for us to claim what is rightfully ours. Troia belongs to the Troians, and today it will become ours once more.'

Filton then said, 'Try not to worry about it too much. I can assure you that this is the right thing for us to do. And, don't forget, it has been foretold. You would come to us with the key to the artefact. Only you can use the key. Only you can activate the artefact. It is your destiny to do so, Ryan, there is no escaping that fact.'

This made Ryan feel distinctively uneasy. He didn't like the idea that his destiny was to set off a weapon that would kill five hundred million people. Yes, it would indeed end the war between Monton and Troia, but that was an incredibly high cost. But he also knew that if he didn't do it, then it seemed inevitable that the war would continue for many more years to come, and would claim many more casualties.

He thought back to the various occasions during his journey when he had just wanted to get something over and done with so that he could move onto the next place. He imagined that the General and Filton might be having a similar feeling now - they just wanted to get this war over and done with. And part of him was now just wanting to get this over and done with. He didn't want to stay on Troia for a moment longer if he could help it. It had been his least favourite stop on his journey. He just wanted to be done with the place and move on, to get this all over with.

The General interrupted Ryan's thoughts by saying, 'I think the time for talking is over. It is time that we went in to see the artefact, and then, Ryan, you can perform your duty. Filton, if you would be so kind.'

'Yes, of course sir. This way please.' He led everyone towards the door on the far side of the chamber. He then said, 'Behold, the artefact.' He placed his hand on a panel by the door, and it then opened up into the ceiling.

In the room beyond there was a bright light emanating from an object in the centre of the room. This object clearly was the artefact. The light within it seemed to be pulsating. It was also incredibly hot in this room. This was because the artefact itself was sitting in a small pool of magma. Above the artefact there was a tunnel that led up, presumably right to the surface and beyond. The artefact had a cone that was pointed towards this tunnel.

At the front of the artefact was what looked like a small wooden block. There was no light emanating from this block. In the centre of the block was what was unmistakably a keyhole.

Filton said, 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

Ryan didn't say anything. He was just thinking that he didn't want to be here. He didn't want to do this. He knew that if he place his key in this lock and turned it, he would be condemning

five hundred million people to death. But he knew that if he didn't place his key in this lock and turn it, then the war would still continue, and people would still be killed on a daily basis. And it would also certainly mean that he and Lisa would have to remain on this God forsaken world, and possibly for some time.

He felt that this was it. This was the decision that he was going to have to make. The decision that was going to change everything. Ian Woon had said that the story would take one of two paths based on this decision. And Ryan didn't like being in this situation one bit.

The General said, 'The time has come Ryan. The time has come for you to fulfil your destiny. Use the key, Ryan, and bring about an end to this war.'

Filton said, 'Please, do this for us. We have been fighting for so very long now. This would mean so much to the people of Troia. Think of them, and their families.'

Ryan then said, 'But what about the Montonians, and their families? This is five hundred million people that we're talking about.'

'Yes, but these are five hundred million people who are in a place that they shouldn't be. This is not their world. This is our world, and it is time that we reclaimed it for ourselves.'

The General said, 'Come on Ryan, we're wasting time. Just put the key in the lock and turn it. It isn't hard. Just activate the artefact and we can all go home.'

Home. Ryan thought about home. Yes, he did want to go back there. He wanted to go back there as soon as he could. He had had enough of this journey. Yes, it would mean the end of five hundred million Montonians, but what were Montonians to him? Once he had turned the key he wouldn't see them die. He would probably just transition away from Troia, and move onto the next part of his journey. He may even end up going back home. Home. Home where everything would be safe. No more travelling to seemingly random places in time and space. Home. Home where he could relax once more. Home. He was almost there, he could feel it. He felt that he could get there by just putting a key in a lock and turning it.

Lisa then came up to him, and said to him, quietly, 'Don't let them pressure you, Ryan. This is your choice to make, and your choice alone. Look into your heart, and do what you feel the right thing to do is.'

Ryan took a deep breath, and thought some more. On the one hand he could use the key, end the war, and go home, but at the cost of five hundred million lives. On the other hand he could choose not to use the key, save those five hundred million lives, but let the war continue, with who knows how many more lives being lost. If he used the key then he also might be able to go home, but if he didn't use the key they he might have to remain here for some time to come.

The General said, 'Hurry up Ryan! You can end this war now! Just get it over with!'

Filton said, 'Please, Ryan. Do this for us. They're only Montonians, they don't matter.'

Then Ryan knew what to do. He didn't like it, but, in his heart, it felt right. He said, 'No, I am not going to do this.'

The General said, 'Yes, Ryan, you do have to do this! It is in the prophecy. Only you can activate this artefact and bring about an end to this war. Only you, Ryan. You must do this! It is your destiny. You have to do this!'

'No, I don't have to do anything that I don't want to do.' He took the key out of his pocket, and held it in his hand. He took a good, long hard look at it.

Filton said, 'Please, I beg of you. Please help us.'

'I am,' said Ryan. He then held his hand out over the pool of magma, and let go of the key.

'Nooo!' cried out the General.

The key fell into the molten rock, and vanished from sight.

A tremor could now be felt in the room, and the light from the artefact intensified. It got so bright that Ryan had to cover his eyes.

But the intensity and the tremors only lasted a few seconds. When they had died down, and Ryan could open his eyes again, he could see that the artefact had vanished.

He heard the General say, 'What have you done?'

'I have saved your people. You may not realise it yet, but, one day, I hope that you do.'

Ryan didn't get to hear any reply that the General made, or Filton, as the room now started to fade. They all looked as though they were frozen. Even Lisa was frozen. Everything around him was fading to white.

Ryan thought that this was it. To his surprise he thought that this was actually it, he was going home! He had made the right choice after all, and now he was being rewarded by going home! He now felt a strong sense of relief. It surely couldn't be that much longer before all of this was over, and he could get back to his life, and get answers to all of the questions that he still had, like what led to him going on this journey in the first place.

Everything around him was now white. He was standing on a surface of some kind, but he couldn't tell what it was, only that it felt fairly soft underfoot. He looked all around him, but there was nothing there to be seen.

He now started to panic. What if he wasn't going home after all? What if he was no going to trapped in this place, this limbo, for all eternity.

He looked all around him again, now feeling very frightened. Then, suddenly, he saw an old man sitting down on something. He had long grey hair, and was wearing a white robe. He looked just like the man that had been described in the legends of Monton and Troia.

The man looked at Ryan, and he had a smile on his face. He said, 'Come here, Ryan. Come and sit with me for a bit.'

Ryan felt both relief and confusion. Relief that he wasn't in this place alone, and it didn't look like he was going to be trapped here. And confusion as to what was going on now - who was this man, and what did he want with Ryan?

Ryan went up to the man. He could see that he was sitting on a white object of some description, but he couldn't quite make out what it was. He sat down next to the man, and found that the object that he was sitting on was very soft and very comfortable.

The man said, 'I am very pleased to meet you at last, Ryan.'

'Where are we?'

'Oh, nowhere. And everywhere. It's a little hard to explain. But you have nothing to fear here.'

'Where's Lisa?'

'She'll be along shortly. But I wanted to have a word with you on your own first. I think that you have done extremely well, Ryan, extremely well indeed.'

'Thank you, I think. You are the same man from the legends, aren't you?'

'Yes, that was me.'

'Why did you set all of that up like that? What was the point of it all?'

'Oh, it's a little complicated, but it was all mainly to try and teach a lesson to the Montonians and the Troians.'

'If I had used that key in the artefact, would it have done what Filton said it would have done? Would it have released a burst of radiation that would have killed five hundred million Montonians based on the Troian's moon?'

'Yes, it would have. That artefact was absolutely real. You were given a real choice to make, with real consequences. You chose to save the Montonians, and put the artefact beyond use.'

'And that was the right thing to do?'

'It is very hard for one person, even me, to say what is right and what is wrong, but, yes, I believe that you did indeed make the right choice.'

'But you said there were consequences. What happened next? No you know how much longer the war lasted for?'

'Yes, and I think you'll be pleased to know that it didn't last for too much longer. The news of your arrival, and subsequent actions, quickly spread amongst all of the Troian generals. Once they heard that the artefact was no more, that their one great hope of ending their war had gone, they no longer had any scruples about telling others about it, and of my visit to them two

thousand years earlier. Meanwhile, the Montonians heard about the massacre of twenty of their men who had apparently surrendered to the Troians. The news about the artefact also quickly spread, and the Montonians also heard about it.

'Needless to say, the Montonians were outraged at the massacre, but there were also Troians who were outraged by it. The Montonians, now believing the Troians to be defenceless now that they had lost their secret weapon, started to gather together to launch a mass attack against the Troians. But there were Troians who made contact with the Montonians, trying to see if there was a way that they could end this conflict peacefully. One of these Troians you may be surprised to hear was the General.

'He was extremely angry when he saw you destroy the key to the artefact. He then saw you and Lisa disappear before his eyes. At first he thought that he and his people were going to be doomed. But then he thought about it some more. He thought about the seemingly conflicting messages that I had given the Montonians and the Troians, and then he realised what my trick was. Whilst I had been apparently setting both sides up against each other, I was in fact hoping that they would actually do something quite different.

'He realised that they shouldn't be living their lives based on prophecies made thousands of years in the past. They should be living their lives in the present, in the here and now. They should be making their own choices, and choosing their own destinies.

'He knew that the Troian army didn't have the strength to defeat the might of the Montonians. If they continued their conflict on a purely military basis he knew that Troia would be utterly defeated. And so he made contact with the Montonians, and sued for peace.

'At first, the Montonians didn't want to know. They saw that they had a chance to utterly defeat Troia, and they wanted to take it. But then they too thought back to me seemingly conflicting messages. They felt that my messages had led those Montonians to their deaths, and that I was seeming to favour the Troians. But then they thought that if I was indeed favouring the Troians, why would I have set up the artefact in the way that I did? I could have set it up in such a way that they could have set off the weapon themselves, but I didn't. Instead, I set it up in such a way that only you, Ryan, could have set it off, and it was you who had chosen not to. The Montonians came to realise that you could have wiped them out, but you chose not to.

'The Montonians felt that they were being played by me, and that I was also playing the Troians. The senior members of the Montonian forces decided that they had had enough of being played, and decided that they would open negotiations with the Troians, and hear what it was that they had to say.

'The negotiations went well. They listened to the Troians demands. The Troians said that they simply wanted to live a peaceful, prosperous life, in charge of their own affairs. They had no desire to expand beyond the boundaries of their own planet and their own moon.

'The Montonians did a detailed analysis of the resources that the Troians would need to maintain the life that they wanted for themselves. They worked out that they didn't need all that much. As you know, the Montonians had developed solar energy, which was a major technological breakthrough for them. They had initially shared this technology with the Troians, and so all of their energy needs were easily met. The Troians themselves were now all mainly living in urban locations, and their population growth before the war had pretty much levelled out - the number of births broadly matched the number of deaths - and so their population wasn't increasing. They looked at all of the other resources that they needed, and they not only had enough on Troia itself, but they had a surplus.

'And so an agreement was made. The Montonians agreed that they would leave Troia and its moon, and allow the Troians to manage their own internal affairs. The Troians themselves would not expand their territory beyond that of their own world and moon, and the Troians were more than happy to agree to this, as they had no desire to expand any further. It was also agreed that the Troians would trade their surplus resources with the Montonians. The Montonians would get some of the additional basic resources that they needed for their expanding population, and in return they would give the Troians some luxury resources that they didn't have on their own world, and any new technologies that the Montonians developed. The Montonians would essentially deal with the Troian's external affairs, whilst the Troian's would deal with their internal affairs.'

'Oh, right,' said Ryan, 'Like what the UK has with places like the Channel Islands and the Isle of Mann?'

'Yes, something like that. The deal was agreed between the Montonians and the Troians, and the war was ended peacefully, with far, far less than five hundred million lives lost after you left Troia.'

'That's good... But, if you knew that the artefact was genuine, and could have wiped out the Montonians on the Troian's moon, didn't you think you were taking a risk? What if I had decided to use the key, and activate the artefact?'

'Yes, there was a risk involved there. It was important that you be given a real choice, with real consequences. But I had every confidence in you, Ryan.'

'You weren't playing me as well, were you?'

'No, not at all. The choice was yours to make, and yours alone. The choice was a completely free choice.'

'OK... So, who are you exactly? What exactly is your role in all of this? What is it that you're doing?'

'Who I am is hard to say. I have been around for such a long time, and no time at all. I'm able to see everything, and yet I also see nothing. As for my role in things, well, I like to keep an eye on the affairs of the multiverse, and help out where I can.'

'You're not... God, are you...?'

The old man chuckled, 'Oh, good heavens, no. Nothing quite like that. All you need concern yourself with is the fact that I and others like me are watching everything, and making sure that everything in the multiverse is running as it should be.'

'OK, I guess that's all I'm going to get in the way of answers on that one. So, I take it that you're the one that's been taking me and Lisa from place to place...?'

'Yes, that has been me. I hope that the journey hasn't been too trying for you.'

'Well, I've survived, I suppose that's something. So, now that I've made the extremely important and life changing decision, does that mean that I can go home? Can I finally get the answers as to what exactly has been going on with me? How I ended up on this journey in the first place?'

'Ah, yes. Ian had told you that you would have a very important decision to make. I'm sorry to have to tell you, Ryan, but the decision about whether or not to activate the artefact was not the decision that he was referring to.'

'It wasn't?'

'No. You still have another bigger and more important decision to make, at least, from your perspective.'

'It isn't over?'

'No, but there is not far for you to go now. You won't have to go to any more worlds, or provide assistance to any more people. No, from here on in, it will all be about yourself.'

'Myself? What do you mean?'

'You still do not know what it was that brought you here on this journey. But soon you will. There are some things that you need to face, and once you have done so, once you know all that has happened, then you will have to make your decision. The decision that will alter the course of your story forever.'

Ryan felt his heart sink. He thought he was at the end of his journey. He thought that he had done all that he had needed to do, and that he could now go home. But now he was being told

that there was still something else that he had to do, that there was still more to go. However, he tried to look on the positive side - it appeared that he was soon going to get some of the answers that he sought.

The man then said, 'It is now time that we have someone else join us here. Look, here she comes now.'

Ryan looked up. There appeared to be a mist in front of them. Out of the mist he could see Lisa walking towards them. She smiled at Ryan, and waved at him. Ryan returned the smile, and he waved back.

The man then stood up, and held open his arms. Lisa went up to him. As she threw her arms around him she said, 'Grandfather!'

'Lisa, my dear, it is so good to see you again! The red hair look suits you!'

After they had hugged, Ryan looked at them and said, 'You're related?'

'Yes,' said Lisa, 'This is my dearly beloved grandfather, who I haven't seen for a very long time!'

'Did you know that it was him who had given the prophecies to the Montonians and the Troians?'

'I didn't know for sure, but I suspected that it was him.'

'And did you know that it had been him that's been sending us to all of these places?'

'Was it?' She looked up at the man, and said, 'Was all of that you?'

'Yes, my dear, I confess that that was my handiwork. But I think that you'll agree with me that Ryan here has done extremely well.'

'Yes, he has. Ryan, you should feel very proud of yourself.'

'Thanks,' said Ryan.

Lisa then asked her grandfather, 'Have you been watching everything?'

'Every minute. You have also been doing well, my dear, and I don't just mean with Ryan.'

'Oh, right...'

'Yes, I was watching you last year, during all of that nasty business with the Dragon Keeper.'

'You saw all of that?'

'Yes, and it pained me that I wasn't able to get involved at the time. But I was sure that you would be able to find a way to resolve things. I was so very proud of you after the decision that you made at the Apocolynium Mountains.'

'Thanks. Was it you that was able to arrange for me to leave the Earth once more?'

'Yes, I have been able to arrange this trip for you. You'll have to go back to the Earth at the end of this business though.'

'I understand.'

Ryan then said, 'I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that I don't. What is all this about? Dragon Keeper's? Apocolynium Mountains? What?'

Lisa answered with, 'There was some trouble on Earth last year during November that I was involved in, and it was something that affected Pyna as well. But it all got sorted out to the good in the end. Everything was fine.'

'Oh, right. Is that all you're going to say about it?'

The man then said, 'I think that's all we should say for now. But I saw it all, and I made a written record of it at the time. I may share it with you one day, and then you'll be able to read all about it for yourself.'

'OK... So, what happens now? What do I have to do next?'

Lisa looked at her grandfather, and asked, 'Is it that time now?'

'Yes, Lisa, I believe it is. I believe he's ready to face it now.'

'Face what?' asked Ryan. 'What is it that I have to face now?'

'Your ultimate challenge. You will have to face up to something that you haven't faced for a very long time, and it's now time that you do so.'

'Yes, but what is that?'

'It is not for us to tell you what it is. You will need to find that out for yourself. But it will not be easy. You will have to face up to some very hard truths. But then, once you have done so, the decision that you will have to make, the decision that will change everything, will become clear to you.'

'Can't you give me anything better than that? Isn't that all a bit cryptic?'

'I'm sorry, but that is the best that we can do. This is something that you will need to figure out for yourself.'

Ryan then turned to Lisa, and asked, 'Will you be coming with me.'

Lisa walked up to him, and held his arms as she said, 'No, I can't come with you on this one, Ryan. But I'm sure you'll be fine. I've seen you come this far. I've seen all of the things that you have dealt with, and all of the things that you have done. I know that you're ready for this now. I'm sure you'll be fine.'

'Lisa, I'm frightened...'

'I know you are, this would be frightening for anyone. But I feel that it is something that you need to do. Trust me, I think you'll find yourself feeling a lot better once it's over.'

'I hope you're right. I really hope you're right.'

'You'll be fine.' She gave him a hug, and he hugged her back. He didn't want the hug to end. He didn't feel that he was ready to face whatever it was that they had lined up for him, despite their reassurances.

Lisa then stepped away, and said, 'We'll give you a minute to prepare yourself. Take deep breaths, and try to stay calm.'

Lisa went back over to her grandfather, and Ryan was left with his thoughts. He thought back over everything that he had been through on this journey. From the town that he was in at the start of it, where he went to dinner with William and Kate, to going to Triceria on Pyna, and helping them to realise that they needed to change their constitution as it was the right thing to do. He thought about Sarah and Patrick on the Challenger, finally being allowed to be together as they went on their way to a new life on Titania. He thought about the guy who had killed that girl back in 1998, and the hard truths that he was having to face up to. He thought about Ben and his pretty check out girl (and he also spared a thought for a certain other partially dressed girl). He thought about the Alians and the vast crowd in Mongolia in the far and distant future, gathering together to watch the last solar eclipse together. He thought about Fiona, and her daughter Poppy, who, like him, had also been unaffected when everyone else had been frozen during totality. He thought back to the time when he relived his father's last night, and the good work that St Luke's Hospice had done in caring for his father and his family. He thought of the writer, trying to write a novel of 155,000 words in just a month, and yet seeming to also know all about the journey that Ryan found himself on. He thought about his visit to Monton, about the vast underground city, and of their struggle to return to the surface. He thought about Sophron, and the feelings that he had developed for her in such a short space of time. He thought about Mr Ian Woon, sitting in his cafe in Elephant and Castle, being one of Lisa's kind, and offering his guidance. He thought about the war that Troia had been fighting against Monton, the huge injustices involved in that war, on both sides, and the relief when he found out that they had finally been able to find a way to resolve their differences in a peaceful manner. And then he thought about where he was now, in this place of limbo, with the man that had been directing where he was to go on this journey, Lisa's grandfather.

He also thought about his encounters with Shadow Zero, the man who seemed to think that everything was Ryan's fault. And then Ryan somehow knew that this was the man that he was going to have to face next, in what he hoped was going to be the final stage in his journey.

He looked up at Lisa and her grandfather and said, 'I'm ready to go now. I'm ready to do this.'

'Very well,' said the man. 'I would wish you good luck, but I'm sure that you don't need it. You'll be fine.'

Ryan looked at Lisa and asked, 'Is this goodbye? Will I ever see you again?'

'No, this isn't goodbye. I'll see you once more before you go home.'

'When will I see you again?'

The man answered with, 'We will both see you again by the Eiffel Tower.'

'The Eiffel Tower?'

'Yes. Try not to worry. That will all become clear to you soon. It is now time for you to go. It is now time for you to face your final battle on this journey. I have every faith that you will do fine.'

Lisa then said, 'Keep strong, Ryan. We're all rooting for you. Everyone is.'

Ryan nodded, and then he turned away from them, to try and see where it was that he was to go next, to face whatever it was that he had to face.

Everything in front of him was white. At first it just looked like a plain field of endless whiteness spreading out in all directions as far as the eye could see. Then the field seemed to change, subtly at first. It was no longer just a plain field of whiteness, it was now as though everywhere was full of mist, or as though he were in the middle of a cloud. These clouds then started to move away and clear.

Beyond the clouds was nothing but blackness. All around him all Ryan could see were the clouds disappearing, to be replaced with inky blackness. He couldn't even see Lisa and her grandfather anymore. Before long, all of the clouds had disappeared, and all there was was blackness.

He could still see his own body in this sea of blackness, and it appeared to be brightly lit, although from no particular direction. He looked all around him, but there was no light source that could have been lighting up his body.

He started to walk. Whereas before the ground underfoot had felt soft, here it was hard. As he walked he could hear his footsteps echoing all around him.

He called out, 'Hello...?' His voice also echoed. He couldn't tell what it was that his voice and his footsteps were echoing off of. There appeared to be nothing here for them to echo off.

He stopped walking, and looked around him again. He was starting to feel frightened. He knew that there would be something here that was waiting for him, but he didn't know what, or when it would find him. But he had a strong sense that it was going to be unpleasant.

He then heard a voice from right behind him say, 'Hello Ryan.'

Ryan span around, and standing just one foot away from him was Shadow Zero. He had a smile on his face, but one which made him look menacing rather than friendly.

Shadow Zero continued, 'I am so glad that you made it this far. To be honest, I didn't think that you would. I thought that you would have failed a long time ago. But, here you are, standing here before me. I hope you're ready for this.'

'Ready for what? What is it that I've been brought here for?'

'You have a few things to face up to. Some truths about yourself. You need to realise that everything is your fault, Ryan. Everything!'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Oh, I think you know, you pathetic piece of vermin! Do you have any idea just how worthless you are? Just what an utter waste of space you are? You call yourself a man, but you're nowhere near a man! I don't know what you are, other than something that I would just wipe off of my boot!'

'Shut up!' Shadow Zero was now making Ryan angry. He didn't know where all of these insults were coming from, but he felt in his heart that they weren't warranted.

Shadow Zero started to laugh. He walked away, and clapped his hands as he did so. 'Bravo! Bravo! There's your fighting spirit! However, that doesn't change the facts of my words. You are still a worthless excuse of a man, and you make me sick! Sick, Ryan! You make me physically sick!'

'Why have I been brought here? Is the whole point of this for you to just stand there and insult me? What purpose are you trying to serve?'

'I'm trying to show you for what you really are, Ryan! You need to face up to what you really are! Why it is that you ended up in this place in the first place! What it was that sent you on your journey.'

'And what was that? How did all this begin?'

'What is the last thing that you can remember, before you woke up in that town by the sea? What is the last thing that you can remember about your real life?'

Ryan thought for a moment, as he racked his brains. He then said, 'I'm not sure. I remember that I was living in Harrow, in north London. I had a job in central London. I'm not sure what I did there exactly, only that it had something to do with spreadsheets. I also lived on my own. I have my own one bedroom flat. That's about all I can remember. I don't know what exactly I was doing in the real world before all of this started.'

'How very interesting. You don't remember anything about...'

'About what? I can't remember anything about what?'

'We'll come to that.'

'No! Tell me now! What is it that I can't remember?'

'You will find that out in good time, Ryan! Remember, you are in my domain now, and I will say what we will do and when! Do not think that you can give me any orders here!'

There was a pause, and Ryan just looked at Shadow Zero with a look of hatred on his face. Shadow Zero had some of the answers that he wanted, some of the answers that he so desperately needed, and he was refusing to give them to him.

Shadow Zero then said, 'I think it's time that I showed you something. You will come with me now, and you will face up to what you really are.'

'And what if I choose not to come with you?'

'You don't get a say in the matter!' Shadow Zero then raised his arms in the air, and then, suddenly, in an instant, all of the blackness was gone.

They were in an office somewhere. It was the middle of the day, and lots of people were walking about and working at computers. As he looked around, he realised that this place looked familiar. Then it all slowly started to come back to him.

He said, 'This is where I work...'

'Yes, that's right. This is where you've been wasting your life away, stuck in this dingy place.'

'I wasn't wasting my life! It was a job. Not a fantastic job, I'll admit, but a job all the same. It paid the bills, and, during the economic crisis that we've had, I was very lucky to have a job at all.'

'Well, that is one way of looking at it, I suppose.'

Ryan continued to look around him. He recognised some of the faces that were here, but no one seemed to be looking at him. Whenever anyone went by they just seemed to be looking through him.

As if he was reading his mind, Shadow Zero said, 'They can't see you. In a manner of speaking you're not really here. It's like when you were sent back to see your father one last time.'

'I'm like a ghost here.'

'Yes, that's right, Einstein! Gee, why do I always get the stupid ones?'

'What are we here to see?'

'All in good time. Now, what else can you remember about this place?'

Ryan thought again. He remembered coming in early most days, and leaving early as a result. He remembered entering a lot of numbers on a spreadsheet, and into a database, and into various other programmes. He would turn those numbers into useful pieces of information, that would then be sent up to managers, who would in turn use them to make decisions about various things.

But what did the numbers relate to? What were they all for?

They related to sales of some kind. But sales of what? What were they selling? What did they do in this place?

He always tried to make the figures as accurate as possible. He didn't care if figures ever gave information that wouldn't have been pleasing to the managers. He just cared about the figures being accurate. Accuracy was the most important thing. There was no point in fabricating the figures at all, as that wouldn't do anyone any good at all. He wasn't one to cook the books.

Books! That's what it was! They sold books! Lots and lots of books!

No, they didn't sell them, at least, not directly. No, but they were involved in books.

Then he remembered, and he said, 'We published books!'

'Yes!' shouted Shadow Zero. 'We have ourselves a winner! Give the man a prize!'

Ryan wasn't impressed by Shadow Zero's sarcasm. 'Yeah, OK, there's no need to be like that.'

'Yes, but I can't believe that you had forgotten that. I mean, what sort of man is it that forgets what he actually does for a living?'

'That wasn't my fault! Something happened to me, something that sent me to that town by the sea, and it messed up my memory somehow.'

'Yes, of course. But that was still your fault. You'll see soon, it was all your own fault, and you will see just how pathetic you really are!'

'Will you stop saying that it's all my fault! What is it that I'm supposed to have done?'

'You will see! And when you do you will realise the truth!'

Ryan continued to look around him. And then his eyes fell on someone, someone who seemed familiar, but he couldn't quite remember who they were. It was a girl, who appeared to be in her early twenties. She had very fair skin, and long red hair. She was slim, but not skinny, and was wearing a black dress with high heels. She was of average height, and she wore black glasses that really seemed to suit her. Her eyes themselves were mesmerising, and he was completely taken by them. This girl was reading a big pile of papers, and was holding a pen. Every now and then she made a note on the papers. She appeared to be thoroughly engrossed in her work.

Ryan stood there, watching her, trying to remember who she was. He was certain that he had seen her somewhere before, but he just couldn't remember who she was...

As he was looking at her, Shadow Zero came and stood in front of him, and said, 'They'll be plenty of time for that later.'

'Who is she?'

Shadow Zero ignored his question and just said, 'It is time for us to go.'

The room suddenly melted away, and Ryan didn't get a chance to look at the girl again. The scene was replaced by something else. They were now on a crowded underground train. They were still in ghost form, which was quite an odd sensation. He could feel the floor of the train, and the motion of the train, but he couldn't feel any of the people on the train. In fact, his body didn't seem to have any form whatsoever, as he was actually in about three different people. He found that he could freely move his arms through the passengers on the train, as though they weren't there, and they were all completely oblivious to his existence.

Shadow Zero was next to him, and said, 'Is this really any way to travel?'

'Sometimes it's the only way.'

'Yes, if you choose to take a job in a city. That was a choice that you made.'

'There weren't a lot of jobs begging when I was looking for one. It just so happened that I took one in the centre of London.'

'If you say so. Oh look, there you are, over there.'

Ryan looked over in the direction that Shadow Zero was pointing, and then he could see himself. He walked through the carriage (and the other passengers) until he was face to face with himself. His other self didn't look at all happy. In fact, he looked thoroughly miserable.

Shadow Zero came over to him and said, 'Does he look like a man who's happy with the choices that he's made about where it is that he has to work?'

Ryan had to admit to himself that he didn't. He said, 'He would be a lot more unhappy if he didn't have a job to go to at all.'

'True. But does he feel that he has to have the job that he's going to today?'

'When was this? Whereabouts in time are we?'

'This is January 2009.'

Ryan thought for a moment. He always felt miserable in January. The January blues is what people called it. Christmas was over, and he usually took a couple of weeks off of work then, as long as his plans fitted in with everyone else in the office. But by January it was time to go back to work. He would always put on weight over Christmas, which made it harder for him to fit into his clothes. He had large credit card bills to pay off after all of the money he spent in December, and he felt there was little that he could afford in the sales. And in January it was a long wait until pay day - he got paid on the last working day of the month. The weather was also often unpleasant - cold and wet, and, if they were really unlucky, as they always seemed to be in recent years, they would have snow as well, which Ryan hated when he had to walk in it. On the first day of snow things weren't so bad. But by the second day, after everyone had been walking on it, and it had melted a little and then refrozen, the pavements would just turn to ice, and he could

barely keep upright. In those conditions he would often fall over and hurt himself, and he hated it.

Yes, it was fair to say that he hated January. It was probably one of his least favourite months, if not the least favourite of them all. So, yes, he could understand that the Ryan of this time might not have been too happy.

He looked into the eyes of himself, and he felt that he could see something there. He felt that there was more to his unhappiness than just the usual January blues.

Shadow Zero whispered to him, 'What are you looking at?'

'Myself. I'm looking into my eyes.'

'No, numbskull! What is the you of 2009 looking at?!'

Ryan didn't like Shadow Zero's tone. However, he turned around, and followed the gaze of his younger self.

On the other side of the crowded train, and clearly visible from where they were, he could see a couple, kissing. The girl was short, blonde, and pretty, and the guy was tall and far more handsome than Ryan could have ever hoped to be himself. This couple weren't just kissing casually, they were really going for it, completely oblivious to the people around them.

Shadow Zero said, 'Disgusting, isn't it?'

'No, it's not that. It's just that they're doing it so openly, in a place like this. It's not right.'

'And why is that? Why is it that it's not right? What is it about this scene that makes you over there look so thoroughly miserable?'

Ryan knew that this was making his younger self miserable. He knew that his younger self would have preferred not to have witnessed this scene. But he couldn't quite remember what it was specifically that he didn't like about it.

He looked at the girl. She was certainly very pretty, another twenty-something that he was now so fond of these days. He wished that she was kissing him, and not this other guy.

And that was it. That was what was making his younger self so miserable. He wanted to be the guy kissing the girl, and not just a bystander.

He always wanted to be the guy who got to kiss the girl, but he never got the chance to be that guy. He was always the guy that missed out, the guy that never got the girl.

Shadow Zero said, 'Are you going to answer me or not?'

Ryan didn't know what to say. He didn't want to admit what he was feeling, what it was about this scene that made him feel so unhappy.

'Ryan, you have to tell me. You won't be going anywhere until you do. I'll make you watch this scene endlessly on a loop if I have to. Why don't you like this?'

'Don't you already know?'

'Of course I do! I know everything that there is to know about you! But I need to hear you say it, I need to hear you admit it! Tell me why it is that you don't like watching that delightful couple kissing each other?'

'You know why!'

'Say it, Ryan, say it!'

'No, you can't make me!'

'You must say it Ryan! Say it! Why don't you like this!'

'Because it's not me! It's not me! It's not me! It's not me! It's not me who gets to kiss the girl! It's never me who gets to kiss the girl! I never get to kiss the girl! I never get the girl! There, are you happy? Are you satisfied? I've said it! Now, can we go!'

As soon as he said this the scene of the train disappeared, and they were once again surrounded by the inky blackness. Ryan could hear his voice echoing away into the distance.

He looked at Shadow Zero standing in front of him, and then he looked away. He felt like crying, but he did his best to hold back the tears. He didn't like admitting what it was that he had just said, but he knew the fact that he didn't like admitting it didn't change the fact that it was true. He never did get the girl, or so he thought.

Shadow Zero walked up to him, and placed his mouth right next to Ryan's ear, and he could feel his breath on his neck. Shadow Zero said, 'So, you never got the girl, and that makes little Ryan feel sad.'

'Shut up!'

'No, I will not. You have to face up to what you are - the man who never gets the girl.'

Ryan then turned around and said, 'No! I don't have to accept that! Sophron! What about Sophron, on Monton? I got her, didn't I? I got to kiss her! If things had been different...'

Shadow Zero then started laughing. 'Really? That's what you're going to offer up in your defence? Sophron? A girl on an alien world, far away from Earth, who you will never, ever get to see again, as long as you live. That's your defence? God, you're even more pathetic than I thought!'

'No! It's not like that... It's... not... like that at all...'

More memories started to come back to him, but they were too fuzzy. They were blurred and unclear, unfocussed. But they were good. He could feel that they were good memories, that they were memories that made him feel happy. And there was one thing about these particular memories that he was certain about.

He looked up at Shadow Zero and said, 'Sophron wasn't the first girl that I kissed... She wasn't the first... There was... someone else...'

This didn't seem to please Shadow Zero. He looked at Ryan with a look of disappointment on his face. He said, 'So, you can remember that much. I see...'

'Who was it?' Ryan wasn't so much talking to Shadow Zero, he was more talking to himself out loud. 'Who was it that I was kissing? I should know whom it was, but I can't remember them. Who on Earth was it...?'

There was a long pause whilst Ryan racked his brains once more. He recalled the memory of the kiss, and whilst he could remember the sensation of it, and the feeling of happiness that it gave him, he just could not remember who it was that he had been kissing. They were there in front of him in the memory, but he just couldn't make out who they were. They were just a blur to him.

Shadow Zero then said, 'I suppose I have got to play fair on this one. You have remembered this much, it is time for me to show you something else. Come on, stop being such a cry baby, and come with me.'

Ryan hadn't realised it, but he had been crying. He could feel the wetness on his cheeks, and he felt ashamed. He felt that he should have been able to remember who the girl was, and he felt really bad that he could not do so.

Shadow Zero started to walk off in an apparently random direction. Ryan watched him for a moment, and then started to walk after him. He didn't say a word to him, and he was curious as to what he was going to show him next.

Everything was still black around them, and the only sounds that Ryan could hear was the echo of their own footsteps. But then they were joined by another sound. It sounded like people talking to each other, a lot of people talking to each other at the same time. It sounded far away and quiet at first, but then seemed to get louder. It was then joined by another sound - music. Ryan couldn't make it out at first, but then it became louder and clearer. It was Christmas music. He didn't know the name of the exact song, but it was one of the songs that he heard being played endlessly throughout most of December.

The blackness was also now starting to lift. An image slowly started to form around them. Before long it became clear what it was. They were back in the office where he worked, only there was now a Christmas party going on there, one to which the whole company in the London office had been invited to attend, as what happened each and every year.

Once again, Ryan found that he was in ghost form, as he was able to move through people without them noticing him.

Shadow Zero had come to a halt, and Ryan went up to him and asked, 'What year is this?'

'This is Christmas 2009, nearly two years ago. Do you remember it?'

Ryan tried to remember it, but he found that he couldn't. Each Christmas just seemed to blend into one another in his mind, and he couldn't remember anything specific about the Christmas of 2009.

He shook his head, and then Shadow Zero said, 'That's a pity. But I have a feeling that you will soon. You should brace yourself.'

'What do you mean?'

'You'll see... Now then, where are you?'

'I'm right here.' Shadow Zero gave Ryan a look that simply said that he had just given him a very stupid answer. Then Ryan realised what he had meant, and said, 'Oh, you mean where's the 2009 me.'

Shadow Zero gave Ryan an exaggerated nod of the head, and then started looking around the room. Ryan started to look around too. Knowing what he was like at these sort of events, he knew where he was most likely to be. And, sure enough, he found himself, sitting by himself, on the far side of the room.

He went over to himself, and Shadow Zero followed him. The 2009 version of himself was wearing a paper hat of the sort found in Christmas crackers, and was holding a drink. He wasn't talking to anyone, he was just sitting by himself and watching the room.

Shadow Zero said, 'Here he is! The life and soul of the party!'

'Leave off...'

'Oh, come on, don't be like that. Cheer up, it's Christmas!'

'Yeah, but I'm not in the mood right now.'

'Clearly. What are you doing, just sitting there by yourself?'

Ryan looked at the younger version of himself, and said, 'I just never really got into these things. I wasn't really a party going sort of person.'

'I see, but what do you see?'

'I see me...'

'Yes, but does the you of 2009 see?'

'I'm sorry?'

'What is he looking at?'

Ryan looked at himself, and saw that he did seem to be looking at something specific. He followed his line of sight, and then he saw it for himself.

His younger self was looking at the gorgeous girl with the long ginger hair. She was standing in the middle of the room, chatting to some of the other guests. This time she was wearing a short red dress with a white trim - a very suitable dress for Christmas. She also had a paper hat on her head. She was casting the occasional glance over at his younger self, who smiled whenever she did so.

The people that she was speaking to move off to some other part of the party. The girl looked over at his younger self, and then she started to walk over. Ryan himself was suddenly starting to feel nervous, and he could imagine that his younger self must have been feeling even more so as she came over, with a large, winning, smile on her face, and eyes that sparkled.

'Hi there!' she said. She had a Scottish accent.

A Scottish accent... Her voice was familiar... Ryan had heard that voice before... He had heard that voice relatively recently...

His younger self looked up at her and said, 'Hi!'

'What are you doing over here all by yourself?'

'Oh, I just needed to sit down.'

The girl sat down next to him. She said, 'That's OK.'

'I'm Ryan, by the way.'

She offered her hand to the younger Ryan and said, 'I'm Sophie.'

The older Ryan then suddenly cried out, 'AAARRRRGGGHHH!!!!' His brain literally hurt. Sophie! Sophie! She was Sophie! He couldn't believe that he had forgotten her!

Memories of her started to flood his brain. This was the first time that they had spoken to each other, but it was far from the last.

The memories were all now there in his brain - he could tell that they were there, but he was having trouble sorting them all out into some sort of order.

He was now crouched on the floor, holding his head. Shadow Zero came over to him, and, crouching down himself, he said, 'So now you can remember her.'

'Yes, I can. How could I have ever forgotten her? How could I have ever forgotten Sophie?'

'And yet you did.'

'She means so much to me...'

'Yes, she does... Right then, let's try and sort out some form of chronology here. This is the moment when you first met.' The scene had frozen when Ryan had cried out, but now it started to speed up. The rest of the party went on around them, but he and Sophie remained where they were, talking to each other for what seemed like forever.

'I remember this now. We got on so well together. It turned out that we had more in common with each other than I realised. We like a lot of the same books, films, and TV programmes. I couldn't believe that I had met someone like her. And we had other things in common as well. Writing, that was the main one. We both liked to write stories, and that was why we had found ourselves drawn to this publishing company when we came to look for work.'

'Indeed. You were getting on like a house on fire. Now, let's spin on.' The scene changed. It was now the daytime, and they were in a cafe somewhere in London. It was still Christmas time. They were both sat at a table, and writing in notebooks, and in silence.

'I remember this too! After the party we had agreed to get together and write. We were challenging each other to see how much we could write in 45 minutes. We did it more than once, and it was hard to tell who had won.'

'Yes, that's right.'

'This was effectively our first date...'

Shadow Zero didn't say anything. The scene changed again. They were now in some woodland in winter. It was the middle of the day, and they were walking along, holding hands.

Ryan said, 'This was our second date. It was Christmas Eve, and we went for a walk in some woodland to the north of Harrow. It was really nice to spend time with her, and to hold her hand. I felt so lucky to be with her.'

They watched them for a while, from a distance. Ryan saw his younger self and Sophie stop, and she now took hold of his other hand as well. They looked at each other, and they kissed.

'Our first kiss...'

After a moment, Shadow Zero said, 'Right, moving on!' The scene changed again. They were now at another party, only this time it was a New Year's Eve party. 2009 was on its way out, and 2010 was about to start. This time Ryan wasn't sitting on his own on the side of the room. He was on his feet, with Sophie, in the centre of the room, talking and laughing with all of her friends.

Ryan said, 'I was starting to come out of my shell by now. I felt so comfortable and happy with her.'

The scene sped on again, and then resumed normal speed as they all started to count down to the start of the new year itself. Once they heard Big Ben chime midnight, he saw his younger self and Sophie kiss again. He remembered how happy he felt during this time.

The image melted away, and was then replaced with an ever increasing sequence of images charting their relationship.

Walking on the beach, eating ice creams.

Dancing together in a night club.

Watching a film in the cinema.

Him meeting her parents for the first time.

She meeting his mother for the first time.

The surprise birthday party he had arranged for her.

Going on holiday to New York, and going to the top of the Empire State building.

Lounging on the sofa at home, watching a DVD.

Having lunch together at work.

Walking along the Southbank at night, holding hands. Crossing over a bridge, stopping in the centre, looking over the Thames, and kissing once more...

And a plethora of other images. The chronology of their relationship was now becoming clear to him. He had fallen for her very early on, but he slowly fell more and more in love with her.

He and Sophie seemed like they were made for each other. They just seemed to click, like two pieces from a jigsaw puzzle that fitted together.

She had always wanted to be a writer. She wrote a little every day, even if it was only a hundred words. Ryan admired her greatly for this. He, too, wanted to be a writer, but he hardly ever actually sat down and wrote something. But she inspired him, and he had eventually started work on a novel. She read passages of it and gave him feedback on it, and he did the same for what she wrote.

He couldn't imagine having a life without her in it. She now meant so much to him. He felt that he would have been nothing without her.

The images then all faded away, and they were back in the inky blackness. Shadow Zero came up to him and said, 'And now, here we are. Can you remember what you were doing before all of this started, before you arrived in that town?'

Ryan thought for a moment, and he still had that last lingering fog in his mind. He could remember spending the late summer of 2011 with her, where the weather got really warm and pleasant at the end of September, and the beginning of October. He could remember sitting with her in the garden of her house, having a picnic, and just generally enjoying life, and loving her. He loved her so much...

But he couldn't remember anything after that. He knew that something else had happened after that, but he couldn't think what it was. He tried and tried and tried to remember it, but it just wouldn't come to him.

He then said, 'No, I can't.'

'Then, it is time to show you. Come with me.'

Shadow Zero started to walk off, and Ryan followed a short distance behind. He felt apprehensive. He knew that he was now about to get one of the most important answers that he had been seeking since he had started on this journey. He had no idea what it would be, and he was afraid that it was going to be something that he wasn't going to like.

Once again, the only sound was the echoing of their footsteps. Then, that sound started to fade away, but there were no other sounds making themselves present. An image started to form before them. Everything around them was frozen. But Ryan could clearly see a building coming into view in front of them.

It was the Eiffel Tower.

They slowly made their way towards it. Ryan tried to see if he could remember ever coming here, but, for the life of him, he couldn't. And so why was Shadow Zero taking him here?

They continued walking along in silence, as the Eiffel Tower appeared to be getting bigger and bigger, as they got closer and closer towards it.

He had always wanted to come to Paris, and to see the Eiffel Tower, as well as to go up it. But he had never had the chance to do so previously.

Then a memory came back to him. He was at Sophie's house, asking her if she'd like to go to Paris. She said she did, and that she loved the city. They agreed that they would go. He also remembered that he felt really, really happy about this. Unusually so. He tried to remember why Sophie agreeing to come with him to Paris would make him feel so amazingly happy, far more so than when they had agreed to go to New York, or anywhere else that they had gone on holiday to. But he just couldn't remember, not just yet.

Paris seemed eerie with everything and everyone frozen around them, and just Shadow Zero and himself walking through it. Ryan wondered what would be waiting for him at the end.

Another memory came back to him. They were packing for their trip to Paris. Sophie had just left the room, and, whilst she was gone, Ryan placed a very important item into his pocket. But he checked it carefully first.

It was a small box, about an inch and a half square. He opened it.

Inside was a ring.

He smiled, as he closed the box and placed it in his pocket.

And then he remembered what he was going to do. He loved Sophie so much, and he was certain that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. For richer, for poorer. For better, or worse. 'Til death do they part.

And what better place to propose to her, than at the top of the Eiffel Tower.

He knew that it wouldn't have been the most original place to propose to someone, but that didn't matter. What mattered is that she would be there, and that he was going to ask her...

They were almost at the Eiffel Tower now. As they got closer, he could see that there was a small crowd of people near the queue of people waiting to go up the tower.

He remembered some more. He couldn't believe how happy he had been feeling. After so long, he had finally found the most fantastic girl, and they got on so well together. She made him feel so happy, and he believed that he made her feel happy too. He wanted to be with her forever. To have children with her. To grow old together. She was everything to him. Everything...

He couldn't believe his luck. How had he been so lucky to find himself in this situation? Part of him had felt that he didn't deserve what he had.

That was when the doubts started to creep in. What if things didn't go as well for each other as he had hoped they would have? There were many other aspects that hadn't gone so well, such as ending up in a job that he didn't particularly like - he wanted to be writing books, not adding up how many books that other people had written had sold.

What if she didn't feel as in love with him as he did with her? A girl like Sophie could have had any guy that she had wanted. Why had she chosen him? Why him? Why should he have been the one who was so lucky to end up with her?

What if she was to turn him down? What if she was to break his heart, what would he do then?

What if she said yes, and they did get married? But then, what if married life didn't turn out to be the eternal bliss that he had always imagined it to be? What if they ended up arguing? What if being together all the time drove them crazy, and eventually split them apart?

What if he found that he couldn't be a good husband to her? He loved her dearly, and would have done anything for her, but what if that wasn't enough?

But he wanted to be with her, he wanted to be happy with her so much.

What if he asked her, and she said no? What if she felt that they weren't ready to take this step? What would happen to them then? Could they stay together, and carry on as though nothing had happened? Or would it be the beginning of the end for them? If they did stay together, when would it be right to ask her again? Would it ever be right to ask her again? He so wanted to marry her, to make a public commitment to her, to have it on paper that they would be committed to each other forever. But he didn't want to risk losing her. He didn't know what he would do if that were to happen.

They closed in on the crowd of people, with the Eiffel Tower towering over them. Shadow Zero and himself were still in ghost form, and could just walk through the frozen people that were there. They got to what it was they were crowding around. He could see that Sophie was here, looking even more lovely than she usually did. She was leaning over someone.

She was leaning over Ryan.

Ryan looked at himself on the ground. He appeared to be unconscious.

And then he remembered everything. The fog in his mind completely lifted.

They had arrived in Paris earlier in the day. This was to be the first of four days that they were going to spend in the city. He had kept the ring in his pocket all the way from London. He could barely stop touching the box it was in whilst they were on the Eurostar. It was so precious to him - not just because of what it had cost him, but mainly because of what it meant to him.

He had thought about asking her to marry him sometime on the second day of their trip, but he found that he couldn't wait that long. He had kept the secret that he was going to propose for some time now, and he couldn't bare it any longer. He decided that he was going to ask her that day. He felt that he had to ask her on that day.

And so he suggested that they go to the Eiffel Tower that day. She had seemed a little surprised that he had wanted to go straight there, but she agreed to go.

This was it. It was really going to happen.

But, as they had approached the tower, all of the feelings of doubt had come back to him. He could feel the weight of expectation. He wanted this to go well. He didn't want to get anything wrong. But he still had his doubts.

He was really going to ask the girl that he loved to marry him. The girl that he cared so much about. If she said yes then he knew that he would be happier than he had felt at any other point in his life.

When he saw the tower, this symbol of romance known throughout the world, all of these feelings had hit him at once. The hope of extreme happiness if she said yes, and the fear of eternal despair if she said no - these two conflicting emotions had collided together in his brain.

It was all too much for his brain to process. He had collapsed to the ground...

...and then he had woken up, on 3rd September, the start of new year and a new beginning, in a house in a town next to sea, where it never rained, and there was always a pleasant breeze.

Shadow Zero walked up to him and asked, 'Do you remember now?'

'Yes, I do. I remember it all now. Oh God, how did it all come to this?'

'You see, you are pathetic. Really pathetic, Ryan! You go and build yourself up, and then you go and knock yourself down. You don't even need anyone else to do it for you! You are a joke!'

'No! I'm not! I'm not a joke!'

'Then, how else do you explain this? Look at you, sprawled out on the floor there, when all you were planning to do was to ask the girl that you love to marry you. Yes, sometimes when someone is getting ready to propose they might feel nervous, but to completely fall apart like this! Now, that really is a joke! And you're the biggest joke of them all, Ryan!'

Ryan started to feel that Shadow Zero had a point. He did feel like he was a joke for allowing himself to end up like this. Why did he have all of these doubts about what he had been planning to do?

The doubts then all came to his mind again, and they felt real. He so wanted to find a lifetime of happiness with Sophie, but he was afraid that if he tried to take this next step, if he asked her to marry him, then there was a real risk of things going wrong.

The conflict was returning to his mind. Should he have asked her to marry him, or not? All of the possible outcomes were now racing through his mind, and he was still no closer to finding an answer.

Shadow Zero asked, 'So, what are you going to do now?'

'I don't know...'

'Well, you're going to have to do something! You can't just stay there looking at yourself forever! Come on, Ryan, what are you going to do? If I were you I would just give up now. You'll never find happiness. You're doomed to live a life of unhappiness, and so you may as well just give up now.'

Ryan didn't want to be unhappy, he really didn't. But he also didn't want to put the happiness that he already had at risk. He wanted to just stay safe.

Shadow Zero then said, 'Give up, Ryan! Just do us all a favour and give up! Give up on yourself, and go and crawl away into a hole somewhere!'

Then Ryan heard Lisa's grandfather say, 'That's enough!'

Ryan looked up, and he saw Lisa and her grandfather standing to his right. Lisa smiled at him as they made eye contact.

Shadow Zero said, 'I was wondering when you were going to show up.'

'Yes, and now I am here. You have played your part, and now you will be quiet!'

'I most certainly will not!'

'Be silent!' Lisa's grandfather raised his arms, and Shadow Zero became just as frozen as everyone else in Paris currently were.

Ryan looked at Shadow Zero, then at himself on the ground, then at Sophie looking over him, and then over to Lisa and her grandfather. He asked them, 'What's going on?'

Lisa's grandfather said, 'What has been going on is that your mind went into a state of extreme conflict. Hope and fear were colliding with each other. The problem that you faced proved too difficult for your mind to handle, and so it shut down.'

'My mind's shut down?'

'In a manner of speaking. It will start up again.'

'Do you mean like restarting a computer when it starts to play up, where restarting will often solve the problem?'

'Yes, that is a most apt analogy. Your mind is restarting.'

'So, wait a minute, I've been travelling with Lisa for some time now, it feels like it's been a week. So, what happened to me in Paris?'

'You are still there, in this moment that you see here?'

'So, what, time hasn't been passing for me?'

'Your physical body on Earth has not been experiencing time, no.'

'But I have? My mind, that is?'

'Yes, that is what has happened. Your mind has needed time to work things out, to rebuild itself, ready to face the problem that it was dealing with at the moment that the restart began.'

'So, wait a minute, is this body -' Ryan indicated himself, and not the Ryan lying on the ground. 'Is this body a real body at all?'

'In a way, it is?'

'What do you mean?'

'When you started on this journey you acquired a new body, of sorts, one that would allow you to travel, and to obtain information from the world around you.'

'But was I in the real world at all? Was anything that I saw with Lisa real?'

'Oh yes, that was all real. As real as anything else that you have seen in your life. But then, what is reality, and what is fantasy? Sometimes it is not always easy to tell. Characters in a book rarely know that they are in a book, and so, to them, the world of the book is just as real as what you consider the real world to be to you.'

'So, is it real or isn't it?'

'Yes and no. I'm sorry, I can't be any more clear than that.'

Ryan tried to put this concept out of his head, as it was confusing him even more than he already was. He said, 'So, anyway, what's going on, exactly? Why did I go to all those places? From what I gather, I ended up in that town because I was conflicted about whether or not I should ask Sophie to marry me. So what did everything I do have to do with helping me to

resolve that issue? Changing constitutions, seeing that eclipse, getting involved in a war - how did any of that help me with my problem? Why did you send me to those places?'

'I had my reasons. Don't worry, after what happened on Monton and Troia I know you must be thinking that I was using you in some manner. I can assure you that I was not. Everything that I was doing was for your own benefit. On your journey you have helped to bring lovers together, you have challenged authority, and won, and you have witnessed yourself from another viewpoint. Don't believe in what Shadow Zero says - you are not pathetic, and you are not a joke. Look at you now - this journey has made you far more confident. You were an active participant in all of the events, and not just a bystander. At first you let Lisa lead the way, but then you started to take the initiative yourself. There were times where it was you doing all of the talking, and Lisa was just an onlooker. That is not a bad thing, in fact, it is what I wanted you to do.

'You are now far stronger, and know a lot more about yourself now than you did when you started out on this journey that I sent you on. I only sent you here with Shadow Zero when I felt that you were ready to confront what it was that brought you here in the first place. Now that your memories about your time with Sophie have been unlocked, and you are much stronger in yourself, you are now ready to deal with this.'

'So, what am I supposed to do now?' Ryan looked once more at his body lying on the ground.

Lisa came up to him and said, 'Ryan, you've been told that you have a decision to make, a very important decision, one that only you can make. This whole journey has been about preparing you to make that decision. This decision will change the course of your life forever. As Ian said, there are now two paths that you can go down, and once you choose one of them, there is no turning back.'

'OK, what is this decision that I have to make?'

'It's a very simple one. So simple in fact, that you will be surprised by what it is. Ryan, you have to decide whether or not you want to be happy.'

'But... that's easy. Of course I want to be happy, who doesn't?'

'Then why are you here?'

There was a pause, as Ryan didn't know how to answer this.

Lisa then said, 'Look at you, lying on the ground. Why were you so afraid of asking Sophie to marry you?'

'Because of what might happen if she said no, or what might happen if married life wasn't what I imagined it to be.'

'Married life is rarely what people imagine it to be! But that is not a bad thing. And as for whether or not Sophie would say yes to your proposal, you should know the answer to that.'

'I should?'

'Yes! Look at her! She loves you just as much as you love her. You two were meant to be together. You complement each other perfectly. You have similar interests, you get on well together, she has helped you to get on with your writing, and, believe it or not, you have helped her to get on with hers. You two are a perfect match.'

'But how did I end up being so lucky as to find her? For a girl like that to fall in love with me?'

'Luck had nothing to do with it. You are a wonderful guy, Ryan! What shouldn't a wonderful girl like Sophie fall in love with you? You found each other at the right time, and it was the qualities that you both possessed that brought you together. If you ask her to marry you, she will say yes, I'm certain of it. I mean, look where you are - the Eiffel Tower! You've been together a while, you love each other so completely, and now you're about to go up the Eiffel Tower together! She's probably expecting you to pop the question. In fact, having come this far, she'd probably be disappointed if you didn't.

'Look at her there. Look at the way that she's looking at you. Look at the expression on her face.'

Ryan did so. Sophie was looking down on him, and she was holding his hand. She looked concerned, really concerned. And he knew that she was concerned because she loved him. She really did love him completely and truly.

Lisa then said, 'Ryan, you have to decide whether or not you want to be happy. When people have to make decisions I don't normally tell them what to do, but on this occasion I'm going to make an exception. Ryan, choose to be happy.' She smiled at him, and held his hands.

He looked at her, and then he looked back to Sophie, the girl that he loved more than anything in the world.

Sophie meant more to him than life itself. Yes, he had looked at other girls on his journey, had even kissed one of them, but now that his memories about Sophie had fully returned, anything that he had felt for those other girls had dimmed. Those feelings were now far outshone by the feelings that he had for Sophie. He loved her so much, and he was certain, more certain of anything else in his life, that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

And he knew that she loved him too. It was plain to see from the way she was with him, the way she looked at him, the things that they did together. He loved her completely, and she loved him completely.

He then simply said to Lisa, whilst still looking at Sophie, 'OK.' And a smile came to his lips.

Lisa then hugged him and said, 'Oh, Ryan! It's so good to hear you say that!'

He turned to her and smiled, and then he saw her grandfather coming over. He said, 'Ryan, for what it's worth, I believe you have made the right choice. I can see a bright future for you. You are now ready to return to your life.'

Ryan was now looking forward to going back to his life more than ever. He turned to Lisa and said, 'Thank you, for everything.'

'Ryan, it was my pleasure.'

'Will I ever see you again?'

'Yes, maybe. Who can say? But even if we never meet again, remember, I will always be here, with you, wherever you go.'

'You'll be with me?'

'I'm with everyone on the Earth. I care about you all so much. I'll be with you throughout your life, and I look forward to seeing how it all turns out. But I'm sure it will be fantastic.'

Ryan turned to look at himself once more, and then he turned to Lisa's grandfather, as there was still something that was bothering him. 'There's still one thing that I'm not sure about. Back during the eclipse, during totality, everyone was frozen, everyone but myself and Poppy. Why was that?'

'Ah, yes. The eclipse. I sent you there as the power of the eclipse allowed you to form a connection to your body here in Paris. I needed to reaffirm that connection. The reason why Poppy wasn't frozen was that you still needed a companion, but not Lisa for this, which is why I hid it from her. The reason why I chose Poppy was that you had a connection with her, one that you are unaware of.'

'A connection?'

'Yes. Poppy is a direct descendant from you, Ryan.'

'She's descended from me...' Ryan thought for a moment, and then he realised what that meant. He then looked up at Lisa's grandfather and said, 'I'm going to have children...' Another smile came to his face.

Lisa's grandfather then said, 'Enough! It is time that you returned. I wish you all the very best, Ryan.'

Lisa then said, 'Goodbye, Ryan. You'll be great. Enjoy life. And be happy!'

'Yes, I will.'

Lisa's grandfather then asked, 'Are you ready?'

Ryan looked back at himself, and said, 'Yes, I'm ready.'

'Then, farewell!'

Everything went black. Ryan could feel himself lying on the ground. He heard an American man saying, 'Give him some space!'

He then heard Sophie's voice saying, 'Ryan! Ryan! Are you OK? Ryan! Please! Wake up!'

He opened his eyes, and he saw her looking at him.

'Oh my God, Ryan! Are you OK?' She took hold of him, as she helped him to sit up.

'Yes, I'm fine.'

Sophie looked up and said, 'Could someone call an ambulance?'

'No!' said Ryan, 'No, there's no need for that. I just got a little dizzy, that's all. It's been a long day - I woke up this morning in London.'

'Are you sure you're OK?'

'Yes. I'll be alright.'

The crowd that was around them was starting to disperse. Any excitement that there may have been for them here was now gone.

Ryan slowly got to his feet, and Sophie helped him up.

She then said, 'I think we should go back to the hotel. You should lay down and have a rest for a bit.'

'No, there's no need for that. I'm OK. Look!' He suddenly started doing star jumps.

'Stop it, you idiot!' Sophie smiled and giggled, and Ryan stopped jumping.

He then looked up at the Eiffel Tower, and then said, 'Let's do this.'

'Are you sure about this Ryan?'

He looked at her once more, into her deep blue eyes, the eyes that loved him so much. He stroked her long ginger hair, and held her in his arms. This girl, this girl that meant so much to him and was so special to him. He knew that Lisa said that luck had no part to play in their coming together, but he still felt so lucky to be with her. He thought back to all of the time that they had spent together, all the things that they had seen and done. She was one in seven billion, and so he felt exceedingly lucky that he had found her, at a office party, two Christmas's ago.

He loved her.

He just, simply, loved her.

He then looked up. The crowd had now gone. There was no sign of Lisa, her grandfather, or Shadow Zero. Everything was back to normal again.

He looked up at the Eiffel Tower, that most powerful of symbols. A symbol of love, at the heart of one of the most romantic cities on Earth, if not the whole multiverse.

And he was here with the girl that he loved.

The girl that he was going to marry.

The girl that he was going to have children with.

The girl that he was going to grow old with.

The girl that he was going to spend the rest of his life with.

He looked back out over the other people in the area. For a moment, a very brief moment, he thought that he had seen Lisa in the crowd, smiling at him encouragingly. But, not sooner than he had thought he'd seen her, she wasn't there. And yet it felt like she was still watching him.

He looked back at Sophie, who repeated her question, 'Ryan, are you sure?'

'Yes, I've never been more sure of anything else in my life.' He then kissed her.

They then both looked up at the Eiffel Tower together. He took hold of her hand, and said, 'Let's go.' He looked at her, and they smiled at each other. They then started walking towards tower.

He placed his other hand in his pocket. He could still feel the ring there. He knew what it was that he was going to do, and he knew what Sophie's answer was going to be.

And he was happy.

The End