

THE STEALER
OF WORLDS

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1

School's Out

When the water stopped coming out of the taps, Robert realised he was in serious trouble. Looking back on it now, from the vantage point of three days later, he realised how naïve he had been just seventy-two hours earlier in thinking that everyone on Earth would somehow reappear, as mysteriously as they had vanished, while he had been asleep that night. Hindsight being twenty-twenty, he now knew that the first, wasted day should have been spent in preparation. He should have been finding food and water supplies to see him through what was looking to be the rest of his life alone on Earth, with no way of knowing what had happened to his Dad or Elisabeth, let alone the rest of the world.

He had decided, in the effort to conserve what water he had managed to store, to stop bathing. With only Catanooga for company, and he didn't seem to mind if Robert smelled, or at least not so long as he opened a tin of food every morning, there wasn't much point in wasting fresh water.

Still, the electricity continued to work, so he was at least able to heat and light his house.

Robert half-laughed, more to stop himself crying at the thought. He supposed it *was* his house now. His one last link to his missing Dad and big sister.

Swivelling his desk chair round, he flicked on the flat-screen monitor of his computer, and for the seventh time that day checked his inbox for any replies to the hundreds of email SOSes he had set the computer up to send. Nothing. The same nothing that had greeted him for three days now. He tried not to slump in his seat.

‘C’mon Robert,’ he said in an effort to lift himself. ‘Get a grip.’ Unconsciously, he pressed his hand to his heart and felt the reassuring lump of metal under his clothes. She was still with him, even if she had been pulled away from him just over a year ago. He straightened his posture, imagining his Mum telling him to do so, recalling her softly accented voice which he had not really picked up, and she had not really ever lost. Calling up his blog, YouTube, Facebook, and the dozens of other networking sites he had joined in the past couple of days, Robert diligently added another day’s worth of SOSes to each of them, so in case there was someone, anyone else out there they’d know he was here.

Job done, Robert picked up Catanooga from where he had been cleaning himself and stroked his pet cat, the warmth of another living thing reassuring in his hands, the soft ginger fur smooth under his fingers. Catanooga for his part tolerated his master’s attention for a few minutes, before making it plain that he had had enough for now, and jumped back down to the floor with a soft thud.

‘Fair enough, Cat,’ said Robert, realising that in any battle of wills with his pet cat, he would most likely not be the winner, and anyway, he didn’t want Cat ignoring him. Not now.

Elsewhere

A long way away from Robert and Catanooga, the man in an impeccably tailored sand-coloured suit with a crisp white shirt underneath it, stood looking at the block of glass that

acted as his safe. The glass was lit from above by a single spotlight, and as the man moved towards it the bright light glinted off the hard edges, rainbows prisms out in every direction.

Inside, suspended like a fly in amber, lay the Plan that the man guarded with his life. Currently, the Plan resembled a computer printed report, a wad of A4 paper bound together by a spiral of black plastic. Such a plain and ordinary covering for something so monumental. However, the Plan had not always looked like this.

Over the course of its existence, from the time the man first devised and formulated the Plan to the present day, it had variously been etched in wax, scratched into clay tablets, scribbled onto reed papyrus, carved into the atoms of the crystal lattices of diamond, germanium and silicon, as well as taking on a hundred hundred other different forms, each one directly related to the latest stage. It had even, for a brief time, been encoded in a continually circulating loop of red light, wavelength 680 nanometres. And all through its long history and many forms the Plan had resided in its glass container.

The man stood before the clear slab, his face hidden in the shadows cast by the high spotlight. Long years of familiarity allowed him to approach it this closely with complete safety.

In fact, no-one other than the man had ever seen the safe for longer than a minute. Once, a lifetime ago someone had tried to steal the Plan, to know the man's designs, and had got as far as making it into the room the man now stood in. But one of the thousands of booby-traps that peppered the room and the glass had taken care of him, and his life as he knew it up to that point ended. How he spent the remainder of his days was a matter of great speculation amongst his acquaintances, but he was never seen by any of them again. Well, not in a form that they recognised anyway.

The man valued the Plan's safety very highly.

He reached out to the glass and gently touched its surface, running his powerful fingers along its edges as if in anticipation. *Soon*, he told himself, counselling patience. He had been

waiting several lifetimes for this to come to pass, for a world large enough to progress the Plan to the next phase. And now he had secured it. Ten earth days, or rather more accurately, his days now, was not too great a time to wait for the culmination of his boldest endeavour yet. And the seven billion lives it would cost were trivial compared to the scale of his ambition.

The man turned from the glass slab and walked back to the preparations for the next stage.

Ten days. Soon enough.

The next day was the turning point for Robert, in more ways than one. He had woken from a fitful sleep, to find Cat reassuringly curled up on his bed by his feet, a lump of warmth, just the way he had been that first morning. It had been Cat's presence there that brought all the memories of the last four days to mind, and Robert realised he needed to write them down while he still had them fresh in his head.

He called up his blog and began typing.

He started with the memories that were strongest, the ones formed when he thought everything was still normal. He remembered waking up with Catanooga's heaviness blocking his exit from his bed just as he did every morning. The bathroom had miraculously been a big-sister free zone he remembered thinking at the time. Elisabeth had started spending more than the occasional night out round at friends' houses, but not enough to ensure Robert could assume he'd always find the bathroom empty. He'd still tried to handle carefully, self-preservation a strong survival instinct in a boy with a seventeen year old half-sister. Bathroom business done, he'd gone down stairs to the kitchen but had found that empty also, with no Dad around getting his family ready for school. Everything was where it should be, but no Dad.

Robert remembered how he'd assumed his Dad had had to pull another all-nighter, the burden of single-parenthood taking its toll on the Cotts family in a thousand different ways, leaving Robert no stranger to sometimes making his own breakfast. He'd reheated a couple of

dosas (Mum's recipe, Dad's cooking) and scoffed them down hungrily.

Robert paused at the memory of the dosas. Despite his insistence that his Dad teach him the recipe, Robert knew that any he made now would never be the same. Before, they represented, to him anyway, a link with his late Mum through his Dad. Now though, they were spoilt forever.

He remembered cleaning his teeth and as he looked at his light brown face and deep brown eyes in the bathroom mirror he told himself to ignore Jonesy today, despite what he might call him, or do to him. He had not wanted to get goaded into another fight. Instead he had tried to think of something clever to say to Erica, the girl with the large brown eyes and long, straight dark brown hair who made Robert blush uncomfortably whenever they accidentally-on-purpose caught one of each other's sideways glances with one of their own. Finally, he tousled some wax into his fine black hair, but gave it up as a lost cause.

Next had been his best friend Henry's house, and the short bike ride to it. How could he have not suspected something was wrong at this point, he wondered? The journey to Henry's had been very quiet, almost unheard of on the estate they lived on. In fact there had been no cars at all on the roads, and Robert remembered although it had felt strangely quiet, for the most part he'd just enjoyed the freedom of a ride free from fumes and the near-death-experience-by-4x4 that constituted an average day's journey.

Henry was also not home, as after a couple of minutes patient, then slightly more impatient knocking on the front, then back door failed to yield the usual being ushered in by Henry's Mum, Robert was left standing outside on his own. He recalled picking up his bike feeling slightly dejected and more than a little isolated, having seen no-one else for nearly two hours by then.

Robert paused and grimaced at that last sentence. What were a couple of hours on your own weighed against the rest of your life? *No, don't think like that.* He began typing again.

School was the next largest memory of this time, after the slightly strange journey to it. He

didn't pass anyone on the pavement, and while there were cars parked in the drives and on the side of the road, there didn't seem to be any driving around. The tyres of his bike slish-slish-slished along the wet paving stones in rhythm with his pedalling feet. All in all it was a disquieting silence that hung heavily in the air all around him. The noisy refuge of the bustle of delivery vans, postmen, commuters, school-runners, buses and everybody else who had to be somewhere by nine o' clock was absent. He was the single living person in this unconventional calm.

School turned out to be no better. Instead of its normal barely-controlled pandemonium, his form room sat quiet and vacant, row after row of unoccupied desks and not a single classmate. Robert was never first to school so was not used to seeing the room empty. Even if he had been, *this* would still have felt wrong. The empty desks stared back at him in their ranks and files like a squad of soldiers waiting for the orders to relieve them that, fatefully, would never come.

Like the journey to it, the school at this time of day should have been awash with noise: chatter between the cliques of girls, a knot of boys discussing football, an altercation that could spiral into a fight, the bell indicating that other concerns be suspended; and above it all the teachers trying to focus everyone enough to learn. The school was missing the busy lives of its young occupants who energised it and gave it purpose. Without the squawks, cries and bustle of the pupils it was hollowed out, sapped of vitality, enervated.

And wrong.

Bewildered and skittish, and more than a little nervous-frustrated, Robert turned round in the doorway intending to search the school for someone, anyone else.

Back out in the corridor, the search began at a brisk walking pace. Arms initially swung confidently in time with the strides, full of purpose. It couldn't last. The children that normally coursed along the corridor, making it buzz with noise and life were missing. The teachers trying to maintain order absent too, leaving the school too quiet.

Too quiet and too big.

Jogging now, three classrooms later, all equally lifeless as the first. Fighting back the primal urge to run away, a scared and frightened animal, the school building overwhelming in its sterile quiet.

Four more identical rooms and jogging was a memory.

Running. Flat out between rooms. Each empty one pressing more and more on him, but him having to keep looking. He had to find someone here. He just had to!

The search of the second floor was a flight from classroom to classroom of desperate footfalls and banging doors. Shouts of rising panic that no-one answered.

Now at the point of angry courage he meant to check the staff room and the Headmistress' office, consequences be damned. The staff room was as empty as all the classrooms had been, the only thing in there being the persistent stale smell that always hung heavily in the air. Stifling a cough Robert flung the door closed with a shout.

'For ffffs sake! Where. The. *Hell!* Is. Everyone?' His exclamation sounded all wrong. Too high and desperate as it carried far along the echoey corridors. He breathed in deeply through his nose in an effort to calm the storm that was rising inside him. He *had* to find someone and losing the plot in the middle of the empty school wasn't going to help at all.

An empty staff room left only the Headmistress' office to try.

Robert paused again. He wasn't exactly proud of what he had done next, but given the circumstances, it might have just about been justified. Either way there was no way he was going to admit to losing his temper, hurling his school bag across the Headmistress' office and almost taking out the expensive flat-screen monitor that sat on her desk.

Deciding that whoever might read this one day had probably had enough of his school day, Robert went on to document his fruitless journey to his Dad's office to tell him, only to find it locked and deserted; then the shocking scene at the traffic junction where he had been stopped in his tracks and stood open mouthed for minutes at what lay before him. Everywhere he had

looked, abandonment. Nothing but a chaos of deserted traffic pointing in every direction. A breeze picked up the pages of a newspaper and they blew past him down the street, colliding with and swirling over the dead cars.

It had been like something from a science fiction film! Except that in the Hollywood movie there would be the high incessant drone of a car horn, and he would go to it and rescue the person slumped unconscious on the steering wheel and, and...

But even that noise was absent. The whole scene was silent.

He wrote about his hurried return home to the house and watching the news in the hope of some information, but there was none forthcoming. How he found he could not stay in the empty house, its hollowed out interior of missing family pushing him back out on to the street and onto the police station where even the cells had been empty; his ride back home once more as it began to get dark, the orange sodium lights coming on, pushing away the deepening gloom of the winter night and casting everything in long, dark shadows. At least the nighttime had partly obscured the truth of the abandoned cars for his ride back, although he could have done without the caw-caw of a group of crows roosting nearby as he passed by.

Back home he had turned the television on, in the hope of catching a news update, something that would shed some light on what was happening, only for him to discover that he was watching exactly the same news.

And that was when it dawned on him, late in the evening on that first day, when the news was exactly the same, even down to the small slip made by the presenter. If there was no one to write and present new news, who was left?

There was no new news for exactly the same reason that there had been no one at school that morning, or no one at his Dad's office, and the abandoned cars and empty police station. Realisation crashed on Robert with the weight of the world that he now knew he was the last person left on.

Robert scanned what he had written and wondered if he should be telling people all these

things, all the small secrets and thoughts that went in part to making him who he was. Probably not, he reasoned, and scrubbed everything but the bare facts from his account.

Satisfied that he had at least documented his situation so far for posterity, he started on an email to his Facebook friend Peter in Hong Kong, more for something to distract him than anything, when the computer switched itself off in front of him.

No, not that as well. Not now. Please! Surely it can last longer than that!?

Robert prodded the on switch on the front of his computer, but nothing happened. Still almost not wanting to believe what deep down he knew must have happened, he flicked the light switch. Nothing. The electricity had stopped.

Robert shivered, and not just from the deepening cold of his house as the evening darkened into night. He had lit as many candles as he could find, but their light did little to lift him. The enormity of his situation was too much for him to face in the near dark; it threatened to overwhelm him, and Robert felt the panic from that first day beginning to return.

If he'd been living the movie version of the events, there would be others like him left in the world, and he'd meet up with them, and there'd be adults who were there to run things until they found a way of getting everybody else back. And there would be other kids for him to hang around with (maybe even his Dad and Elisabeth would be there!) and everything would work out OK in the end.

But this wasn't the Hollywood-happy version of things. This was real life, his real life. As far as he could tell everyone, every Mum or Dad, every big sister or little brother, every son or daughter, everybody in fact was gone, and he had been forgotten, left behind somehow, for some reason.

There'd been no warning that this was going to happen. No mysterious lights in the sky, or reports of something in space, or news of a disease. Nothing.

'Get a grip,' he told himself out loud, addressing the persistent night as much as himself. It

felt good to hear a human voice, even if it was his own, so he spoke again, this time with a little more determination in his self-administered order. 'Don't lose the plot, not now.' Robert held his necklace, his Mum's former mangalsutra with both hands. His Mum had gifted it to him before she had died, and it was Robert's most treasured possession. He never ever took it off. Ever.

Robert willingly paid the price of the teasing about his masculinity for his necklace. It had been his Mum's and now it was his. Apart from his memories it was all Robert had left of her. The sensation of the cold metal between his fingers re-assured him and calmed him down a little. 'I'm not losing them too Mum. I'll get them back somehow, I promise.'

Speaking out loud and making his promise to his Mum, Robert felt the rising panic ebb out of his consciousness, and calmness and rationality begin to creep slowly back in, until after a good fifteen minutes of talking to both the darkness and his Mum telling her he'd do whatever it took to get Dad and Elisabeth back, Robert fell asleep in his chair, exhausted.

Outside, in the cold night air, a pair of eyes watched Robert's house patiently, carefully. They had been watching his house for several hours now, ever since they had seen the candle light spill out of the windows. The man who owned the eyes stood waiting for something to happen, for someone to emerge from the house but no one did. Over the next few hours the light slowly dimmed and eventually went out completely.

The man considered his options. He did not know enough about the place he had arrived at a few hours before, and needed more information before he made his move. He could find himself facing one or a dozen people in that house.

How many other houses therefore could be occupied? It was too risky to break into one and find out; he had learnt not to blunder into situations without knowing as much as possible. Checking the device that had brought him to this planet, he saw it had enough power to keep him warm for the next few hours.

He'd wait until the morning. Then his first priority would be to check out the house with the light.

Nine days left.

2

King For A Day

Sleeping as he had done meant that Robert woke in quite possibly the most uncomfortable position he could imagine. One whole side had gone numb, and he gently tried not to move it too much while the pins and needles danced up and down his leg. Eventually he was able to use both his feet again as well as feel the fingers in his left hand. 'Remind me not to do that again, Cat,' he addressed Catanooga who had come looking for food.

Remembering his promise to his Mum, Robert decided he needed to do something, anything to somehow get his family back. Washing and changing out of his clothes for the first time since putting them on, Robert swapped his school uniform for something a little more sensible. His favourite top wasn't available, as it sat, still damp in the washing machine, where it had been for four days now, along with Elisabeth's far too strappy for college as far as Dad was concerned clothes.

Feeling stronger and more capable of facing the outside than he had been since that first day of revelation, Robert stepped out of his house into the chilly, grey morning. Picking his

bike up off the lawn where he had abandoned it three nights ago (well, who was around to steal it anyway), Robert headed off back into town as the first part of his making-it-up-as-he-went-along plan to get his family back.

He had barely got as far as the first junction when he became sure he was being observed from somewhere. He slewed his bike to a stop with a squeak of the brakes, and stood, straddling the crossbar, in the middle of the road.

'Hello!' he called out to the empty street. 'Hello!' he tried once more.

Nothing. Just the same emptiness he had been hiding from for three days.

Shaking his head, Robert stood on the pedals and was off again.

The man who had watched Robert's house all night waiting for someone to emerge, saw the door open, and a young lad, perhaps not even a teenager, depart on his bike. *What? It was only a boy. How had this happened?*

The man weighed the significance of this new information. Should he confront the boy? He was not sure. The one thing he was sure of however was that he needed to find some clothes. With it obviously being winter on this planet, standing naked in the frigid outside, especially during the long nights was not a viable option, even if he did have the means to warm himself.

When he was sure the boy on the bike was well out of sight, the man broke cover from his hiding place and made for Robert's house, letting himself in through the unlocked front door.

After a pointless half day trying to find someone, Robert, after grabbing a couple of bottles of mineral water from a deserted shop, headed home.

Once back at his house he noticed with alarm that he had left the door unlocked. He remembered his feelings of being watched from that morning, and the unease he had experienced then came back to him now, only more so. He was convinced there was someone

in there.

Leaning his bike against the wall as quietly as he could, he frantically scanned around for anything he could use as a weapon. All the garden tools were safely locked in the shed, and the only thing to hand was the heavy lock from his bike.

What should he do? It wasn't like there were any police to call or anything!

Reaching for the lock as his only option for defence, Robert decided that no one was going to take his Dad's house from him, and gently as to be as silent as possible, he pushed the door open.

Immediately he heard a voice calling from the kitchen. 'Robert? Is that you?'

Robert did not recognise the man's voice as either one of his teachers or any of his Dad's friends. He stayed still. And quiet.

'Robert?' the voice called again. 'It must be you, this is your house isn't it? Please don't be afraid, as I'm not here to hurt you. You have my word on that.'

Robert took a gamble. 'Who are you?' his voice cracking a little, he took a deep breath before continuing. 'If you're not here to hurt me, what's your name? You know who I am, so what are you called?'

'Fair enough, I suppose. Look, I'm going to come there OK, so don't panic please. And my name is Tairn. I'm kind of like you in a way.'

Huh?

But Robert did not have any longer to wonder what this man called Tairn meant. He heard footfalls leaving the kitchen and when he judged the owner of them was right by him, he swung the bike lock as hard as he could at where he hoped this Tairn would be.

'Uuufff!'

Robert stepped from his hiding place to see Tairn holding his midriff in obvious discomfort. 'Ow! Mollusc Pellets Robert! I said I wouldn't hurt you, didn't I?' Tairn gasped. Robert took a step back as the man before him straightened up a little stiffly. He was

enormous, and the clothes he had on barely did up, and in places were stretching to splitting point.

Robert realised his mistake and that he was hopelessly outmatched should Tairn want to cause trouble. 'Sorry, I thought you wanted to hurt me,' was all he could manage in the way of an explanation.

Tairn nodded his patient understanding. 'Well, I don't, so please don't hit me again.'

Then Robert realised something. 'Why are you wearing my Dad's clothes?' he asked. He had meant to carry on acting all indignant and as threatening as possible, brandishing the bike lock as menacingly as he could, but the sight of this man who was built like a heavyweight boxer standing there in a pair of jeans that almost came up to his knees and a t-shirt that barely contained his muscular frame and asking not to be hit again struck him as so incongruous that it was the most logical thing to say.

'Uh, yeah.' Tairn, for his part looked a little embarrassed at his state of dress. 'It looks like I don't take the same size as your Dad. Still, better than having to wear one of your sister's skirts eh?'

Tairn immediately realised his misjudged attempt at humour, as, at the mention of Elisabeth, Robert immediately raised the bike lock again, waving it vaguely in his direction still needing convincing of Tairn's passivity. 'How the hell do you know so much about me and my family? Who are you to come breaking in to my house anyway!'

Whatever answer Robert was expecting, the one that Tairn gave came as a complete surprise. 'I told you, I'm kind of like you, Robert. You see, I had my world stolen from me over twenty years ago, when I was a little older than you are now.'

Robert gawked.

'Can we sit down, and I'll try and explain?' Tairn asked, rubbing absently at his middle.

'But why are you wearing my Dad's clothes?'

Fifteen minutes later Robert and Tairn sat in Robert's living room, Tairn taking one of the

armchairs, and Robert sitting holding Cat on the sofa. After apologising for reading Elisabeth's diary, 'I needed to find out things quickly,' he had offered in the way of an explanation as to how he knew all about Robert and his family, the conversation had turned to Tairn's arrival.

'Well, it's kind of embarrassing really. You see, I didn't have the energy to bring my clothes with me. All I had left in me was enough to jump to the last planet he stole.'

'He? Who? Who's taken my family?'

'His name is Ballisargon. He stole all the people of my world, much like yours, but I managed to escape and I've been running and hiding ever since.'

'Bal-iss-argun?' Robert stumbled over the unfamiliar name.

'Ballisargon. All one word,' prompted Tairn.

'And you've been running for how long?'

'Ever since I was fourteen. I usually hide out on recently emptied planets, as there's always plenty of resources left and there's only one of me.'

I am not becoming that, thought Robert as Tairn continued.

'Normally they were pretty scarcely populated, but highly advanced worlds, but this one looks different. Like there were a lot more people around than the worlds he normally steals. How many people lived here Robert?'

'About seven billion. Why?'

Tairn whistled to himself. 'Wow. He must be planning something very big indeed to need that many people.'

'What? What is he going to do with them? With my Dad and sister?'

'I'm sorry Robert, I don't know,'

'Well I know I want them back. Tell me how to find him.'

'What? Are you mad? You don't want to go looking for him!'

'Yes I do,' stated Robert, matter-of-factly. 'If he's taken everyone from Earth, then he has

my family, and I want them back. I will go and, I don't know, ask him if he will send them back.'

'Ask him! ASK HIM! Hahahaha!' Tairn's deep voice boomed loud in Robert's living room.

'Don't laugh at me.' There was a shard of flint in Robert's voice that did not go unnoticed by Tairn.

'Ha-heh uh, um. You're really serious about that, aren't you? Yes, you are I can see it in your eyes.'

Robert said nothing in reply. He just stared at Tairn, which made Tairn uncomfortable. There was something in the boy's eyes that he found unsettling. Something primal and noble. Tairn decided that although the threat from Ballisargon was ever present, it was for the time being very remote, whereas the threat from this boy, although much less terrible was much more immediate.

'I tell you what,' Tairn offered in as a conciliatory tone as he could. 'If you help me here on this world, I'll see what I can do,' the last part whispered as if someone very specific might overhear.

'Good. What can you do?'

Tairn motioned for Robert to move closer to him. He began to whisper, almost conspiratorially, 'I can send you to his lands. The farthest distance from his stronghold, you understand. I can't risk him knowing it was me that helped you.'

'Fair enough. What help do you need in return?'

'Some new clothes would be a good start.'

One hour and one forced lock later, Tairn stood clad in what Robert could best describe as a Hell's Angel outfit. Boots, jeans, heavy shirt and a leather jacket rounded off by the large unkempt beard Tairn wore certainly made him look like someone you really wanted on your

side in a fight. Tairn scrutinised his reflection. 'Nice,' was all he had to say.

'You know, I've been thinking about why you're helping me,' offered Robert.

Tairn said nothing.

'You want me off the Earth don't you? It makes it safer for you if I'm not here. I mean this Ballisargon won't come back if he gets me will he? That will leave you the whole planet.'

Tairn turned to Robert, flexing his fingers into huge fists, before breaking out into a wide smile. 'Very smart, Robert. And even if he doesn't get you, I think it's best if I stay away from you in general. So, do you still want to go?'

Robert didn't miss a beat. 'Yes.'

'OK, no time like the present.'

'What, now? But I've got stuff to get from my house.'

But Tairn was no longer paying attention to Robert. He had fished something that looked like a mobile out of the leather jacket and was worrying away at the buttons and dials on it. When he had finished, he turned back to Robert. 'Ready?'

'What? No, I mean, yes, I mean, wait.'

But it was too late. Whatever Tairn had been doing was done. Robert found it harder and harder to see the shop all around him, as darkness began to creep in around the edges until it seemed he was looking down a tube at a picture of where he was standing.

'What do you mean you want to 'stay away from me in general?'' Robert had to shout his question, as he could hardly hear or see Tairn through the darkness. 'I only want to find my family...'

He barely heard Tairn's reply. 'You know, Robert, I think you'll do a lot more than that...'



As Robert vanished from the Earth, two very unique individuals were waiting and talking about him. They were called Pradeep and Vidya, and they were brother and sister. While they weren't twins, they did share a number of similar physical characteristics.

Presently they were sitting on a sand dune, underneath a rust-red sky. They had been there for several days now, ever since everything had changed. When that had happened, they left the business that was occupying them, and headed off to wait.

Pradeep was the more accomplished waiter of the pair; he sat casually on the sand, his legs crossed out in front of him, while Vidya paced around on the spot a small distance away. He was about to answer the question his sister had posed when he sensed something.

He caught her green eyes with a flick of his own. 'He's coming.'

3

Road To Nowhere

The tunnel zoomed back out. The sight that greeted Robert was not the shop he and Tairn had just been in; he was somewhere else, somewhere very different indeed.

In fact he was not even inside anymore. Stretching off in every direction and all around him as far as he could see was dark red-brown sand. There was no grass or trees, or flowers or any kind of plant life that Robert could see. All there was was the red sand. Dry, dead and lifeless. Robert strained hard to hear even the tiniest of sounds: insects, animals, anything, but there was nothing.

Oh that's just bloody marvellous. I've been dumped in the middle of the... He looked up while thinking the word 'Sahara' when he saw the sky. *What the..? This isn't Earth!*

Instead of the safe and familiar deep azure that the sky should have been it was rusty red, the colour of dried blood. There was no sun that he could see but there was a kind of daylight that didn't seem to cast any shadows. Dark grey clouds scudded overhead, driven by winds high in the atmosphere.

Where the hell am I? Mars?

Then, How did he do that?

Robert shivered involuntarily at the thought of having been sent so easily to another planet, even though it felt ludicrous when he imagined it. Then he had another feeling, as he realised what he now faced. He was alone, most likely stuck, on another *somewhere* with no means of either locating his family or getting them back home.

He kicked ineffectually at the sand in frustration at Tairn for sending him here without any plan or any anything other than the clothes he was standing up in.

The sand puffed away from his trainer before settling to the ground.

He kicked it again. ‘Dammit! You could have let me bring...’ Nothing came readily to mind, which made him even angrier.

OK, got to keep it together.

But how? How was he supposed to do that? He didn’t know where he was, which way he was supposed to go, even how far away from home he was. The one thing he was sure of was that his family was here, and they needed him. He needed a plan, even if for the time being that amounted to finding a useful looking direction to head in. He’d work the rest out on the way.

In the hazy distance Robert could make out what looked to be a dark strip in the desert. It was almost dead straight, meaning it was unlikely to be natural.

At least he had found his direction to head in.



Pradeep and Vidya had been walking for several hours, in the direction indicated by Pradeep. As the journey had worn on Vidya had begun to grow restless. Her nature was not

her brother's, and she felt she needed to be doing more than just walking. She was edgy. 'What if he gets lost?'

'He isn't. We're about an hour away.'

Vidya gazed hard at the horizon, seemingly not comforted by her brother's confidence. Pradeep decided he needed to change the subject. 'What do you think we should tell him? I mean, we're going to be a bit of a shock.'

Vidya paused. Pradeep was too good at knowing what she was thinking, and was always able to distract her from herself. She thought before replying. 'Well, with everything he's likely to have experienced in the past few days I would say he'll probably cope admirably.'

'You mean it's not like we're wild animals?' her brother replied with a smile.

Vidya shook her head in mock annoyance. 'Be serious Pradeep. You know what I mean.'

'Yeah, I guess I do. But what about everything else? He's going to have questions that we're not equipped to answer,' he hinted at what he was thinking.

His sister replied curtly. 'No. Not after what happened.'



The strip was indeed artificial. Two straight lines of metal side by side, a few centimetres apart with a channel in the ground between them, sat between a wide concrete path that looked to reach to the horizon. It wasn't much, but at least it proved that there was, or at the very least, had been, civilisation here.

After an hour of walking, Robert began to see a shape in the distance, something dark silhouetted against the red sky. As he neared it, keeping his gaze more or less permanently fixed on it, it became a collection of buildings of some sort. The walking became a slow jog.

Closer still he could see that it was quite a few buildings, a small city of some kind? At this

distance each building looked no more than two or three storeys and seemed to be made from some sort of white stone, so that as Robert drew near the outskirts, they stood out quite distinctly from the red sand all around.

Robert couldn't help but break out into a run. However once at the bounds of the city his enthusiasm died as he saw the ruins he had been heading toward. Every single structure over a certain height, without exception as far as he could see, had been decapitated at the third floor level. It looked as if someone had sliced a giant knife through the air and taken the tops off all the buildings, leaving great piles of rubble scattered at the bases of most of the structures.

What the hell had happened here?

Despite himself, he padded toward the nearest most intact looking building. At the entrance his foot stubbed against something half buried in the sand. Stopping, he bent down to see what it was. Next to his trainer was a lump of clear something. Robert excavated it, and saw it was a solid, smooth and heavy looking crystal of some kind, about the size of a cricket or tennis ball. He picked it up to find that it weighed something like a bag of sugar. The crystal was semi-transparent and turned the colour of oil on water as he rolled it over in his hands. The edges, though slightly dulled were still very pronounced, and each facet was only slightly scratched from its exposure to however long it had been out here.

Robert carefully put the crystal to his nose and sniffed gently. It did not seem to have any odour that he could tell. *What was it?* Looking around he could see more lumps covered by sand scattered all around him. Whatever they were there seemed to be a lot of them.

'Hello? Is there anybody there?' He called into the open doorway. His voice echoed loudly round the empty property, and for a second he had a vivid déjà vu of his time in the school.

Shaking the memories and feelings away he crossed the threshold. The interior of the building was gloomy, and it took Robert's eyes a few moments to adjust.

When they had, he realised that he was standing in what had once been a dining room on

this world, but was now devoid of any life.

Robert went to pick up a piece of what looked like a vegetable sitting on one of the abandoned plates. As soon as his fingers touched it, it fell apart in his hand, crumbling between his fingers and onto the plate. It had turned to sand, it had been here that long.

This place had been dead for decades. It was a tomb, and he was the only living thing in it.

Unable to stop himself, he hurled the crystal he still had in his hands against the nearest wall, where, much to his surprise, it went straight through, leaving a neat hole the size of his fist. He was no better off here than he had been on Earth! At least there he knew where everything was. Here, he didn't have a clue.

The anger made him feel stronger, braver somehow. But it was a selfish confidence. While he may have felt able, in those moments of extremis, of taking on the whole world in a fight, he would only have to answer for the consequences of any rash actions he undertook. It was easier to lash out, to react rather than to think, and while some situations demanded action, others did not. The anger was almost a refuge; a safe place to hide when things got difficult or when it felt like the world was ganging up on him.

But...

While here he did not have to worry about being punished, the consequences of ill thought actions were far greater. At least on Earth he had the luxury of knowing that someone (his Dad, usually) would pick up the pieces he left scattered after an outburst. Here he had no such comfort. Losing it big time here could, and probably would, be fatal.

Robert tried to breathe slowly and deeply. He tip-toed to the hole in the wall and looked through it. He could see the crystal out in the street again, a few metres away. He cringed, just glad that no-one had seen him vandalise what was obviously an abandoned house.



Pradeep and Vidya stood at a corner of one of the abandoned buildings not too far from Robert. Pradeep sighed at his sister's reply. They were going to have this argument again. And it still wasn't settled.

'But the Engineer is in the best position to tell him and teach him,' he stated, matter-of-factly.

'Pradeep, I said no. I won't take him there. I can't be held responsible for my actions if I have to speak with the Engineer.' Vidya headed off, ahead of her brother, this time with a barely controlled anger.

'And who else do you think can explain everything to him?' Pradeep called after her. 'And I know you too well. You're still hurting too much to talk to him impartially.'

Vidya ignored him, so he changed tack, catching up with her once more so they were level, shoulder by shoulder. 'We don't know enough about how the world works, about Ballisargon, about the Move, about why things change or even the... them,' he finished, swallowing hard, uncomfortable at whatever it was he couldn't name.

'I mean,' he continued, his point coming back to him, 'I know *how* to Move. I've been doing it all my life, but I'll be damned if I could teach it to someone else. And Ballisargon. How much do we really know about him? We've never even seen him, and I've never met another person aside from the Engineer who has.'

Vidya stopped again. She knew Pradeep was right, she just didn't want him to be right in *that* way.

Seeing her pause, her brother pressed his argument as much as he dared. She might have been his sister, but he did not want to rile her. An angry Vidya he could do without. 'The Engineer was there, remember. First hand knowledge. If we want to help Robert then the very least we can do is to make sure he knows what he's doing.'

Vidya could not deny that her brother's argument had merit. The Engineer was the best

person to equip Robert with the knowledge she and Pradeep would struggle to impart. And if she was serious about helping Robert, then she owed him every chance and advantage she could give him. But that meant...

Vidya broke her long silence. 'And how do we go about looking like we want to help without *looking* like we're helping?'

Pradeep let his original point drop for the moment. At least she was talking to him again. He looked thoughtful, pulling his large expressive mouth one way, then the other. 'You know, I really don't know. I guess we'll just have to play it cool, and try to answer his questions honestly, but be careful at the same time.'

'I'm not lying to him Pradeep.'

'I'm not asking you to. But if we tell him everything all at once, it might be too much for him. I don't know how I'd cope finding all that out in one hit.'

'But what if he asks something awkward?'

'Then the Engineer would be the perfect person to answer him without the risk. I know what you think about the Engineer. Hell, most of the planet heard about your falling out. You weren't exactly... discrete. I just hope we're still welcome on the Bridge.'

Pradeep had steered the conversation back to what Vidya did not want to talk about and it was obvious he was not going to let the matter drop. Vidya knew that her brother felt the same way about Robert as she did, he just expressed it differently. She was itching to get going, but once again he urged caution and preparation. So, she had two choices. Swallow her pride and do something she swore to herself she would never do again, or not take Robert to speak with the Engineer. So really only one choice. Two of the three promises she had ever made in her life were now in conflict and it was obvious to Vidya which one she had to break.

The one she had made to herself.

'OK. We'll take him to the Engineer.'

'Thanks.' he said solemnly. 'This was not the time for a joke.'

‘So, how do we explain our presence here to him then?’

‘We’ll just have to play dumb for a while. It’ll be easier to keep an eye on him then if he doesn’t suspect too much anyway. Huge coincidences do sometimes just happen,’ he finished with a smile.

‘Bumping into us here is pretty huge Pradeep.’

‘Not really. After all, it was sat on the main hub-way so it’s logical for him to follow that here, and as it is really the only remaining set of buildings between here and the Bridge, why shouldn’t we be here?’

‘I don’t know, it’s a pretty big chance you’re taking.’

‘Me? When have you ever known me risk anything? Look, I’m sure this is where he is. Sit down Vidya, please?’



Robert looked guiltily through the new hole in the wall he had been responsible for, then glanced around. Now feeling like he was trespassing he went back outside and inspected the crystal. It was virtually unharmed. Deciding it was too heavy to take with him, he left it lying on the sand.

He looked at the ruined buildings all around him. The city was dead and lifeless. Its living heart of people who should be crowding the squares, pumping through its streets and alleys all gone. Stripped of the reason for its existence, the vacant city felt aimless and purposeless. A monument to nothing.

Disquieted in a way he would have found difficult to articulate, but knowing that it was not a pleasant feeling, Robert suspected that whatever fate had befallen Earth had happened here too. What was it Tairn had said? ‘He cleans worlds,’ or something. Robert shuddered.

He could spend all day, days even, wandering round this empty mausoleum of a city looking for people who no longer lived here. He had to come up with something else, and soon. What that something else was, however, Robert did not have the faintest idea.

It was then that he heard the voices. Faint and indistinct, but still voices. He did not need any further encouragement. He was off at a sprint in a second.

Once he had made it to the back of the building he thought the voices were coming from, he paused, listening, trying to determine if they were friendly or hostile.

‘...ook, I’m sure this is where he is. Sit down Vidya, please?’ said a male voice. It had a deep sonorous tone to it, and an accent Robert found familiar.

‘I’m going to look for him,’ came the female reply. The voice had the same cultured resonance to it, and for some reason Robert felt reassured at hearing it.

‘If we want to see the Engineer, then we’re going to have to wait for him to arrive. He’ll be here. Trust me.’

‘I never said I wanted to see the Engineer, Pradeep.’ The male voice gave a small sigh, but the female voice continued. ‘I’m only agreeing with you because you think it is a good idea.

So they were waiting for a man called the Engineer, and it didn’t sound like he had arrived yet.

Robert carried on listening to try and find out more; he was still not sure if the people on the other side of the building were friendly or not, regardless of how posh they sounded.

The female voice continued, ‘It’s just that it’s not too safe out here. Maybe we should go and look for him. He may have got lost. Or worse.’

‘You worry too much,’ said the male voice as if stating a fact. ‘He’ll be fine.’

Robert got the sense that the female voice was not quite convinced by this, and as if to confirm his suspicions, the male voice re-assured, ‘Alright, we’ll give him another ten minutes. If there’s no sign of him by then, then you should go and look for him, while I stay here and wait. Agreed?’

‘Agreed.’

Well they don't sound hostile. And maybe I can tell them that I've not seen anyone on the way I came from, so they won't have to waste their time looking that way, thought Robert. He decided to introduce himself to the owners of the voices.

He stepped round from his hiding place to find himself not looking at two people as he had expected, but at two tigers, sitting sphinx-like on the sand. Two tigers. Two fully-grown tigers! Heads bigger than his whole chest, enormous paws the size of his face, long, sleek ochre and black bodies that seemed large enough to contain him whole.

TIGERS! Ohmygod! I'm dead!

Robert's eyes went wide when one of the tigers looked languorously over its shoulder at him. He fumbled for his necklace. When the second tiger joined its companion and turned its head at him, he took a small step back, very carefully. But when they both got up off their haunches and began to walk toward him, he broke out into a run.

'Hey! Stop. We won't hurt you.'

Robert was round the corner and nearly twenty metres away when he heard the call that stopped him dead in his tracks. *It had been them!*

Robert stood his ground as the tiger pair slinked round the corner and stood facing him. One looked at the other, seemed to see a 'you go first' look from its companion and cleared its throat. 'Sorry we startled you. Please, we're not going to attack you, if that's what you're worried about.'

Robert stood there a mix of shock and disbelief. They could talk. 'You can talk,' he echoed his thoughts, despite the obviousness of his observation. Then: 'Pleasedonteatme!'

The tigers shared a look. Then the male one said to his companion, 'Apparently, Vidya, he does not want to be eaten.'

Vidya, if that was her name replied to the male tiger. 'Pradeep. Please be serious.' Then directed back at Robert she said, 'Of course we won't eat you. Why would we want to do that?' She sounded almost aghast at the notion of eating someone, especially a lost boy from

Earth.

Robert looked sceptical, but the male tiger picked up where the female one had left off. 'Now, since we've got that out of the way, I think introductions are in order,' he said. 'I am Pradeep, and this is my sister, Vidya.' He pointed with a paw at the other tiger.

Vidya raised her paw in greeting, and waved it gently at Robert. He saw, that unlike Pradeep, Vidya's paw, and the rest of her right front leg was pure white. There was no hint of the deep orange that she had on her other limb, and all the black stripes were missing too. Robert found himself beginning to stare, and checked himself. He hoped Vidya had not noticed. He did not want to seem rude.

'What are you doing out here in the Lyr?' asked Vidya seemingly unaware of Robert's attention to her leg.

'I'm looking for my family,' replied Robert, glad that the conversation had continued. He deliberately tried to focus his eyes anywhere but Vidya's forepaw. 'I woke up a few days ago to find they had disappeared. Well, everyone had disappeared, but I'm here to get my Dad and sister back. On Earth I met a man called Tairn, who told me that someone called Ballisargon had taken everyone, and he sent me here somehow. So here I am.'

The nervous energy from seeing two tigers caused Robert to say whatever came into his head. If he kept them talking maybe they would keep their promise and not want to eat him. 'Tairn said he'd send me as far from this Ballisargon's stronghold as he could. He didn't seem to want Ballisargon to know it was him who helped me,' he continued.

Pradeep looked up at the sky, which had grown considerably darker in the time they had been waiting for Robert, and his arrival. 'It's quite a journey to Ballisargon's Keep, so we'd bet...' he began, before trailing off, seemingly losing the thread of what he was going to say next. Then he narrowed his eyes, and his large ears twitched as if hearing something a very long way away.

'What is it, Pradeep?' his sister asked.

But Pradeep did not answer. He was concentrating hard. Then his head jerked round and he looked at the horizon.

Robert followed Pradeep's gaze. He could make out a darkness in the sky some distance away. It looked like a large indistinct dark red-brown mass in front of the grey clouds. He tried to tell what it was. It *looked* like a cloud; it was too large and densely packed to be a flock of birds, and was too irregularly shaped to be anything artificial.

Even in the short space of time it had taken Robert to work this out, the cloud-thing had grown larger and nearer in the sky. Now he was able to see that there were trails of some sort hanging underneath it, making it look like a giant jellyfish hanging in the air. The whole thing reminded him of something, but he could not place where he had seen it before.

He did not have time to work out why it seemed familiar, because Pradeep was shouting something.

'Run! For pity's sake run, Robert! Follow us! Now!'

Shaken from his reverie by the tiger, Robert saw the pair of them bound off. Vidya paused, turned her head and called him. 'Come on, Robert. It's bad. Really!'

Robert did not want to hang around and find out what caused two tigers to turn tail. In a second he was off, running after them as fast as his feet could carry him.

He turned a corner, following the tigers. Behind him he could hear the storm approaching. He glanced over his shoulder as he ran. The storm seemed to be made of the desert itself, the sand-cloud-tentacles hissing like rain as they struck the ground.

In a minute the storm was upon him, and the tigers just ahead of him, sweeping them all up in its roar. In less than a second he lost sight of them both; they seemed to merge with the sand the storm was made of. Another second later Robert lost all sense of direction in the swirling tumult. His world disappeared into a haze of dark noise, the sand blocking what little light there was and shutting out all other sounds.

He slowed to a walk for fear of smacking into the wall of a building. He pulled the hood of

his top up, but it did no good. Within no time at all he found his mouth and nose clogging with the fine dry sand. He coughed, but this only served to fill his mouth with more sand. He could feel, even with his eyes closed, the sand scratching at his eyeballs, clogging his tear ducts. He stumbled forward, blindly, his arms flailing ahead of him, reaching for anything he could shelter in. He shouted a cry for help. Then it all went black.



The man in the suit looked up from the current stage of his preparations. A few hours ago, a tickling sensation had started at the base of his skull, inside his spine where he could not reach. It had persisted for a while, until the man had been able to ignore it and concentrate on his work. Now it was gone as suddenly as it had arrived.

This was unusual, and the man did not like things that happened out of the ordinary. His discomfort was such that he turned from his work, leaving it half-finished. He angled his head as if into the direction a faint sound was emanating from and closed his eyes in concentration. Underneath his eyelids his eyes flicked back and forth, looking into the darkness.

Then they stopped moving and the man in the sand coloured suit opened them again, but only a fraction. His expression hardened.

He would despatch something to investigate.