

# **Operation Stargazer**

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**OPERATION STARGAZER**

**BY**

**CHRIS HAWLEY**

**Sequel To  
Secret Of The Red Planet**

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## FOREWORD

As we watch the events unfolding at the present time, we cannot help but see monumental changes ahead. Our children and their children are likely to inherit a world fundamentally different from the one we are living in today. Throughout the world, ordinary people are feeling uncertain of the future: the rich becoming richer; the poor having to struggle harder to survive; the discontent at the unwillingness of the powerful few to relinquish their hold on wealth or position; the deepening economic crisis facing the developed nations; the emergence of a mighty China that threatens to upset the stability of the global economy; the increasing world population that is set to top 7 billion by the end of 2011; the reluctance of world leaders to switch to renewable energy resources and reduce the dependence on polluting fossil fuels; the resulting changes to our climate that make it hard for farmers to know when to sow the seeds; widespread drought and famine and the suffering they cause. But, in my opinion, topping the list of the world's ills are the rise of greed, selfishness and intolerance, and the worship of power and money instead of the Almighty Creator of the Universe.

In *Secret of the Red Planet*, Bill was told that he is destined to play a significant part in saving the Earth from environmental disaster, a life mission that he has taken to heart. In subsequent adventures, Bill becomes more and more committed to his mission, and consequently he comes up against more and more opposition from forces with a vested interest in the status quo. Bill, and many others of his generation, feels that those in power today are plundering and looting, with no regard for the welfare of future generations and the kind of world they should inherit.

It is my belief that, in order to achieve a peaceful and just world for the whole human race, a major shift in thinking has to take place on a global scale. The greed, selfishness and intolerance have to be replaced by Love, in its various forms: giving, caring, respect and forbearance. But such a shift *will* happen. Humankind *will* eventually tackle the mounting problems and a better world *will* come in due time, but not

until humanity is on its knees. A lot of suffering may have to be borne before we as a race realise that the road we are taking is not on the road to happiness.

Chris Hawley

Lamu

August 2011

This book is dedicated to:

My wife Margarita,

In gratitude for her selfless love and support over the  
past 45 years.



**PART ONE**

**RACE AGAINST TIME**

## CHAPTER ONE

### ZERONERA

A cloudy consciousness spread through me: a dim recollection of having lived a life and having left it behind, only to find that a fragile thread still remained, connecting me to the shadow of my past. But it was just a frail connection, insufficient to give me an answer to the fundamental question: who am I? Other questions were too distant even to contemplate. Whoever I am I know I have a dull pain in my left shoulder. How did I come by this ache? I made the effort to search the corners of my mind for the answer. It was as if my head were stuffed with cotton wool instead of brain tissue. Ah! Now I remember; the table! I fell off the table onto the floor and the floor is stone cold. I must get up and get back onto the wooden bed and under that vile blanket before I die of cold. But I don't feel cold any more. Why?

But it was slowly coming back to me now. Shadowy scenes flitted across the screen of my mind: scenes of blazing cars; angry faces; gunshots. I know now; you are Bill Steadman and you are the captive of the Russians. Get up and find the bed! But why can't I open my eyes? I moved my left arm and a stab of pain made me gasp. My right arm groped around for the leg of the table but instead it found the rounded edge of something hard like stone. It was like the bed I had slept in in Similaria. I felt it with my hand. My arm traced a vacant arc, but found no table and no wooden bed, and this was not the cement floor of the hut that I lowered my hand to. Then, suddenly, it all came back to me and I remembered having been woken and carried through the grating metal door by some people; I can't remember who they were. But yes, now I remember. *Michu!*

I slowly and with difficulty opened my eyes, afraid of what I would see. Michu's reassuring voice may have been part of a dream after all. The colourful scenes had vanished and I saw only inky blackness. I opened my eyes wider but saw nothing whatsoever. Panic gripped me. I am blind! Or

have I crossed over into the afterlife? I rubbed my eyes with my right hand and blinked. Still there was nothing out there but pitch darkness and some multi-coloured stars as a result of the rubbing.

‘Michu!’ I tried to call, but no sound came from my lips. ‘Michu!’ I called again. This time a faint whisper escaped into the void. I called out a third time, ‘Michu! Michu!’ This time I heard my voice more clearly and it echoed in my ears.

‘Bill?’ It was a man’s voice over to my right.

I turned to face the sound.

The voice was soothing. ‘Bill, it’s me, Manu.’

I remembered who Manu was but for the life of me I could not remember where I had last seen him. Yes, of course! It was that morning I had left Mars to go back home. What is Manu doing here in Russia? And how did I become blind? Total confusion enveloped me. I was breathing heavily.

‘Bill, relax,’ said the voice from the darkness.

‘Manu, is that really you?’

‘Yes, Bill, it is me. Just relax. You have had a hard time but you are going to be fine.’

I struggled to speak. ‘Manu, I can’t see. Tell me, why am I blind?’

‘No, Bill, you are not blind,’ was his reassuring reply.

‘Then why is it so dark? Why can’t I see you?’

‘We’re back on Mars, Bill.’ Manu spoke slowly.

‘In Similaria?’ I croaked.

‘No, we are in Zeronera.’

‘Zeronera!’

I struggled to sit up. Leaning on my right elbow, I let my left arm rest on my side. Zeronera! It had a frightening ring to it. I tried to recall where I had heard the name before. Zeronera! Zeronera! I could hear Zeris’ voice now, mouthing the word with a touch of fear. ‘Zeronera; you call it Utopia. They want all that we have built up over thousands of years and they will stop at nothing to get it.’ A shiver slithered down my spine, but I was powerless to speak.

After a few moments, during which I could hear my heart beating against my ribcage, Manu spoke again. ‘We were taken prisoners by the Zeros: you, me, Michu and Sonia.’

At the sound of their names I gasped. ‘Where are they?’

Where's Michu and..... and Sonia?'

'Don't get alarmed, Bill: they are well. They are being held in another chamber, probably just like this one.'

I tried to imagine what the chamber was like. Then I thought of Sonia. She must be scared out of her life, in the darkness and in a strange place. 'How do you know... she's... she's fine?' I asked.

'I am in constant contact with Michu, Bill.'

'Yes, I forgot.'

'If she's thinking of me, I hear her thoughts and she can hear mine, and if I think of her...' Manu paused and I knew he was in communication with her. 'They are both well and getting to know each other. Sonia is stronger than you think, Bill.'

'Yes, it's true,' I agreed. It was all coming back to me now. I thought how calm and confident Sonia had been in Russia and how she had persuaded me against attempting my reckless plan of escape. Yes, Sonia was strong and level-headed. I had wanted to go it alone, but she had insisted on being part of the adventure. I saw in my mind's eye the slip of paper in the library book, telling me she would take up my offer and go with me to Mars. And now both of us are here, in circumstances neither of us could have dreamed about. I felt another pang of guilt at having involved her in the nightmare. But then, it was what she wanted and how lucky I was to have met her.

My thoughts turned back to Michu. But Manu was speaking again.

'I have been communicating with Michu just now. She says they are both comfortable and they are pleased to hear you are conscious again.'

I smiled at the darkness, in spite of my situation. But there was so much I needed to know. I wondered how it was we came to be in Zeronera?

'Let me tell you, Bill,' Manu said, reading my mind. 'We were following your progress at all stages: your kidnap by Sonia's father, then the CIA, then the Russians. Priam knew that in our preparations to repel the Zeros and the Zoggs, both his scientist friend, Hermann and the Russians would be involved. So we let things follow their course until you needed to get out of there. It was only then we moved in to

help.’

‘I knew I was right, Manu,’ I said.

‘About Hermann and the Russians, you mean?’

‘Yes, but how did you know they had Hermann?’ I was finding my voice again.

Manu explained. ‘Priam was there at the meeting. He says he was having coffee with Hermann, somewhere near his office in Victoria, I think. Two strangers came in and sat at their table. They introduced themselves and said they wanted Hermann to accompany them to Moscow: they had an offer to make to him that would make him rich and famous.’ Manu gave a short laugh. ‘Well, you know that Hermann doesn’t care for riches or fame, but when he heard that there was a possibility of having unlimited help in bringing his electromagnetic theories to fruition, well, he jumped at the idea. Priam said he couldn’t hold Hermann down, he was so excited.

‘Anyway, it was all systems go from then on. Michu and I had an urgent meeting with the elders and they gave us permission to bubble to Earth to rescue you.’ Manu paused. I felt his hand on my left arm. ‘Zeris spoke very warmly of you, Bill.’ He squeezed my arm gently, then withdrew his hand and continued. ‘The idea was to rescue Sonia and you, but to leave Hermann to work on his theories with the help of Moscow. Luckily, both you and Sonia have learnt to ask Michu for help and she hears your cries. You can’t hear her yet; at least not often. So how did we find you? Well, Priam did his detective work, locating the camp. How he did it, I have no clue. The rest was simple enough. Priam and his technician programmed a five-seater bubble and Priam, genius that he is, infiltrated the camp and, posing as a high-ranking Russian official, he speaks fluent Russian incidentally, he located your prison and Sonia’s too.’

‘You Martians will always surprise me,’ I said in the direction of Manu.

He laughed. ‘We left a note for them: Priam wrote it before flying back to London. He told them not to hunt for you and Sonia, that you were on your way to Mars, that they should keep the whole thing secret and that we would be in contact with them soon.’

‘But, Manu, I can’t understand why Ivan locked me up for

so long without food or water. I could have died.'

'Anger, Bill. Ivan was livid at your attempt to contact the outside world. He wanted to teach you a lesson so that in future you would respect him, and even fear him. I don't think he had any intention of letting you die. While he still needs you he will do all he can to make sure you survive.'

I grunted. 'He has a strange way of going about it. Anyway, how long do you think it will take Hermann to finish the work on his theories so they can use them?'

'That is the million dollar question, Bill,' said Manu out of the darkness. 'There are many 'ifs.' One thing for sure is that time is not on our side. The Zeros must know something is afoot. It's a race against time. The Zoggs can be here in eight months. Once the Zeros are ready for action and they put out the call, well, what can I say?'

'You said, eight months. That's a long time.'

'A long time?' Manu gave a short laugh. 'Do you know how far Zogg is?'

'Zeris did tell me; several light years, I think.'

'Almost seventeen light years, Bill. At the speed of light it would take them seventeen years to get here. Did Zeris tell you they can travel at twenty times the speed of light, using a particle they have discovered?'

'He did tell me they know how to fly faster than light, but...phew! Eight months is not long then, is it?'

Manu made no answer.

'But how did they capture us, the Zeronerans I mean? How did they know when to expect us?'

'That is something that is puzzling us too. Priam thinks there is a spy among the Martians on Earth and maybe here too, and the spy is passing information to the Zeros.'

Zeris has advised Priam to be extra vigilant and not to speak to anyone about any secret matters. It is going to make Priam's job very difficult until the spy is caught. But Priam is a very astute person and he says he already has his suspicions. Anyway, Michu and I took off from Russia in the bubble, with you safely inside. You were given something to make you sleep. We landed in our usual place near Similaria and were just about to transfer to smaller surface bubbles when the Zeros attacked and... well, here we are.'

'Were the girls hurt?' I asked anxiously.

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‘Nobody was hurt. Of course, it was tough on your damaged shoulder, but they treated us well; they had to, you see.’

Manu’s face was hidden by the veil of darkness but I sensed a note of sorrow in his voice.

I was puzzled. ‘Why did they have to?’

Manu didn’t answer immediately. Then he said slowly, ‘because the captain in charge of the Zeronera guard is my father.’

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE DICTATOR

Manu's words rang in my head. I could hear his breathing above the hammering of my heart against my ribs. Neither of us spoke. Then, in the far distance, I heard the sound of voices.

I sat up straight. 'Who are they, Manu?'

'Guards, Bill. Stay calm. They may not come here.'

The sound came nearer and I could make out the soft padding of feet. The voices were nearby now. One man was giving orders.

'It might just be a routine check: there's no need to be alarmed.'

I held my breath and sat completely still. Then a beam of light flooded the chamber as the stone doorway slid aside. It was in fact a soft light, but after the pitch blackness in the chamber my eyes took some time to adjust to it. I saw Manu for the first time, sitting on a stone bed a metre away from me, squinting towards the source of the light. A quick glance round the chamber revealed its approximate size and shape. It was roughly round, with a series of raised stone beds like those Manu and I sat on. The ceiling was rounded and the floor fairly level. That quick survey was all I had time for, because my eyes darted to the entrance to take in the action taking place there.

'*Zigismo ho!*' came the call from a man pushing through the narrow entrance into the chamber. Silhouetted against the lighted doorway, his features were not clear, but I guessed he was a Zeroneran guard. He was tall for a Martian, heavily built and thickly bearded. He wore a tunic not unlike those used by the Similarians and he wore on his feet a pair of rough sandals and on his hands he wore heavy black gloves that reached almost to his elbows. His head was covered by a round cap with ear flaps secured under the chin by a strap.

'*Zigismo ho!*' he shouted, even louder than before.

Manu and I sat still. I didn't understand the guard's com-

mand, for that is what it sounded like. I looked across at Manu for his lead but he only drew himself up and put out his chest in a show of defiance. Whatever it was the guard had said, Manu was not to be moved.

‘*Zigismo ho!*’ yelled the guard for the third time, striding towards us. He lifted his arm and took a swipe at Manu’s head. Manu ducked in time to avoid the blow, while I scrambled awkwardly to the far end of the stone bed, wincing from the pain in my left shoulder.

A shout from the entrance made the guard turn sharply. Another Martian had put his head through the gap and had said something to him. The guard muttered a few words to Manu and then turned on his heels, crossing the floor to face the other. There followed a heated exchange between the two. I looked at Manu, who sat calmly on his bed watching the argument. Then both protagonists disappeared and the huge stone was moved effortlessly back into place, leaving us once more in complete darkness. The voices faded away. For a few moments neither Manu nor I spoke.

At last I said softly, ‘Manu, what does it mean?’

‘*Zigismo ho?*’ It means, ‘Victory to Zigismo!’

‘Like *‘Heil Hitler?’*’

‘Yes.’ Manu cleared his throat. ‘Let me explain some things about the Zeros. Their leader is called Zigismo, as you already know. He became the Chief of the Elders of Zeronera about... about thirty years ago. At that time the population of Zeronera was about nine hundred, still large by Martian standards, but much smaller than it is today. Zigismo, or Zigi as we normally refer to him at home these days, was highly respected and so much was expected of him. But Zigi had secret ambitions for Zeronera and, of course, for himself too. He began well enough, but slowly he started to dominate the Council. He ruthlessly but quietly removed those who stood up to him and replaced them one by one by those who would do his bidding without question.’

‘He became a dictator,’ I said.

‘Right, but he was clever: he kept his ambitions to himself. He had a plan and that was to build a secret army. He persuaded all Zero women of child-bearing age to find husbands to sire Zeroneran children. That was quite normal. But what we didn’t know was that the boys were to form an army

that would eventually be used to attack the other clans, and eventually to conquer Mars. But that was not enough for him. The girls....’ and here Manu paused for a moment, ‘the girls, as soon as they were able to bear children, were forced to submit to Zero men, not just any men but the men chosen by Zigi himself: the bravest, fittest, strongest of them.’

‘That is against the culture of Mars, right?’

‘Yes, Bill,’ said Manu sadly. ‘That was completely against tradition. It had never been known before. Zigismo now has an army of more than five hundred strong fighting men. Sadly, my father is one of them. As a rule, Martians have never been fighters: they are workers and they act in the interests of the clan, and finally in the interests of the whole of the planet. Zigi has created a new culture, and if he is not stopped he will rule Mars and spread his devilish culture to... and who knows what will happen.’

‘I see the problem now,’ I said, crossing to Manu with difficulty. I found him in the dark and put my right arm around his shoulders. ‘No wonder Zeris was worried when he told me about the threat from Zeronera, the day before I left Mars.’

Manu continued. ‘We could unite against Zigi and we might just defeat him with a good leader. But the clans are not organised. It would take a long time to mould them into some kind of defence force. And, on top of that, Zigi has the Zoggs to back him. We don’t stand a chance.’

‘How do you know for sure about the Zoggs?’ I asked.

‘I can’t tell you, Bill. It’s top, top secret. I don’t know all of it myself. I suspect we may have a sympathiser in Zerone-ra, who is feeding information to our elders, but that is my personal idea: I have nothing concrete to back it up.’

I thought for a moment. ‘The guards, what were they arguing about?’

‘The first one was incensed because I refused to repeat the greeting, ‘*Zigismo ho!*’ The other, who is more senior, told him not to insist on it, but the first one was still angry. His ego is hurt. Anyway, the young Zeros have been raised to revere, almost to worship their leader and it is a standard greeting here. Lately, if anyone dares to refuse to use it, Zeros that is, they are punished. I am told Zeronera has many chambers like this one, where opponents of the regime are

kept in solitary confinement. Not many have the courage to stand up to Zigi.'

'And your father, Manu?'

Manu sighed in the darkness. 'About twenty-one years ago, Martian years that is, my mother wanted a child. Zeroneran men were considered to be among the best on the planet, so our elders approached them and Atik was found to be a good choice. So I was born over twenty years ago and, in accordance with our tradition, I stayed with Tania, my mother. When Zigi came out into the open and formally founded his army about eight years ago, my father was chosen to be an officer because of his bravery and strong character. He is now a captain in the Zeroneran army.'

'How loyal is he, Manu?'

'I don't know. I hardly know him actually. I hadn't seen him for eight years until the day we were taken prisoner.' Manu sounded upset and I felt for him. 'Normally, a father will visit his children at least once a year and sometimes much more often, but Zigi has forbidden it. Not only that but he brainwashes the people. They are no longer allowed to mix with other clans, so they never know whether what he tells them is lies or not.'

'How do you know this if you don't mix with Zerone-rans?'

'It's what we believe. Our children from Zero fathers don't see them anymore and the Similarians who sired Zero children aren't ever allowed to visit them. But there is another reason why we know some truths about Zigi.' Manu paused and cleared his

throat. 'About a year ago, a boy of my age suddenly appeared at the entrance to Similaria. We would not have known he was there had it not been for Aldo. Aldo is the one in charge of collecting produce from the farm. Aldo was passing through the wall just as the boy was approaching in a bubble. The boy, his name was Stefan, asked to be allowed in, so Aldo sent a message to the elder on duty and Stefan was finally let in. It turned out that his father was a member of our clan, something Aldo didn't know. The boy missed his father so much that he stole a bubble from Zeronera and escaped. He was welcomed by us all and he spent time with his father, but when it was time to go home he said he couldn't

face it. It was a difficult time for the elders because such a thing had never happened before. There was heated debate, but finally they decided he would have to go back.'

'Poor boy!' I said.

'But it turned out worse than we thought,' said Manu mournfully.

'What happened?' I already feared the worst.

'He was killed, Bill.'

'By *Zigismo*?'

'Yes, Zigi ordered his execution for disobeying his orders and as a warning to others not to do the same.'

'The monster!' I said between clenched teeth.

'He is worse than a monster: he is capable of anything. And he has moulded his army into a ruthless machine.'

My thoughts turned to our own predicament. I was about to give voice to them when Manu spoke again.

'Don't give way to your fears, Bill,' he said. 'Zigi will not harm us just yet. Why? Because he needs to know what we know and what we are up to. We have to be strong.'

'But maybe he'll torture us, right?' I began to sweat and my stomach tied itself in knots.

'We have to be positive. It will not come to that. There will be a way out, you'll see.'

He had not finished his sentence when I first heard the sound of feet coming towards us. 'They're coming back,' I breathed, fighting back the fear that held me rigid.

The steps became louder. I tried to decide how many men there were, but already they were at the entrance, moving the huge stone aside. A chink of dim light spread across Manu and I saw his eyes narrow. Then the gap was wide enough for a man to enter. One after the other, three men squeezed through into the chamber and stood still in a line facing us, legs apart and hands on hips. They were much like the first, swarthy and arrogant. One of them stepped forward. He was dressed in the same uniform as the one who had stuck at Manu: striped tunic, sandals, heavy gloves and a cap with ear flaps. It was only the absence of the beard that differentiated him from the other, but he looked just as aggressive and I waited with bated breath. I said a prayer to myself. Please, Manu, don't antagonise him.

'*Zigismo ho!*' he bellowed in a deep voice. The others re-

mained behind him.

Neither Manu nor I moved a muscle, waiting for the man to respond to our silence. Then he spoke to Manu in a commanding voice. Manu stood up and motioned to me to do the same.

‘We are to follow him,’ said Manu quietly to me.

I got up from the bed and stood for a few moments, feeling weakness in my legs and a dull ache in my left shoulder. Manu said something to the guard and then he took my arm, leading me unsteadily forward towards the doorway. The guards stepped through the entrance and we followed. Outside, a passageway led off to the left and to the right. We walked slowly behind the guards along the left-hand passage, up a slight incline. The uneven walls were lit by dozens of small crystals, like the ones I had seen in Similaria. They gave off a soft light, enough to see the way. A strange damp, pungent smell pervaded the air. After some time the tunnel widened into an open space. I lifted my eyes in wonder at the lofty ceiling adorned with dozens of creamy-white stalagmites, or were they stalactites? I never could remember which was which. But there was no time to debate or to stare, because at this point the guards made a quick turn to the right and entered another passage. We followed close behind. After a few paces we came upon a curtain of rough grey material. As we drew near, our guard barked out the official greeting to two guards who stood stiffly at either side, and the curtain was swept aside. We passed through and found ourselves in a long hall.

By this time I was feeling dizzy. My legs were wobbly and my shoulder was aching. Manu noticed this and allowed me to lean on him. He said something to the guards and they permitted us to sit for a while on a rough stone bench just inside the entrance to the hall. I took in the scene, peering around at the walls lined with guards standing like statues, the ceiling covered with luminescent crystals, and then to the far end of the hall, about a hundred or so metres away. I fancied I could see a raised platform decorated with coloured materials, but it was too far and the light insufficient to provide much detail.

Suddenly the head guard called to us to follow him. He spoke to Manu and Manu translated for me.

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‘We are to face Zigismo,’ he said solemnly. ‘Are you ready?’

I stared wide-eyed at my friend. ‘This is it, Manu!’ I said in a trembling voice.

‘Yes, Bill, this is it!’

## CHAPTER THREE

### AUDIENCE

It seemed to me that we would never reach the end of the hall. As we progressed I looked back. The entrance retreated into the gloom, but our destination appeared not to draw any nearer. It *was* a stage of some sort at the far end; that was clear to me now. I was still feeling dizzy, but at each step I told myself I had to go on. Manu walked by my side, supporting me when he felt I needed it. At times the ceiling appeared to swim to one side and the stationery guards to lean over, as if they would fall. The stage became blurred and then clear, only to become blurred again. The journey seemed endless.

When I was utterly sure that I would collapse in a heap and would have to be carried, the chief guard bade us halt. To our left, against the wall, lay a long rough stone bench, on which we were told to sit. It was only then that I noticed others seated at the far end of the bench about twenty metres away. I squinted to get a better look at them. They swam in front of my eyes like phantoms.

Suddenly, my vision cleared sufficiently to identify them. My heart missed a beat as I realised who they were. Manu nudged me and whispered in my ear. It was confirmation of what I had already decided. The forms sitting on the bench were none other than Michu and Sonia. They were looking in our direction and had probably been following our progress down the long hall towards them. I lifted my right hand in a gesture of greeting and both of them acknowledged it. I looked at Manu. He and Michu were looking at each other and I knew they were exchanging thoughts. I concentrated on Sonia's face. Her complexion appeared paler than usual, but the light was not bright enough to be sure. Her red hair was roughly tied back. She was dressed in a grey tunic that looked too small for her and she wore no shoes. She sat staring in my direction and her lips were drawn back in a weak smile. I smiled back and raised my hand again. My heart

went out to her and I knew how much she meant to me.

The chief guard approached Manu and spoke to him, standing with his legs apart and his hands on his hips, in a posture I had already come to identify with Zeroneran aggression and arrogance. When he had turned to give orders to the other two guards, Manu swivelled round to face me.

‘The Chief of Security will be interviewing us shortly,’ he whispered. ‘Zigi is not available: he has some other issue more important to attend to. He may ask to see us later.’ Manu paused and his next words were mouthed slowly and sternly. ‘After Zigi, the Security Chief is the most important member of the ruling council...’

My speechless eyes rested on Manu’s serious expression.

‘... and he does Zigi’s work with fervour and utter ruthlessness.’

I turned away from Manu’s flickering eyes and searched for Michu in the dim light of the hall. She sensed my attention and smiled a Michu smile that made my heart beat faster. Her expression was meant to convey strength to me: I knew it.

‘What do you think he will say to us, Manu?’ I asked in a shaky voice, still studying Michu’s pale face.

‘Whatever he asks, Bill, I have to be careful to avoid giving away too much and at the same time just enough to convince him I’m telling the truth. It is not going to be easy and my fear is I don’t know how much he knows. You understand me?’

‘What their spy has told them, right? But Manu.....surely he can read your mind.’

‘Fortunately the Zeros more or less lost the ability to read minds. At least... that is what we have been told. But we cannot be sure of that, Bill. I must try to keep my mind off everything except the question being put to me.’

‘And me?’ I asked. ‘If I think in English, can he understand me?’

‘Even if you thought in Latin he would understand, my friend. It is not the words he would pick up but the thoughts behind the words. And we cannot know which Earth languages he knows anyway. Don’t forget, Zeros have been to Earth too.’

‘So I must practice mind control as well,’ I whispered.

‘Exactly! Listen, Bill, if he talks to you, don’t say more than you have to and keep silent if you possibly can. You have a good excuse anyway. You’ve been very sick and you can claim loss of memory. I’ll tell him exactly that. He will talk to me in Kisoro, or at least the contaminated version they speak in Zeronera.’ He spat out the last few words.

I looked at Manu sharply. It was unusual for him to speak that way.

He grinned and said, ‘I shouldn’t be prejudiced I know, but it’s hard sometimes.’

The chief guard was striding towards us now, beating his sides with his gloved hands. A sharp call and we were on our feet again, wedged between him and two guards behind us. I turned to see Michu and Sonia bringing up the rear, surrounded by guards. Like that, our little procession made its way to the far end of the hall. Fear rose in me with every step. What must Sonia be feeling?

We halted before a raised platform and all but four guards fell away to the side. I looked up at the vaulted ceiling with its many crystal lights: orange, blue, green and white. On the platform was a single high-backed chair, richly gilded in bright metals that could have been gold and silver. The seat was covered by fabric of deep maroon; Zigismo’s chair for sure. I marvelled at the intricacy of its patterns and I wondered if it had been brought from Earth. I was convinced that it was the only chair on Mars. I had never seen even a single piece of furniture in Similaria. I looked sideways at Manu for answers but his eyes were closed. Looking for answers too, I guessed.

The four of us were led up onto the stage and made to sit on the floor in front of the chair, a little to the left-hand side. Opposite us was a single cushion and I wondered what kind of man it was waiting for. There we sat for what seemed like hours. Occasionally I turned to the girls. Nervous smiles were exchanged with Sonia. Michu looked calm and hardly moved, while Manu kept his eyes closed. He must have felt the weight of his responsibility for our safety and the future of his people.

Suddenly, through some curtains off to the right of the stage, a Martian appeared, striding purposefully towards us, with two guards in tow. He was thickset, with long dark hair

and thick beard. He wore the usual striped tunic but flowing out behind him swung a long black cloak, secured round his neck by a dull metal chain. I guessed he was the Chief of Security. He crossed swiftly behind and then round in front of the gilded chair, bowing to it as he passed. He bows to an empty chair: what reverence the Zeronerans must have for their leader! With a flourish he arranged himself on a cushion facing us, the chair on his right. The two guards stood silently behind him, legs apart and hands on hips. The Chief of Security looked slowly from one to the other of us in turn. I felt his dark eyes boring into mine, like the fierce point of a carpenter's drill eating into the wood. I looked down, unable to stand the intensity of his gaze.

'*Zigismo ho!*' he said quietly but with fervour. I found the softness of his voice incongruous. A wide smile split his face in two, but his eyes did not lose their steely hardness.

'It makes no difference,' he said slowly in halting English, his eyes sweeping across our four expectant heads. What didn't make any difference, I wondered. He looked straight at Manu and said something to him in what was probably Kisoro. Manu held his gaze but said nothing.

The Chief of Security sighed and turned to face Michu. The words he spoke made Michu's eyes widen for a moment and then she looked down. He continued speaking slowly and deliberately, looking from Manu to Michu and back again. Another question for Manu. Again silence. The Chief sighed again and began tapping his knee with the fingers of his right hand.

At last Manu cleared his throat and spoke, carefully and evenly, keeping his eyes firmly on the face in front of him. I knew that Manu was bringing all his powers of concentration and strength of will to bear and I prayed for him. The Chief listened intently, without moving a face muscle, but occasionally nodding his head. When Manu had finished speaking, the Chief straightened up and then, leaning forward, said but one word to Manu. '*Fold.*' It was said with such clarity, I could not mistake the word.

There was complete silence. Manu and Michu exchanged glances and then both lowered their eyes. What could it mean? I looked at Michu and she met my gaze. 'Death!' The word came into my mind in an instant. Death! '*Fold*' means

death; such a common, innocuous word. I knew it. Sonia! I looked across at her. Sonia! No, it can't be! We cannot die here on Mars, never to see our families again. I thought of my parents, of Ben and Tim and my other friends. No, it is not possible! There must be a way.

Sonia saw the anguish in my face. Then she smiled. How can she smile at a time like this? Her eyes told me there was a way out and it was not going to happen: have faith. Dear Sonia! Then to myself, Bill, are you a man or a mouse? I felt ashamed of myself. There was Sonia, a girl, and you, a man. I managed an unconvincing, lopsided smile and she smiled back.

The Chief of Security was speaking again in his regular, calculated voice. Then, suddenly, he got to his feet hurriedly and marched out the way he had come, black gown splaying out behind him, accompanied by his two guards.

He left us to our thoughts: thoughts with no future beyond the next days, or hours, or minutes; how were we to know? But Sonia's eyes spoke of hope. And Michu, surely Michu, together with Manu, will find a way. I looked up again at the many crystals in the roof of the cavern. In any case, they will still glow, with or without us, like the two little Martian moons, spinning determinedly around their parent. And Mars will continue to rotate on its axis and orbit the Sun relentlessly. And the Red Planet will still appear as a tiny red ball in our Earthly sky, which will still be studded with myriad twinkling stars, with or without us. But will Mars be ruled by Zigismo, the dictator, the tyrant? And what about Earth herself? Who will rule our beautiful but fragile planet, the enigmatic Zoggs? At that moment I felt no more significant than a solitary atom suspended in the vastness of the universe.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE WAITING GAME

Back in the darkness of the chamber, Manu and I sat side by side, neither of us wanting to speak. We held hands and the physical contact was comforting. At last the words came hoarsely, shakily.

‘Manu?’ I said into the darkness.

‘Yes, Bill?’

‘When do you think they will... you know?’ I didn’t want to say the word, the word that had been on each of our minds since sentence had been passed by the Chief of Security.

‘The final decision is with Zigi,’ said Manu blandly.

‘What do you mean? Whether to confirm what he told us, or... to overturn the ruling... the *fold*?’ Somehow it was less horrible to use the Kisoro word. I imagined folding my school shirt and putting it away in the cupboard in my bedroom. The thought brought a half-smile to my lips.

‘He’s sure to uphold the decision,’ Manu said with conviction. ‘As to when, well, to tell the truth, I have no idea. But Zigi being Zigi, he is bound to enjoy our agony of suspense. And also, I suspect they will try to get more information from me before then.’ Manu squeezed my hand and I felt the comradeship I was unable to see with my eyes.

‘Will you give it?’ I asked tentatively.

‘I hope the Almighty will give me the strength to resist.’

A shiver ran up my spine as I pictured Manu being tortured. I put my arm around him. I didn’t know what to say. My eyes filled with tears, which I wiped away silently and hopelessly. I didn’t want Manu to pick up the weakness in my tears. But he must know: he can read my mind, can’t he?

‘What exactly did you tell him?’ I asked.

‘I said what I thought he would already have found out from the spy, you know: your involvement with the press; your kidnapping by the CIA and the Russians. I said your first trip to Mars was an educational one, as a future environmentalist. The Zeros know about the environmental work

we are involved with on Earth, because they also participate in the programme. I mentioned nothing about any deal with Hermann and the Russians, nor did I admit any knowledge of any threat from them or the Zoggs. In fact we are not even supposed to know the Zoggs exist. Kazak, that's the Chief of Security, listened to my story. I claimed that was all I knew. But he must know more than we think he knows. That way we are dispensable. We are no longer of any use to Zerone-ra.'

'And you were not able to read his mind? If you were, you would have discovered how much he knows.'

Manu's answer sounded logical. 'Thoughts cannot be read if they are not in the forefront of the mind, Bill.'

There was complete silence in the chamber for some moments, while I grappled with the science of the mind. I heard only the sound of breathing and the pulse in my head throbbing in time with my heart. I broke the silence with another question.

'You think they know that Hermann is working with the Russians?'

'They must know Priam has been with Hermann. Their meetings have been quite open. They may not know what was discussed between them: Priam is very careful about these things and nothing is put in writing, Martian style, you know.'

I sighed. 'What are our chances, Manu? I would say, pretty well zero, wouldn't you?'

'Zero, that's a good one, Bill! There *is* a possibility though,' he said after a short pause. The note of hope in his voice made me look up at him, invisible though he was. He continued. 'If my father were to know... he might just...'

'Can you get a message to him?' I asked.

'I don't know how. It's too risky. I don't want to get him into trouble. The penalty for a Zeroneran who helps an outsider is instant death. I can't risk that, even though he is one... one of the enemy. The other thing is, he may be totally loyal to Zigi.'

My short lived hope vanished as quickly as it had come. I sat despondently, with my arm still round Manu's shoulders. My thoughts turned to home. I saw my mother going about her daily routine, mechanically, without enthusiasm, wheel-

ing her shopping trolley down the High Street. ‘Hello, Mrs Steadman, have you had any news of Bill? You have? A strange gentleman came to tell you he is safe but is unable to say where? I am so sorry!’ Mum thinks, better to be home out of the way than having to answer question after question. I could see my father sitting at the kitchen table reading the local daily: hoping for some good news; cursing at the lack of it; listening for his mobile to sound its familiar jingle; starting up at the sound. Nerves, nerves! I knew what my parents were going through.

Priam came to my mind. Had he discovered the mole in his network? Michu’s father was also in great danger. But Michu must be talking to him, mind to mind: she must know. Was Priam in contact with the Russians? How long would it take Hermann to perfect his invention? Now that Zigismo is aware that there is something afoot, will he call on the Zoggs and speed up his vile plans to conquer Mars? All these questions and no answers. Here I was, a wretched prisoner in the hands of the enemy, deep down below the Martian surface, millions of dark empty kilometres from home and with the sentence of... of *fold* hanging over my head.

‘Bill, don’t allow your mind to destroy you,’ said Manu earnestly. ‘Have faith and keep your hopes alive.’

I meditated on Manu’s words. He is right, Bill. Where is your strength? I tried to put all my fears away and concentrate on Michu’s face. I called her name in the depths of my mind. Michu! Michu!

Far beyond my consciousness came a soft voice, whispering faintly. I could not say it was Michu’s voice; it was too distant. But the voice came nearer and clearer. It *was* Michu and her soothing voice brought comfort to my troubled mind. ‘Bill, my father is well and he is in touch with Hermann through Ivan. They are working night and day on Hermann’s theories, together with Russia’s top scientists. Hermann has never been happier in his life. He is excited beyond measure. Keep your hopes alive; Manu has already told you that, hasn’t he? We are all together: Sonia, Manu, you and me. Together we shall pull through: have faith! I love you.’ That was all, but what a gift!

‘Thank you, Manu,’ I said to him.

‘The pleasure is mine, dear friend,’ he replied, and laugh-

ed a comforting laugh.

A knot came into my throat and tears pricked my eyes once again. But these were not tears of despair, but tears of gratitude for the friends I had; friends that would always stand by me: Manu, Michu and Sonia.

Just at that moment the sound of men's voices reached my ears, then the padding of feet in the corridor outside. My heart missed a beat and my grip on Manu's shoulders tightened. I stared into nothingness. Was this it? Had our time come... so soon? But better soon than sitting in agony day after day, knowing the time must come eventually.

The stone moved and the dim light from the passage struck a beam across the floor and faintly illuminated our two forms. A guard entered and I waited in anticipation for a signal to go with him. But no signal came. He seemed to be carrying what looked like a large stone plate in one hand and a roughly shaped jug in the other. He crossed to the stone bed opposite us and laid them down. He said a word to Manu and was gone. The stone was back in its place and we were once again in darkness. Relief swept over me as I realised we had been given food. I suddenly felt hunger that had been hiding behind the fear and despondency of the last few hours. Manu and I ate from the same plate, steadily and in silence. Not knowing what I was eating and not caring either, I tucked into the food as if I hadn't eaten for days, which, come to think of it, I hadn't. Could I remember the last time I had eaten? For the life of me, I couldn't!

'Not bad for Zero food,' remarked Manu when we had cleaned the plate.

My fingers searched one last time, just in case we had missed a morsel. No, the plate was as clean as a whistle. The jug was put into my hands and the plate removed.

'Drink from the jug,' Manu told me.

The water was sweet, just as I remember the *Similaria* water. But it had an odd aftertaste. A sudden thought flashed across my mind. Could it be poisoned? I passed the jug back to Manu and lay down on the stone bed. I waited for the effect of the water on my stomach, but there was none. Before I knew it, I was asleep.

How long I slept I couldn't say. I was woken by Manu's voice entering a vague dream, the nature of which was for-

gotten immediately. I opened my eyes and sat up.

‘Manu?’ I called out, putting out my arm to locate my friend in the darkness.

‘Bill,’ he said cautiously, ‘there’s someone in the passage outside. I can hear whispers.’

I strained my ears for the slightest sound, but I could only hear my heart thumping in my chest. Keep quiet! I can’t hear a thing.

‘There it is again,’ Manu whispered.

This time I heard it, a faint sound of muffled voices. My stomach turned over. Then the stone began to move. I held my breath. The chink of light grew bigger. A guard pushed through the gap as soon as it was large enough to admit a full grown Martian. He stood inside the doorway and looked at us.

‘Follow me,’ he said in English.

I looked across at Manu, wondering if the command was addressed only to me or to both of us. Is this it? Are we to face our end, or the torture chamber? The pulse in my temple beat like a drill. My mouth went dry and my legs began to shake.

The guard uttered a few words in Kisoro, more urgently this time.

‘Come, Bill,’ said Manu quietly. ‘We are wanted. Are you ready?’

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE RIVER

I was close behind Manu as he squeezed through the narrow entrance. In the passageway stood another guard, and beside him two feminine forms, standing shoulder to shoulder.

‘Michu! Sonia!’ I called out in surprise, realising immediately that I had made a mistake in crying out. Michu put a finger to her lips and both guards gesticulated to me to be quiet. What is going on here? Why the secrecy? I was nonplussed.

‘You are going free,’ whispered one of the guards to me, ‘by the orders of Atik. Come, we go this way.’

Free! How is that? Who is this Atik? Then I understood: Atik was Manu’s father. He had obviously got to hear of our capture and sentence of death. My mind was in a whirl. But no time to think, we were being hurried down the right hand passage in the opposite direction to the way we had gone to meet Kazak. My left shoulder began to hurt but I gritted my teeth and kept going.

‘Hurry! There is no time to lose,’ Michu called over her shoulder anxiously, as we sped down the narrow dimly-lit corridor: half walking; half running. The two guards were leading, followed by Manu and with Michu just in front of me. I looked back. Sonia was way behind me, trying to keep up. I slackened my pace so that Sonia could catch up. She seemed to be hobbling. The others were increasing the distance between them and us. I put out my hand to her.

‘Bill, I have twisted my ankle,’ she moaned. Her face was contorted with pain.

‘Sonia, this is no time to be twisting your ankle!’ I cried, unsympathetically, as if she had done it on purpose. ‘I’m sorry, Sonia,’ I relented. ‘Just keep going.’

The others had disappeared round a bend in the tunnel. I urged Sonia on.

‘Bill, I can’t! You go on without me.’

‘No! What are you saying? How can I leave you?’ I panted.

We turned the corner in time to see the other four figures rounding another bend some fifty metres ahead.

‘Sonia, jump on my back!’ I called to her.

Fortunately she was a scrap of a girl, hardly forty-five kilos. I made better progress carrying her than before, even though the dull pain in my shoulder was aggravated by the load on my back. But how far is it? Will I be able to keep going?

At the next bend, the passage began to slope upwards, curving this way and that. There was no sign of the others. Had we missed a turning? I was frantic. To make matters worse, the rock under my feet was rougher now and I tripped on the uneven ground. I regained my balance but the jolt sent a stab of pain through my shoulder and I cried out. The going was becoming more difficult and I was forced to slow my pace, puffing and panting with the exertion, and with less oxygen than I was accustomed to.

‘Put me down, Bill!’ cried Sonia into my ear. ‘I will try to walk. You’ll never make it with me on your back.’

I let go of her and she slid down, hopping on one foot and grimacing in pain. I took her hand and pulled her forward. At that moment, I saw Manu ahead of us, running back down the steep hill towards us, yelling for us to hurry. But as much as I wanted to, there was no going faster.

‘You take one side and I’ll take the other!’ Manu shouted, as he came up to us. I understood his meaning. With an arm over each shoulder, Sonia didn’t have to put so much weight on her ankle. But Manu was quite a bit shorter than me, and leaning to the side brought pain to my back after only a hundred metres. Manu noticed this and tried hard to keep his side up. And so we struggled up the slope, pain and exhaustion eating into my resolve.

I lifted my head and saw Michu ahead of us, waiting, hands on knees, bending forward, catching her breath. She was alone. Where had the guards gone? We struggled up to her, my breath coming in painful snatches.

As if to answer my question, Michu said quickly, ‘Our guards took a side passage. They said we should go straight ahead until we reach the river...’

I stared at Michu. River?

‘...and we just follow the flow. But whatever you do, don’t drink the water: it is badly contaminated. Come on, there’s no time to lose!’ she urged. ‘It’s not far now.’ And so we were off again, Sonia strung between Manu and me, hopping, dragging her injured ankle, crying out now and then. I felt for her, but we had to keep going.

‘The guards explained to me... but that can wait,’ said Michu with a breathless wave of her hand. ‘Any time now our absence may be discovered and the whole of the Zero army will be after us.’

At that I turned to look back at the way we had come. My heart did a summersault and giant butterflies gnawed at my stomach. About two hundred metres away, running in our direction, were several Zeroneran guards.

‘Look!’ I yelled, turning to face the others. But they had seen the guards and had already set off, with Michu leading. We struggled on as fast as we could, Manu and I dragging the crippled Sonia between us. But the guards were gaining on us, fast; too fast.

‘Not far now!’ shouted Michu encouragingly. And indeed, a few metres further on, the passage suddenly widened out and simultaneously we came to the crest of the incline. There before us, over to the left, swept the river, fully fifty metres below. The pathway, bound on the right by a sheer cliff face, dropped away suddenly to the left. Down the slope we ran, Michu swiftly, Manu and I raggedly, twisting, pulling, heaving.

I twisted my neck to find the first guard only ten metres away. There was no time to reach the bank of the river. There was nothing for it but to jump, at least twenty-five frightening metres.

‘Jump!’ screamed Michu, echoed immediately by Manu. Both of them went feet first over the edge without a second thought.

Looking back on those terrifying moments, I never understood why I hesitated, but hesitate I did. And that hesitation was our undoing. I could have avoided disaster had I gone over the edge like my Martian friends. Was it the fear of heights? Hardly, I had plunged into the swimming pool many times from the high diving board. Maybe it was the sight of a

strange Martian river; dark and forbidding. Whatever the reason for my delay, I was to regret it time and time again in the coming days.

Sonia and I were so near, and yet so far. Another two seconds and we would have both been sailing down towards the black water, like a pair of skydivers. Sonia, handicapped as she was with a damaged ankle, was just too slow. On the edge, we hesitated for what could have been no more than two seconds. I felt rough hands on my arm, pulling me away from the edge. Sonia gave a scream and I turned to see her grabbed by two swarthy guards. A metre from the edge, I struggled frantically to free myself from the vice like grip. Then it happened. I lost my balance and the guard, for fear of falling himself, let go of my arm.

I tipped backwards. I felt myself falling. Horrified, I caught a glimpse of Sonia between two guards, her eyes wide in astonishment. And then I saw nothing but the roof of the cavern rushing away from me. The next moment I hit the water with the back of my head and for an instant I lost consciousness. The iciness of the river brought me back to the present. I could have died then and there and at that time I wished it. Sonia, I have let you down. My dear Sonia, it is all my fault: how can you ever forgive me? Will I ever see you again?

A devastated Bill Steadman swam with the current, down the chilling Martian river towards freedom. Freedom from what? For it seemed a hollow victory; hardly a victory at all, with Sonia still in the hands of the Zeronerans. I cursed myself over and over again for my failure to save her. What would become of her now? Surely her life would be forfeit. I imagined the anger and recriminations that would follow our escape. Sonia would have to be the object of their anger and revenge, of that I was sure.

I was in the river for not more than three minutes, but the water was freezing cold and the aching in my limbs, then the lack of feeling, coupled with the pain in my shoulder, numbed my senses and dulled the emotional pain of losing Sonia. I was about to lose consciousness when I felt hands dragging me from the water. I retched and I knew that I had swallowed water, something that Michu had warned against. I vomited water before struggling to my feet and, with Ma-

## Operation Stargazer

nu's help, ran clumsily as far as a sheer cliff. A Martian suddenly appeared and in an instant a hole opened in the wall. I hardly knew what was happening, but in a trice I felt a bubble forming around us. When I regained consciousness, we were outside and it was dark. The sky was full of stars; piercing points of light in a black firmament. Before I knew it, the bubble had taken off with us inside and was soaring into the sky. Manu and Michu sat either side of me, arms around me, comforting me, sharing my pain, emotional more than physical. I was sobbing gently. All I could see before me were the frightened eyes of my friend, Sonia, as she watched my fall in utter dismay. What must have gone through her mind at that moment? Fear for my safety? Fear of being left alone? Disbelief at being abandoned? It was probably a mixture of emotions. Sonia, Sonia! Dear Sonia! Forgive me!

## CHAPTER SIX

### OPERATION STARGAZER

‘Welcome back to Similaria, Bill,’ said Zeris warmly, as soon as he had settled himself on the cushion in front of me. ‘You have been through a lot since we last met. You have suffered, but, believe me, your suffering will not have been for nothing.’

I found it hard to agree with Zeris, however much I respected the Chief of the Council of Elders of Similaria.

‘And I must...I must tell you how sorry I am for the loss of your friend,’ he said kindly. ‘Again, I have to say, her sacrifice will not be in vain.’

I looked at Zeris. It was never Sonia’s battle, was it? I still don’t know how I involved her, the poor, poor girl. But all I managed to say to Zeris was to echo his word.

‘Sacrifice?’

‘Yes, Bill, sacrifice.’ He smiled sympathetically. ‘Do you think this battle is yours only? Sonia got involved because she wanted to. She could not have been left behind, you know that. But this is more than a battle, Bill. It is a war: a war against tyranny, against greed, against destruction; a war for all beings to fight; all beings who believe in the future of our planetary system. Many will be involved in this war, and some will give their lives for the cause. You would also give your life if it became necessary.’

In my heart I knew he was right. We must stand up to the forces of evil that threaten to destroy us. And I am determined to be in the front line in this war, even if I fall in the heat of battle. But why did Sonia have to be the one? Why not me? Sonia had more guts than I will ever have, with which to carry on the fight.

‘Don’t think such things,’ said Zeris. ‘Your turn to display bravery is yet to come. Anyway, we have no proof yet that Sonia has been... or will be, executed.’ He looked at me intently for a few seconds, stroking his long, white beard. ‘It is five days since you escaped from Zeronera and we are still

waiting news from there.’

I found it difficult to believe I had been five days back in Similaria. Even before the bubble had reached the front entrance, I had started to vomit again, the result of swallowing mouthfuls of river water, and had had to be carried to my bed. Manu said that I had been sick for more than three days, during which time I had endured one nightmare after another. He had made me drink the juice of special fruit that was used in cases of stomach upsets, rare as they were. Physically I was now well again, but emotionally still sick at losing my friend. Now Zeris was giving me an unexpected gleam of hope.

‘There is a possibility she is still alive. Let us not lose our faith.’ Zeris leaned forward and put his hand on my arm, squeezing it gently.

‘What makes you think so?’ I asked.

‘There is clearly a movement in Zeronera that does not support Zigismo. Your escape is testimony to that.’

‘Manu’s father?’

‘For one, yes,’ said Zeris, nodding his head.

‘But he may have done it for Manu alone,’ I argued, ‘not because of any...any mutiny; any opposition.’

‘No, if Atik was totally loyal, he would have gladly sacrificed his son. There is something more to this than family attachment, Bill.’

‘Yes, I see.’ The thought of Sonia being protected by Manu’s father or others gave me the lift I needed. I smiled for the first time since falling into that river five days before.

‘Sir?’

He frowned.

‘Zeris, I mean.’

He nodded. ‘Yes, continue: I’m listening.’

‘Why is the river polluted: the one in Zeronera?’

‘We are not too sure. You understand, it is hard to know what goes on there. In the days before Zigismo’s dictatorship, the river was sparkling clean, like all other underground water on Mars. They have been experimenting with something; something that we suspect may be used against us when the time comes to... to attack us.’ He became serious, narrowing his eyes and turning them upwards towards the dome of the chamber above us, dotted with gleaming crys-

tals. Then he lowered his eyes again and stared into my face. I saw a glint of moisture in his eyes. Could Zeris be about to cry: the Senior Elder?

‘You mean poisonous gas?’ I asked in horror.

‘Possibly. Something of a chemical nature. I can say no more than that, because we don’t know.’

I didn’t want to think about it. I had other questions for Zeris.

‘And what news from Earth, Sir?’

‘Ah! I see you’ve not been talking to anyone.’

‘I haven’t been in the mood to talk,’ I said. It was true: since rising from my sick bed I had avoided company, and the others knew it. A request from the Chief Elder was not one to be rejected, so there I was before him. It was an opportunity, in any case, to get up to date with events back home.

‘So, let me put you in the picture,’ he began. ‘I received full reports this morning from Priam in London. Priam, as you may know, is the coordinator of the project; the operation code named ‘Stargazer.’ He is hard at work.’ Zeris paused, as if to organise his thoughts.

I imagined Priam bubbling here and there, dressed in dark suit, bowler hat and furred umbrella. Quicker than London Transport, for sure! I remembered the times he came to see me in Dover Street. Another age, it seemed to me. I thought of Mum and Dad.

‘My parents?’ I asked Zeris.

‘Priam has assured them you are safe, but said he couldn’t tell them where you were. Your mother was grateful. Your father gave him some trouble though: he almost struck him when Priam refused to tell him.’

I gave a short laugh. ‘Typical of Dad,’ I said. ‘And Sonia’s father?’

‘Free. The police wanted him convicted of murdering you and Sonia, but the magistrate ruled there was not sufficient evidence and he was released. You see, the victims have still not been identified. He lost his job though. He went off to Canada to stay with his sister; had to you see; too much publicity. He even received death threats.’

I was startled. At that moment, I felt heartily sorry for Albert Smith, however much I loathed him. He felt that he was a victim of his own upbringing. His view was that life had

treated him badly and he longed for a better future. He had not understood that there are no victims in this world. We, and only we, are responsible for our own destiny. That much I had learnt from Michu.

Zeris continued. "Operation Stargazer" - he pronounced it grandly and with enthusiasm - a restful sort of code name for a monumental project, don't you agree? Even more than a project perhaps: more appropriately a monumental *movement* for the salvation of our solar system.' He sighed. 'Still, "Stargazer" it is.' He smiled at me.

'Stargazer! It has an awesome sound to it,' I said, returning his smile.

'Awesome! That's the word,' he beamed. But after a moment his pale face clouded over and his eyes took on a troubled look. 'Yes, our solar system is in great danger,' he said solemnly. 'And there is just no time to spare.' There was urgency in his voice.

'But Michu says Hermann is working flat out with the Russian scientists. Surely they must come up with some answers soon?'

'From what I am told,' said Zeris, 'and I am no expert, his magnetic theories are immensely complex. It could take months... or even years, to provide us with the workable technology. And the problem is, we don't have years, perhaps not even many months.' Zeris grimaced.

The roof of the chamber seemed to press down on me and I felt claustrophobia enveloping me. A bead of sweat trickled down my back beneath my tunic.

'When will we know for sure, Sir?'

He had no time to answer the question. He suddenly looked over my head at the entrance to the chamber. I turned to see what had diverted his attention. There at the entrance stood Michu, and with her was someone who looked vaguely familiar.

Zeris rose quickly from his cushion and strode over to meet the visitors. His bearing gave away none of the anxiety he felt. They both bowed and Zeris returned the greeting. As they crossed the chamber towards me, I recognised the man as one of the guards who had helped us to escape from Zeronera. He was taller and broader than the men of Similaria, but with the same pale skin. He was bald and his pate glowed

with a translucent lustre. I got up from my cushion and prepared to meet them. As the Zeroneran drew near, I could see that anxiety creased his face and his blue eyes darted furtively from side to side. Our eyes met for an instant and then he looked away. The smile that should have accompanied the eye contact came too late, but it was recognisable as an attempt at communication.

Michu came up to me and we bowed formally to each other. I felt like taking her in my arms, but I knew it would have been inappropriate and she would certainly have resisted. But the warmth in her eyes was unmistakable.

Zeris bade us sit. Then he faced the Zeroneran and spoke some words in Kisoro to him. Then he turned to me and translated. 'Welcome to Similaria. We seldom have the pleasure of meeting one of our brothers from Utopia. Relax, you are among friends.'

'My name is Horos and I can understand well the tongue of the Earthman. I wish for us to talk that way so he will know what we talk.'

Zeris nodded. 'Tell us then, Horos, the news you bring.'

Horos visibly relaxed. He closed his blue eyes for a moment and breathed a long sad sigh. Then he began his story.

'It is my first wish to tell you that the Earth girl is yet in Zeronera, without harm, but she is fearful.' Horos glanced at me as he completed his sentence. 'It gives me happiness to see her brother well after his ordeal.' Another glance in my direction. 'I risk much to come here, but....I had to come. How I escaped is not easily explained, but I am here and I am happy for the welcome.'

So Sonia is still alive! But what is she going through, my poor Sonia.

'Brother Zeris,' said Horos, 'I also fathered a Similarian child, with Namis. Mother and child I have not seen for years. My wish to be with them brings me here.'

'That I know,' said Zeris. 'Marika is now grown up and has a child of her own. You will have the pleasure of seeing them today. Go on, Horos.'

'I am grateful, Brother Zeris. Well, there was much danger in my escape and I am fearful of the actions taken when they see me not there. Leader Zigismo is nervous and his revenge for those that face up to him is fearful. You will not

send me back to my sure death, Brother, like the unfortunate young Stefan.'

Zeris' face showed sadness at the memory of Stefan's fate. He was quick to reassure Horos. 'Have no fear, Brother: you are safe here. But do go on.'

'Zigismo says he keeps the Earth girl as hostage. He needs five Similarians before he lets her come back. You will by chance know that. It was told at the big meeting. Many cheered him for that. Zigismo knows how to talk to deserve cheers.'

Michu's eyes met mine. She winced visibly.

Zeris sat up straight and tugged at his beard. 'Is that so? We did not know that.' Then he leaned forward and said, as angrily as Zeris could possibly be, 'there'll be no trade! That is blackmail and we shall not oblige!'

I gritted my teeth and said, 'Sonia would not want that either: she would rather die than have that on her conscience.' It was the truth: I knew Sonia well enough.

'It is Zigi's way of getting information,' cut in Michu. 'He intends to torture them to get the information he needs.'

'Now, Horos,' said Zeris, raising his arms to command attention, 'I need to know two things. First, why has Zigismo not informed us of his demand for five of us in exchange for Sonia?'

'I now begin to think I am the one who is to give the news,' said Horos. 'My escape was a miracle. It could not succeed, I think, unless they wanted me to.'

'So they let you escape so you could deliver the ultimatum!' Zeris pursed his lips. 'But how did Zigismo know you wanted to, and that you would deliver the message?'

'I think they know I helped the prisoners escape.' Horos was visibly distressed.

'Very well, you have delivered the message.' Zeris paused. 'But, who is to deliver the answer?'

Horos squirmed on his cushion. 'Zigismo thinks you will not keep me here: you will return me to Zeronera, like you did with Stefan.'

'Good. We shall call a meeting of the Elders. But I can tell you, Zigismo will not get the answer he is expecting. The Elders are sure to agree to your staying. You will be a useful source of information.....if you agree, of course.' Noting

Horos's acquiescence, Zeris went on. 'My second question to you: what is the strength of the opposition to Zigismo's regime in Zeronera?'

'Yet not strong,' answered Horos. 'But now more ordinary Zeronerans are trying to see another way. But Zigismo is a brute. He keeps control by fear. Most of his army is with him, but a small group would fight him if the group was bigger. Now, they would fear too much: they fear they would be killed quickly.'

'Sir?' I spoke confidently.

Suddenly, all eyes were on me.

'What is it, Bill?'

'Sir!' I could not go on. I was about to lay my life on the line. But I knew it was what I must do.

'Get it off your chest, Bill.' Of course, he and Michu already knew what I was struggling to put into words, but they needed to hear it from my lips.

'I myself will... will go to Zeronera. I will make contact with the Zeroneran rebels, and I'll come back with what you want to know, and... I'll bring Sonia.'

There was complete silence for half a minute, during which time everyone was staring at me in wonderment. There, I had said it and there was no going back.

'And I will come with you,' said Horos without hesitation.

We all stared at Horos. There's a brave man, I thought, and crazy like me.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE MAKEUP ROOM

‘Your plan is crazy, Bill, crazy!’ cried Manu, pacing up and down the sleeping chamber and waving his arms about. ‘You will never come back alive and... and we will have lost you *and* Sonia. Forget it!’

‘I’ve made up my mind, Manu,’ I said calmly. ‘Even if the odds on my succeeding are a million to one, I have to do it. I owe it to Sonia. If it’s the last thing I do, I *will* do it.’

‘I can see there is no point in trying any more to persuade you against this... this ridiculous plan of yours.’ Manu uttered a short laugh and slapped me on the shoulder.

‘Ouch! Steady on, Manu! That’s my bad shoulder.’

‘Sorry, my friend.’ Suddenly Manu became serious. ‘We must make a plan.’

Plans are all very well, but sometimes they fail. Thinking back to that plan to escape the media: the disguises, the ancient aunt and uncle from Down Under hobbling down Dover Street, being greeted by Mum at the gate. Was that this lifetime or another? It seemed so long ago. But in the end, the plan, although it fooled the press, was foiled by Albert Smith. I suddenly realised the extreme danger of my idea of diving back into the dark strangeness of Zeronera. This was no fun game, like dressing up as aunts and uncles. This was life and death stuff: more likely death than life. Could I bring it off?

‘Of course you will.’ Manu was reading my mind. ‘This is your moment of glory; your opportunity to show the bravery you have inside.’

I stared open-mouthed at Manu before yelling at him. ‘I thought you just said my plan was crazy!’

Manu laughed. ‘I had to say it, didn’t I? But I knew you wouldn’t accept my words, and I didn’t want you to either. It’s the right thing and the Almighty will be with you all the way.’

‘Manu, I don’t know what to say.’

‘Then say nothing,’ he replied with a smile. ‘But let’s dis-

cuss the plan.’

I set about thinking of ways to infiltrate Zeronera. Why not a disguise? But how to get hold of a tunic: the striped one?

‘It is possible we may have a tunic, Bill,’ said Manu. ‘I know that some Zero men who fathered Similarian children used to keep a spare tunic here for when they visited. This is going back some years of course, but it’s possible we still have them.’

‘Cool,’ I said, ‘but what about my skin: my dark skin will give me away immediately.’

‘I know, but it’s the makings of a good plan. Let’s go and see if we can get an audience with one of the elders. We must get permission to impersonate a member of another clan.’

Excited now at the thought of action and the remote possibility of seeing my beloved Sonia again, I followed Manu along the galleries and passageways of the cavern, down to the central meeting place, where we met a woman whom I was told was a kind of liaison officer. She told us she had the authority and there was no need for an elder to be involved. She led us back up a winding walkway on the far side of the cavern. As we made our way along the rough wall of the cavern, I looked across the dim interior, lit by hundreds of crystals. Similaria had a homely feeling, vast as it was. I compared it to the fearful darkness of Zeronera, with its strange, damp smell, its tough and arrogant soldiers, and the feeling that Big Brother was always watching your every move.

At the entrance to a chamber tunnelled into the wall of the cavern, we were met by a tiny middle aged woman with wispy grey hair and little black eyes that pierced me through.

‘Zeroneran tunics? I should imagine we have,’ she said, after the liaison officer had explained what I needed.

She disappeared into the semi-darkness of the chamber and reappeared a few minutes later with a striped tunic over her arm, a pair of sandals in her hand and a knowing smile on her face. ‘I will arrange for someone to attend to his skin. Zeronera colour, I suppose.’ She addressed me. ‘You should come back when the sun has fallen to twenty degrees above the horizon.’

I offered my thanks to the wispy-haired lady, who smartly returned to her duties, while Manu and I retreated the way we

had come. After a moment, I turned to him.

‘Manu, how will I know when to go back? We can’t see the sun in here.’

He grinned. ‘One day you will learn how to judge the passage of time. For now, I will have to tell you when the sun is twenty degrees from setting.’

‘I just can’t manage without hours,’ I said. ‘They’re so convenient.’

‘We have never had the need for them: we just know by instinct, and there is nothing more to be said. Now, you will not be going until tomorrow, or even the day after,’ said Manu, as we climbed up to the dining area. ‘We must give Horos some time with his family. You are going on a dangerous mission and he may never see them ag...’ Manu stopped himself, regretting having said it. ‘Sorry,’ he said.

We entered the dining area and I immediately spotted Michu, Sofu, Anamaru and Diana, seated at the far side. Diana was facing me. As soon as she caught sight of me, she jumped up and came over, giving me a hug. I had not seen her, or the sisters, since my first visit to Mars. It was a happy reunion. Sparking chatter glittered the party. They wanted to know my story first hand, despite having heard it from Manu. I told them the tale from start to finish. There was laughter in plenty at the light-hearted times and sympathetic frowns when I came to the traumatic parts. It was so good to see them all again.

Michu joined us with some news. ‘Guess what? My father’s coming. He has been given leave from London duties for four days. He’ll go first to report to Futoria; that’s his clan’s home, Bill, and then he comes here. I can’t wait to see him.’

‘Only four days!’ I said incredulously. ‘A long weekend trip to Mars!’

‘You English can spend half the day cooped up in little saloon car in a thirty mile queue, just to spend four hours at the seaside on a bank holiday weekend,’ Michu countered. ‘*And* it could rain the whole weekend. In that time we have made the journey to Earth and back, still fresh and ready to go.’

It amazed me how much Martians knew about life on Earth. Yes, I could see the logic in her argument. Come to

think of it, I wouldn't mind a long weekend in England myself: seeing my parents, taking Ben and Tim for a coffee at McDonald's, going to the library. At that thought, Sonia's freckly face and ginger hair came to my mind. Sonia!

Michu's voice hovered on the edge of my mind, which was so full of Sonia's image that the words took time to gain entry.

'What was that, Michu?'

'I was saying; why don't you ask Zeris if you can go back with Priam? He will agree: I am sure. Just for a few days, of course.'

'You think he would?' I was bowled over by the idea. 'But, Michu, Sonia comes first.' I suddenly felt the urge to be off to Zeronera. 'Must I wait two days?'

'Yes, if you want Horos to accompany you. And you know you cannot go alone. It would be suicide.'

The happy, carefree mood of the lunch had gone. We finished our food and each of us went about our duties.

Manu and I spent some time in the library, looking at the internet. The news from Earth was bad, but then wasn't it always that way? Happy, positive happenings never make news: it is only the violence, political turmoil, wars, famines and natural disasters that capture the attention of us human beings. Then we can lay the blame at someone's door, or offer hollow pity for the suffering victims, just to divert our minds from our own guilt over our collective misdeeds, such as blatant disregard for the health of our environment. We have relegated matters of the environment to holding sumptuous conferences that never achieve much, but give politicians the opportunity to brag about their own efforts and decry the unwillingness of the others to do their bit. Just now, it is economic problems in the US that threaten to plunge the world into another depression. And world news is still dominated by conflicts in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan and Pakistan: conflicts fuelled by aggressive policies that encourage extremism, conflicts that show the inability of humans of different races and religions to get on with one another. Would it take a threat from outer space to bring humankind together, I wondered?

Were we, as a race, becoming immune to the suffering of our fellow creatures? Before the invention of sophisticated

weapons, wars were largely won or lost on battlefields away from habitation. Land battles were fought by neat ranks of soldiers in brightly coloured uniforms. Sea engagements featured wind-powered warships firing cannons at each other across the water. Most civilians knew next to nothing about these battles until after the event. Since the advent of television, war in all its gory blood-soaked detail has been invited into our very own sitting rooms, where, with a click of a button, we can view real-life battles or, if we prefer, we can watch the violent antics of our favourite soap opera characters. Which one is more real than the other? Perhaps we need that extraterrestrial threat to bring together the people of our planet: Whites and Blacks, Muslims and Christians, rich and poor.

In a while, Manu said it was time to return to the ‘makeup room.’ I didn’t know what else to call the place where I was to be made to look like a Zeroneran. The fact that I couldn’t speak a word of the language was something I had yet to come to terms with. Horos met me there.

‘I am the model,’ he said. ‘Soon, none will know you are not of my clan.’

‘My life depends on it,’ I replied with a smile.

Soon, the makeup artist was at work. First came the head shave. I had not bargained for that. It was as well there are no mirrors on Mars: I could not have been able to look at myself in the glass. He had prepared a cream in advance, which he started to smear evenly over all exposed parts of my body. After a while, he stood back and peered critically at his handiwork, his eyes switching from me to Horos and back to me. He was evidently not satisfied, because he went away to adjust the mixture. It took several attempts before he relaxed into a smile and nodded his head slowly but emphatically. Horos stood by all the while, at times shaking his head from side to side, at others nodding sideways, as if he was not quite sure that I would pass the scrutiny of the Zeroneran guards. Finally, both he and the artist were content with the colour and texture.

‘It will not wash away with cold water,’ said the artist, ‘but beware of hot water: it will run.’

With those words of caution, Horos and I left. As we ambled back to the far side of the cavern, we chatted about his

life in Zeronera. He looked to me to be at least fifty years old, but he could have been much older: it was hard to tell.

‘Before Zigismo rose up into power,’ he began, talking as we walked, ‘we Zeronerans were happy.’ His pale face creased and sadness came into his blue eyes. ‘There was much to eat, we had the best fruit farm in all the Utopia region, our water was clean, we were all busy but always there was time for play and fun. And most of all we were free; no guards watching our actions.’ He stopped and smiled wistfully, staring out over the cavern. ‘Now, well, you know how it is like: guards everywhere, what are you doing? Where are you going? Don’t go there, don’t do this, the Council will not like it, they will put you in a dark room deep down under Zeronera and you will not come out again for a long time... if you come out at all.’

‘You don’t have to go back, Horos,’ I said compassionately.

‘Yes, I know.’ He looked up at me and continued walking along the gallery. ‘But I *must* go, you understand?’

‘Not really, to be honest. Someone else can easily go instead of you.’

‘No, it is for me to go and none else.’

‘But you must spend some time with your family here before you go.’

‘We go tomorrow,’ he said without a moment’s hesitation.

‘But your family...’ I stopped in my tracks and stared down at him.

He put up his hand. ‘No buts.’

I could see that it was his final word on the matter.

He turned and looked up at me intensely and said slowly, ‘Don’t you forget, we will come back soon to Similaria.’

A knot came into my throat and tears pricked my eyes. ‘Your faith is an example to me,’ I said. I knew that Horos and I would become good friends and with the blessing of the Almighty, we would return to Similaria, with Sonia too.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### RETURN TO ZERONERA

With the exiting prospect of a weekend in England on my return to Similaria, Horos and I set off in a programmed bubble the following day. As we sped eastwards, the pale sun stood in the sky ahead, bathing the red desert in its soft light. Far over to the right, a dust storm was brewing. I had been told about Martian dust storms; how they could cover an area the size of Europe and last for weeks on end. In the bubble we were comfortable, making it hard to believe that outside it was bitterly cold. There was no basic difference between the bubbles used by Zeronera and the ones Similaria had, and that was a blessing, as we could approach Zeronera without attracting undue attention. Of course, there would be watchers, suspicious no doubt, but Horos was a Zeroneran and he had told us they would be expecting him back, whether it was forceful removal by Similaria or a voluntary return home.

We had the outline of a plan: I mean outline only. We could not say which way events would turn: a thousand and one outcomes would need a thousand and one plans. We had to be alert to the events that unfolded and adapt our strategy accordingly. We had no idea how we would be received, and whom we would be able to trust. We would just have to feel our way forward and continually pray for guidance. One false move, one misjudgment and we were doomed: that, we were fully aware of.

It was in that anxious frame of mind that we glided towards Utopia. The bubble was invisible-enabled, so that on arrival at the entrance to Zeronera, our identity would be unknown. I was not sure that it was in our interest but, after lengthy discussion, it had been decided to make use of the invisible facility. A host of other ideas had been bandied about and we stored them away gratefully. You could say we had some trump cards up our sleeves; well perhaps not trump cards so much as useful cards. Whether they would turn out to be winners, we could not know.

‘We are soon to arrive at my home,’ announced Horos, after a long period of silence, during which my mind had wandered back to past events. Was it possible that all that has happened since Silver Streak blasted off on that sunny Saturday morning has been crammed into a few short weeks? Was it on the third of August I left Earth? What is the date now? Have the schools gone back? I have to admit, I’ve lost track of time, and the Martians are no help, having no clocks and no calendars. Of course, I had lived an extra week by going back in time, incredible as it still seemed to me. It was on Sunday the 12th of August that the article was published, that I can be sure of, but since then, let me see, it was three weeks before the end of the holiday, then the CIA and Russian kidnaps and...

I got no further because Horos’s voice, announcing our arrival, plunged into the midst of the mathematical calculations and scattered the numbers in all directions. I jumped in my seat and my heart crashed against my ribs, as if it wanted to escape from its prison. Calm yourself, Bill, I said to myself, your survival depends on keeping cool.

The bubble descended rapidly and came to rest at the foot of a sheer cliff face. It reminded me of my arrival at the entrance to Similaria for the first time. Then, it had been a friendly welcome: this time our reception was not likely to be so warm. We waited. My saliva glands responded to the knotting of my stomach. You are not going to vomit, Bill! Take hold of yourself!

Still we waited. Horos glanced in my direction and an attempt at a smile passed across his face. My attempt at a reply was rather weaker than his. We sat watching the cliff face for some sign of movement. Several minutes passed and I was becoming more nervous by the minute.

Suddenly a section of the cliff changed colour, from sandy-red to brown and then to dark brown and finally to black. There was no other way to describe the opening of that door. It was: ‘open sesame,’ magic, no hinges, no handles, just sandy-red to black in easy stages. Then a large bubble appeared in the entrance, glinting in the sunlight. Our small bubble moved forward and locked into the large one. At once a Zeronera guard stepped into our bubble.

‘*Zigismo ho!*’ he cried.

‘*Zigismo ho!*’ Horos and I replied in unison. We had practiced the greeting exhaustively in Similaria before leaving and I hoped my pronunciation was acceptable to the guard.

Horos, without waiting for the guard to ask anything, spoke his rehearsed lines. He spoke with a strong commanding voice that made the guard take notice. I had been told exactly what Horos was to say. He was to ask for an immediate interview with the Chief of Security and say that he had very important, more than important, vital information that had to be communicated to Kazak as a matter of extreme urgency, and it was for his ears alone. Horos uttered his piece so convincingly that the guard came to attention, saluted, gave a loud ‘*Zigismo ho!*’ and escorted us quickly into the big bubble, which passed into the cliff face and then descended into the hostile depths of Zeronera.

So far so good!

As the bubble dropped down steadily, the two guards who were escorting us stood erect, hands on hips, eyes ahead, tight-lipped and unsmiling, faces like wax, trained to serve unreservedly with single-minded dedication to duty. Horos, for his part, remained calm and serious. I tried to emulate his outer peace: inside I was a bundle of nerves.

At last the bubble came to rest and we were escorted into a barely lit and stale smelling corridor, much like the others I had seen and breathed in Zeronera. In such a maze I would very soon be lost, I was sure. Soon, the passageway widened into a small chamber. In the half-light, I could make out a group of guards, standing to the right. As we entered the chamber, one of them stepped quickly out and shot out an arm as a signal to us to stop. He strode forward and came to attention, shouting a loud ‘*Zigismo ho!*’

Horos and our escort responded. Standing behind Horos, I kept quiet. Some words were exchanged between the guards and we were on our way again, down more similar passages that seemed to stretch out into eternity. Then I recognised the curtained entrance to the Great Hall, where we were handed over to a new escort, the others disappearing back the way we had come. One soldier hurried down the hall ahead of us. I suspected he was off to alert the staff of the Chief of Security of our arrival. Everything was done smartly and without a moment’s delay.

As we passed the stone bench on which I had first seen Michu and Sonia, my heart began to ache for news of my sweet friend, who had watched in horror as I had fallen backwards into the raging river; whom I had let down in her hour of greatest need. I knew that I would not be able to ask the Chief of Security. How could I? How would we even be able to acknowledge her existence without giving the game away? My only hope was that Kazak would bring up the subject of Sonia's exchange for five Similarians and in that way offer some news of her wellbeing.

Before long we were seated on the cold stone floor to await the appearance of our interviewer. I made an effort to concentrate on Michu, hoping to reap some strength and inspiration. Michu, are you with me? This is a time I need your support. Yes, I could hear her voice in my head, urging me on, telling me all would turn out well.

It was not long before Kazak, the Chief of Security appeared, his black gown and long black hair swaying as he walked. He followed the same routine as before, bowing at the gilded 'royal' throne, strictly reserved for the mighty Zigismo. Horos and I stood up to receive him. He greeted us with a 'Zigismo ho!' to which Horos alone replied. Kazak shot me a hard glare, his dark powerful eyes drilling into mine. With some difficulty I let my eyes relax so that Kazak's face became blurred, a move I had carefully rehearsed, so as to appear mentally sick. Then, as I lowered my eyes, Kazak spoke gruffly to me, before turning to Horos and saying something through clenched teeth. Horos's next words were uttered passionately and pleadingly. I could guess what was passing between them, because it was part of our plan: the only way we could think of to overcome my lack of Kisoro. I was not to say anything. I was a young Zeroneran who had somehow got separated from an expedition some time before. Who could say how long ago? Let us just say, some time ago. I had been captured by the Similarians, tortured in an attempt to extract information, to the extent that I was now unable to speak at all: completely dumb! I could not even remember my name! That was the plan we had devised. Would it work? Would they check the records to confirm the story? What records though? There were no records; nothing written down. But surely a mother would know me. It was a

big gamble and only time would tell if it was going to work, and time would work against me.

We sat stiffly on the hard floor and the interview got under way. Horos spoke with conviction, putting all his effort into convincing Kazak of the truth of his story. Although I knew the gist of Horos's tale, because we had gone through it many times, I wished I could have understood the language. Kazak fired question after question aggressively at Horos, whose answers sounded surprisingly clear and confident. It looked to me as though the interview was going well for us. Horos was speaking again.

Suddenly Kazak jerked his head up, leant forward towards Horos, his black beard jutting out provocatively, and spat out a mouthful of words, full of venom like a spitting cobra. Horos jumped visibly at the verbal attack. He was put off guard momentarily, before he regained his composure and replied to Kazak's fury, slowly and deliberately. I held my breath, waiting for another tirade from the Chief of Security. None came and I was relieved.

The interview lasted at least an hour, but finally it was over and Kazak was gone. Horos slumped from exhaustion, but with evident relief. He gave me a smile and a nod, which told me the plan had gone as well as we could have hoped.

'But there will be more questions, Bill,' he whispered to me as we left our positions. 'We will speak after; not now.' His eyes darted to the guards, who were approaching. It would have raised suspicions if we were to be overheard, as I was to them totally dumb, and worse still if we were heard speaking in an Earth language, when we were both Zerone-rans.

But the freckled face of Sonia alone filled my mind. Had Kazak touched on the subject? I had not heard her name but that meant nothing: he would hardly refer to her by name. Horos read my mind and shook his head sadly. So that was that! But Atik, the father of Manu, would soon hear of our presence in Zeronera and surely he would bring the news that my heart longed for.

We followed the guards down the long hall and out into the narrow, damp corridor. Nothing was said. Where are they taking us; to those dark, damp and dreary dungeons? What had Kazak in mind for us? As much as I hated the black si-

Chris Hawley

lence of those chambers, I was dying to be alone with Horos  
and find out.

## CHAPTER NINE

### THE CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD

‘Tell me, Horos!’ I pleaded, the moment we were left alone. ‘Tell me everything that was said, and don’t miss a thing!’

‘Patience, friend, it will all be told,’ said Horos with a smile. His arms were stretched out, palms towards me. ‘Let us sit and I will tell all.’

Horos crossed the small room and brought two plain brown cushions, which he threw to the ground, adjusting his own with the movement of his right foot. The room was bare, except for two long raised platforms, the traditional beds, and a pile of thin coarse blankets stacked on one of them. Several crystals dotted about the ceiling illuminated the room sufficiently to show Horos’s features. So we had been accorded the honour of a decent room, rather than the dark dungeon reserved for prisoners. That at least was evidence that the interview with the Chief of Security was something of a success. But I had no illusions that we were free to come and go as we liked. We would be under constant surveillance, for sure. Kazak would be taking no chances.

‘Now, Horos, spit it out!’ I persisted, impatiently.

‘Well, of course, Kazak wanted to know why you did not greet him. For him it was an insult. He could have killed you for only that. I had very quickly to tell him the story: how you came not to talk.’

‘Yes I know: you did a great job. He swallowed the whole story.’

Horos hesitated. ‘I rather say he took it into his mouth. He must chew the story with his teeth before swallowing. I can not say he believed it completely. Also he must tell Zigismo. Kazak is...’ Horos blew into the air. ‘It is Zigismo the important one.’

I was amazed. ‘But Kazak is powerful, isn’t he?’

Horos only laughed and sat down on his cushion.

‘So then what happened?’ I asked, taking my seat oppo-

site my friend.

‘You know the plan. I told him Zeris was agreed about sending five from Similaria for the gift of the Earth-girl. I asked if she is healthy but he refused an answer. Instead, he asked the names of the five and I could not tell him. I said they were ready to come as soon as she is put in a Similaria bubble. That is when he was very angry and he told me the Similarians must be inside Zeronera before Earth-girl is given out.’

‘So *that* was the reason?’ I said. ‘I thought it was the end of us.’

Horos continued. ‘Then I told him many lies about Similaria; how they wanted to make me into a slave. My duty is to Zigismo, I told him. I only wanted to see Namis and my daughter Marika: would Zigismo forgive my mistake? I told him Zeronera is not much known there, and they have no ideas of Zeronera attacking them. It is easy for Zigismo. Similaria is weak. I told him all that and he was happy.’

‘Did he ask about me? You know, not the no-name Zeroneran, but the real me, Bill.’

‘Yes, he did. He is even now angry about the escaping from Zeronera. He said the Earth-girl is not any use for him, only to bargain. That is why he wants five Similarians. And something else.’ Horos paused. ‘One of the five must be Manu... and, as well as the five, he wants the Earth-boy... you.’

‘Me? And Manu?’

‘Yes. He thinks Manu will be useful to him. Manu knows much and he is a leader. And you? Of course, you know much about Earth things.’

Manu and me in exchange for Sonia! Why was this not made clear to Horos before he was allowed to escape? But of course, this condition was not mentioned at their meeting. But Zeris says we are not going to trade anyway, are we? It is escape only, no trade. Then I chuckled to myself. If Kazak only knew that the one he wants was sitting right in front of him just an hour ago.

At that moment there was movement outside the entrance to the chamber and we heard the stone doorway move aside. In stepped a mature but handsome Zeroneran, a few centimetres shorter than me, but strong and agile. He was clean-shaven; head and face. There was something about him that

reminded me of someone. He was dressed in the usual striped tunic, with a rusty coloured scarf and cloth sandals. Behind him were three guards. He looked at me and bowed. Both Horos and I rose and bowed to him in greeting.

How strange, I thought. No *'Zigismo ho.'*

Our visitor turned and barked an order to his guards. They swivelled round and left the chamber, closing the entrance and leaving us three alone.

'I am Atik, Captain of the Guard of the Zeronera Army.'

Of course, now I knew why he reminded me of someone. He was so much like his son, Manu: they could only have been father and son. I smiled but said nothing. I was lost for words.

Atik turned to Horos. 'And how are you, Horos?' He spoke in a deep, clear voice.

'Getting to be friend of the Earth-boy, Captain Atik.' Horos bowed again.

'Can we sit?' asked the Captain, fetching another cushion. We all sat down.

Atik cleared his throat. 'What news of Similaria? How is Manu? And Tania?'

'He is well,' I said. 'At least Manu is well; I haven't met Manu's mother yet.'

'No? Manu must introduce you.'

I was struck how well Atik spoke English, far better than any Zeroneran I had met.

He smiled. 'I spent five years in England, Bill. That is long enough to perfect the language. Now to business; the Chief of Security has given me the job of interrogating you. I am the most senior and the most trusted of Zigismo's captains. I intend to keep it that way. It was fortunate for me because I needed the opportunity to speak with you privately, without arousing suspicion. Horos here was one of my trusted men. He was instrumental in your escape from Zeronera.'

I looked at Horos. I had forgotten that he was one of those who showed us the way to the river. 'But without your help, Captain, we could not have succeeded.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'It was my duty,' was all he said.

'But, Captain,' I asked, 'how did Kazak never find out

who helped us escape?’

‘The second guard, Horos’ companion in the escape, paid for it with his life.’

I was shocked. ‘Kazak killed him!’

Atik’s head dropped momentarily. Then he looked up. ‘Someone had to die. It was better one than many. His death will not have been in vain.’

Zeris’ exact words stabbed my brain with the force of a lightning bolt. Yes, I thought, I may also die for the cause.

Atik’s next words were spoken with a note of urgency. ‘Listen, we have work ahead of us. Zigismo is close to finalising his plans to attack Similaria and all other clans in between. We have no time to waste. Soon he will send a message to Zogg, and they will be on their way. Within one year he intends to control Mars, and then it will not be long before he and the Zoggs launch their planned attack on Earth. We must mobilise as quickly as possible.’

‘How much support do you have within Zeronera?’ I asked.

‘Basically, you can say that my *zenda* is completely loyal to me. There are five *zendas* of a hundred soldiers, each under the command of a captain. I am sounding out the other captains, being extremely watchful, of course. One cannot be too careful here. Anyone can give you away, and that only means one thing.’ Atik flattened his hand and brought it across his throat. ‘Most of the soldiers have been brought up to idolise Zigismo and they would die for him, but many have almost an equal loyalty to their captains.’

‘Do the soldiers understand what Zigismo’s plan is?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes! Most would like to be part of the conquest of the planet. They think it would mean a better life; riches, you know.’ He shook his head. ‘But look what he has done here in Zeronera: our water is becoming polluted, our air is lacking in oxygen, he is overpopulating our home; he is building an army of violent, ruthless soldiers. Can you imagine this trend replicated throughout Mars?’

‘Clans like Similaria,’ I ventured, ‘have survived peacefully for thousands of years, by preserving their environment and restricting population growth.’

‘Exactly,’ said Atik. ‘And another thing, the Zoggs will

use Zigismo as long as he is useful to them and then he will wipe him out, and probably every single Martian. The Zoggs are interested in Earth: they are only interested in Mars as a base to attack Earth.'

'Zeris understands that,' I said.

'Zeris is a wise man,' said Atik. 'So you see, my main aim is to convince the captains that Zigismo is only using them to fulfill his ambitions. And for the Zoggs, well, as I have said, all Martians are dispensable. Control of the Earth is there ultimate goal.'

'Atik, we came with a plan to rescue Sonia, and at the same time, to find out what is the strength of the opposition to Zigismo. Zeris is anxiously waiting for our safe return. We were not sure if we would meet you: that is very fortunate for us. But let Horos explain our plan.'

Horos spoke in Kisoro. He told Atik the details of the plan we had worked out with Zeris. Atik listened attentively, sometimes nodding his head and at others screwing up his face. When Horos had finished, Atik suggested some amendments, which we accepted. After all, Atik knew Zero-nera and, more important, he knew the minds of Kazak and Zigismo.

'There has to be a master plan,' said Atik, after agreeing on the escape plan. 'When you reach Similaria, take this message to Zeris, with my personal greetings. Suggest to him that he should call a meeting of the Heads of Council of all the clans he knows to be sympathetic to our cause. The meeting should be kept absolutely secret: we cannot let Zigismo know that we are uniting against him. The meeting must agree on a common strategy, covering the training of our young in physical combat, procedures in the event of attack, especially if Zigismo uses chemical weapons, etcetera. It is unlikely he will use these unless he has to: he would not want to pollute the clean water and healthy air they have in most homes, like he has done in his own.'

'But, Atik,' I countered, 'Similiarians are not used to fighting: they are peaceful people. Who will train them?'

'You play Sombrillo, don't you?'

'Yes but...'

'Then bring someone from Earth; someone expert in Karate or Tai-kwon-do.'

‘Brilliant!’ I cried. ‘I know just the boys!’ Then I thought; time, do we have time? It takes months to become proficient in these martial arts. But anything is better than nothing; anything that helps someone face an attacker with something other than terror. I could see my friends working flat out, training Martians to fight. Just up Tim’s street!

Atik disturbed my visions of Ben and Tim in Tai-kwon-do uniforms.

‘I would send someone from here, but it is very risky: he may be missed. And, of course, he would only teach physical fitness and strength. I believe something more than that is needed.’

My heart was already set on Ben and Tim. How they would love to be here, training Martians to save their planet! I couldn’t wait to ask Zeris’s approval.

## CHAPTER TEN

### LEAVES FOR SLEEPING

After Atik had left, Horos and I rested on the beds provided. We needed to conserve our strength for the planned escape. I was also suffering from the shortage of oxygen in the polluted air of the cavern. It did not affect Horos in the same way: he had become acclimatised to it over time.

I thought of the revised plan we had agreed with Atik. It was extremely dangerous, for us and also for him. If they discovered that he was in any way involved in our escape from Zeronera, he would immediately be executed. He was a key player in the plan to thwart Zigismo's ambitions, and without him and his leadership, Operation Stargazer would have lost a valuable ally. And, of course, he was Manu's father too.

We had to move quickly. The longer we remained in Zeronera the greater the risk that they would discover my true identity, and when that happened I didn't fancy my chances of seeing the outside world again. I shivered at the thought.

The river escape route was totally out of the question now: it was bound to be heavily guarded. But Atik had hinted at the existence of a tunnel that was only known to a select few Zeronerans, and therein was the danger to Atik himself, for he was one of those who shared the secret. If we did succeed in breaking free from here, there must not be the slightest clue that the tunnel route was used, otherwise suspicion would fall on him, with disastrous consequences.

At any moment, we expected a summons from Kazak. He had told Horos he would be calling him for further information on Similaria. That was before Atik was sent to question us. Atik would have reported the results of our interrogation, such as it was. Would it satisfy Kazak? I smiled ruefully. If only Kazak knew what we had talked about! And me? He must be expecting a berieved family member to claim me, so that I can take my place in the clan, memory or no memory, speech or no speech. Better to be out of here before they find

out there is no family member to claim me after all. And what did Sonia know of what was going on? For all I know, she thinks she's been deserted; sacrificed. Poor Sonia, not long now! It's either make or break. These were the thoughts that chased each other round my restless mind in endless circles, while I lay there, supposedly resting, staring hard at the crystal-studded ceiling.

'Bill, someone is coming,' whispered Horos quietly; tensely.

It was true: I could hear voices. I sat up and looked across at Horos. My heart beat faster as I watched the entrance expectantly. At that moment the stone door moved easily aside and a young Martian soldier stepped into the chamber. He was alone. He was clearly an officer, with a grey scarf similar to the one worn by Atik, apart from the standard tunic. He bowed. Again there was no '*Zigismo ho*'.

'*Ekinome!* I bring news from Captain Atik,' he said seriously, lines creasing his forehead. 'I am called Kiko, and I serve him in *Zenda One*. It is not good news, sorry.'

My mind raced ahead of him. What could the news be?

Horos spoke quickly to the officer in Kisoro. Kiko answered in English.

'Atik had meeting with Kazak. Kazak is not happy now. Kazak suspects *orobani* in *Zeronera*...'

'Traitors,' explained Horos.

'...Captain Atik sent me to take you to captain of *Zenda three*: he is friend; he knows way. We collect your Earth friend and we go, very urgent we go, before Kazak he sends guards here.'

Horos and I were already on our feet and were eagerly following Kiko out of the chamber, even before he had finished speaking. Outside in the passageway we met two guards, who sprang to attention at the sight of a senior officer. With feet spread apart and hands on hips, they uttered the normal greeting, '*Zigismo ho!*' Kiko responded mechanically; without feeling. Some words were exchanged but the guards stood their ground, blocking the passageway, clearly under strict instructions not to allow us to leave our place of house arrest. Kiko then raised his voice and commanded the guards to step aside to let us pass. The guards consulted each other in whispers for a moment and then turned again to face

Kiko, who by now was beginning to get angry. One guard spoke in a low, measured voice, his jaw set hard. I knew he was not going to give way.

Horos and I were asked to step back into the chamber, while Kiko continued to argue his case with the guards. The stone door was closed but we could hear the sounds of raised voices, quarrelling outside.

‘The guard is saying he must get permission from officer in charge,’ said Horos, sitting down heavily on his bed. ‘The officer will ask why we are moving out of here.’

‘We can’t put Atik and his men in danger,’ I said in frustration, slapping my thigh with the flat of my hand. ‘Kazak is already unhappy. He may suspect Atik. We must not involve him.’

‘Yes, it is true. They will be killed,’ agreed Horos, fear showing in his eyes. ‘But without their help, we do not have chance of getting out of Zeronera.’

‘I have an idea,’ I said suddenly. A plan was forming in my mind and my tongue was sweeping on ahead, the plan hardly more than a vague thought.

Horos was listening intently.

‘I don’t know... I was thinking... we could overpower the guards and tie them up and... and escape in their uniforms.’ The plan was already sounding foolish and ridiculous. How were we to tackle two heavyweight guards, trained to fight, as weak as we were? And how were we to tie them up, with no rope? And how would we look? And how would I sound, not knowing the language?

‘It is a good plan, Bill,’ said Horos, and he clapped me on the back.

‘It is?’ I replied, incredulously.

‘Well, we have Atik and Kiko to help us.’

‘But I thought...’ I said testily. ‘I thought we agreed not to involve them.’

‘We can involve them, but .. not involve them... if you understand me.’

‘No! I don’t know what you mean,’ I said impatiently.

Just then Kiko entered to the sound of the stone moving aside. He was beating his fists together and wearing a worried frown. We both stared at him and waited for him to speak.

‘It is not good,’ he said in a loud whisper. ‘They have order to not let you go out of this place. I should know it was not easy.’

‘*Zime*, I agree it is not easy, Kiko. But our Earth-friend has plan,’ said Horos, glancing at me.

‘I *had* a plan, but Horos has taken it over,’ I said with an empty laugh. ‘He says it can work. I am not so sure.’

‘Tell me!’ urged Kiko. He sat quickly down on the bed beside me, his face lined with anxiety.

I looked at Horos. He clearly wanted it to be *my* plan. I hesitated a moment and then, seeing four eyes glued to my face, I gave in.

‘We entice the guards in here, overpower them, tie them up, put on their uniforms and escape.’ The four eyes watched me expectantly. I went on. ‘We rendezvous with you, or Atik or someone, somewhere, with Sonia, and...’ I waited for the cries of derision, but none came. ‘We get a map of the way out and we... we... get out.’

Silence. I could almost hear their two minds working. My mind was empty; confused. I had given the outline of a plan I had no confidence in. The more I thought about it, the more it sounded absurd; unworkable.

‘*Zime*, it is start of a plan,’ said Kiko after a brief pause. I had the feeling he was being polite.

‘The other plan was good,’ Horos mused, ‘but...’

‘No! We cannot involve Kiko or Atik directly,’ I said forcefully, looking straight at Atik’s fellow officer.

Horos was nodding his head slowly.

‘Right!’ said Kiko, before Horos had reached his third nod. ‘I bring cloth for tying and leaves for making sleep. I talk with Atik for same idea for your Earth-friend and I arrange for map.’ And with that he was gone, leaving Horos and me slightly bewildered. ‘Leaves for making sleep,’ he had said. What could it mean? Leaves for making sleep.

‘*Boloro*, a herb used here for sleeping,’ Horos explained. ‘Only very small amount is used for helping sleep, but big quantity... ah!’ He let his head fall sideways and snapped his eyes shut to demonstrate the dramatic effect of the leaves. I understood.

‘Kiko actually believes in the plan,’ I said doubtfully after a while. Horos just nodded slowly. I imagined Sonia over-

powering swarthy guards alone; single-handed. I worried about it. What if she herself were overpowered? Then I worried about the escape route: would I be able to follow the map, which will be written in Kisoro for sure? And what will Zigismo do when he finds out we have gone? Who will face execution? Too many worries, Bill: keep calm and worry about things when the time comes, that's soon enough. But the worries obstinately refused to depart.

'When we get to the exit, how do we get to Similaria?' I asked. Another concern had joined the others.

Horos smiled. 'Leave that for me.'

Does Horos have a magic wand to whisk us away to Similaria? I looked at him but he avoided my gaze. How long before Kiko returns? Will he get here before Kazak's soldiers? The guards must have already reported our attempt to leave the chamber. I started to pace up and down, with arms folded and with eyes sweeping the floor.

Noises in the passage outside made me wheel round to face the entrance. The seconds of suspense seemed like hours. But in the end it was Kiko. I sighed with relief.

'I have got the things you must have,' he said, crossing to where Horos and I stood expectantly. 'Here is some cloth for tie guards.' He handed me a few strips of grey cloth, the remains of uniforms, I guessed, 'and here the leaves for making sleep.' He gave Horos a hand-sized bundle wrapped in leaves and explained to him in rapid Kisoro. But Horos already knew how they were to be used. He nodded his head vigorously, while holding the bundle at arm's length, as if it were a writhing mass of poisonous snakes.

'I go now to see the Earth-girl,' said Kiko. 'When you finish...' He made some swift actions to illustrate the tying up of the guards. '... go down passage...' He indicated the direction. Then he lapsed into his own tongue, explaining hastily to Horos the direction to take. Then he bowed to both of us in one swift, sweeping movement and disappeared through the entrance, pulling the stone across after him.

'How long should we wait?' I asked Horos anxiously.

'We do not wait, my friend,' he said. 'Every minute Kazak can send guards and then...' He raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders. At once he reached for the bundle, which he had placed on the bed, and unwrapped it carefully,

keeping it away from his face. The contents were a mass of dark green leaves that gave off a soft vapour, but had no particular smell. He broke it into two halves and handed me one half, wrapped in leaves, indicating that I should not breathe in the vapour. I held the noxious potion in my outstretched right hand and pinched my nostrils with the thumb and index finger of my left. Horos laughed softly at the distaste written on my face.

‘Now start shouting at me!’ he told me.

I looked at him quizzically. When I made no movement, he began to shout at me and push me towards the bed. It took a moment for me to understand his motive. Then I screamed at him and he cursed me in Kisoro. It was not long before the stone was flung back and both guards rushed in. At that moment we stopped our fictitious quarrel and stood facing the guards, like a couple of guilty schoolboys. The guards advanced towards us menacingly, bellowing loudly. The doorway was left open.

Without wasting a second, Horos leapt forward and, drawing his hand from behind his back, he plunged the handful of steaming leaves into the nearest guard’s baffled, open mouth. A second later I did the same to the other guard, who reeled back on his heels and stared at me in bewilderment. Both guards were already down, trying to rid their mouths of the evil tasting concoction. But within seconds both were lying still, completely unconscious. I think I was as shocked as they had been. It had all taken less than half a minute.

We were just about to unravel the strips of cloth, when we heard the sound of feet in the passageway. I looked at Horos in alarm. But Horos was alert. He quickly kneeled down and scooped as many of the leaves as he could from the mouth of the first victim and I did the same with the other. By the time the two new arrivals had entered, Horos and I held behind our backs a reduced quantity of anesthetic leaves. The guards looked at us and then at two inert bodies decorating the floor. Both their mouths were conveniently open in shock. Before they had time to close them, Horos and I had sprung forward and clapped our green-stained hands over their open mouths. My victim struggled to free himself and managed to give me a hefty whack on my head with his free hand. But it was his last movement. Both slumped to the floor to join their sleep-

ing colleagues.

‘Do we have enough rope?’ I asked. It was a rhetorical question. We were already frantically separating lengths of cloth. But first we had to relieve the guards of their uniforms, stripping them down to a pair of grey underpants. We decided not to dress them in our clothes: it was time we could not afford to spend, so we left our uniforms in a pile on the floor. We worked as quickly as possible, tying their ankles and wrists behind their backs. At any moment we expected to hear the thudding of many feet in the passage.

Having dressed ourselves in the Zeronera tunics, both of us wearing two tunics each, Horos and I slipped through the doorway, pulling the stone across carefully. Down the left-hand passageway we walked, trying to look as much like Zeroneran guards as possible. While we hardly looked smart, I was thankful to be tall, that is, thirty centimetres above the average Martian, and not so thin either. Horos was smaller than the normal Zeroneran soldier and hardly looked the part, but we had no choice.

Horos knew the way and I followed, confident in his ability to navigate. We passed the occasional couple of guards, and each time we offered them a hearty ‘*Zigismo ho.*’ Not one of them questioned us or even looked at us twice in the dimness of the passage. My confidence grew as we walked. I had to breathe deeply to garner enough oxygen to fuel my body, How the air in Zeronera has been polluted!

Suddenly there was a sound of feet in the corridor ahead. We slackened our pace and held our breath, expecting to see a body of guards come round the corner. To my utter surprise, the athletic figure of Atik, accompanied by Kiko, rounded a bend not twenty metres in front of us. But my greatest surprise, I hardly knew what emotions I felt, was to see the third figure with them: a slip of a girl, wearing the tunic of Similaria, with red hair tied in two pigtailed and a pair of round glasses low down on her nose. When she saw me she ran on ahead of the others and flung herself into my outstretched arms. I held her tight for a few seconds and then held her out at arms length, to get a better look at her.

‘Sonia! Sonia!’ All I could do was to sound her name, over and over again. It was as though the world did not exist: just the two of us locked together. I temporarily forgot where

we were and the danger we were in. I kissed her then, full on the lips. She melted.

‘Sonia, I didn’t think I would ever see you again.’

‘Bill, I am here,’ and she smiled. And then she cried. Tears ran down her cheeks; tears of relief. I kissed her cheeks, tasting the saltiness. Smiles surfaced through the tears. I shed a few too.

‘Bill, we must go,’ said Atik gently but with urgency. ‘There’s no time to lose.’

‘And you?’ I asked. ‘I’m *so* afraid for your safety. Kazak will know you helped us escape.’

‘What you say is true, Bill. But I am going with you,’ said Atik with a smile.

‘You’re going with us?’

‘Yes. Kiko too. We have been accused and a warrant has been issued for our arrest. There is no future for us here, only death. We go with you to Similaria. We fight the fight from there. We muster the clans of Mars and we defeat the tyrant of Zeronera. Is that alright?’

‘Zeris will be overjoyed to have you,’ I said.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### ZERIS' SURPRISE

Priam bowed. 'Bill, it is a pleasure to see you again.'

'Sir, it is my pleasure entirely,' I said pedantically through my broad smile.

Priam was introduced to the other members of the party, each of them bowing in turn; first Atik, then Kiko, then Horos. Then they were introduced to two other elders, who stood beside Zeris. Manu, Michu and Sonia greeted Priam with smiles and bows: no introductions were necessary.

Zeris stretched out his arms and motioned for us to sit. We all sat cross-legged in a semi-circle, Zeris in his position as the senior elder, with the other elders, Toral and Andrade, on each side of him. We prayed to the Almighty to guide our thoughts, words and actions.

As some small talk was being exchanged in Kisoro, my mind went back to the events of the day before. It had all happened so quickly: the journey through the intricate passageways of Zeronera, the narrow, secret tunnel that only a few Zeronerans knew about, the squeezing through crevices that were hardly large enough for a person to crawl through. I feared getting stuck on more than one occasion and I never thought I would see the end of it, kilometre after kilometre: sweating, puffing and panting. At the base of the shaft to the surface, Horos had triumphantly produced three invisible bubbles, one for him, one for Sonia and one for me. Atik and Kiko had their own bubbles. There was nothing more to tell. In no time at all we were at the gates of Similaria, tired but relieved. And what a welcome awaited us!

But Zeris was speaking, and my mind switched to the present.

'Brothers and sisters,' he began, placing his hands flat on the floor of chamber 13 and bending forward, his long white hair falling over his cloaked shoulders. His powerful eyes moved from one face to the next, all around the semi-circle. 'I have news for you.' This was said in a serious tone. I

waited with bated breath.

‘Captain Atik has brought news from Zeronera; disturbing news.’ He paused and surveyed the group around him.

I looked across at Atik but his straight face gave nothing away.

‘Zigismo has uncovered a plot to topple him from his position as leader of the clan. There is no saying what he may do by way of revenge.’ Zeris pronounced the last word with distaste. ‘Atik and Kiko have had the good fortune to escape the wrath of the hated dictator. Let us hope Zigismo does not revenge on Atik’s soldiers.’

Atik, like any true leader, loved his men and fought for their welfare. He would be deeply affected if anything were to happen to them.

‘If I may speak,’ said Atik, ‘I believe that my men are safe. Zigismo needs his army: five hundred soldiers are the very minimum he needs to conquer the planet. Take away one *zenda* and he would be under strength. He has to risk some opposition within. He will put a trusted man as the new captain and continue with his plans.’

Zeris smiled and said, ‘we will arrange a meeting with the whole council and you can give us all the details of Zigismo’s plans. How lucky we are to have your support, Atik, and I know Manu is overjoyed to have his father around.’ All eyes were now on Manu, whose expression showed great pride in his soldier father.

‘I will gladly tell everything I know,’ replied the Zerone-ran captain. ‘Together we shall overcome the despot.’

‘Well said!’ Toral clapped her hands and threw her head back. She was a small, middle aged woman with greying hair and grey-blue eyes that sparkled brightly.

I switched my gaze to Zeris, whose eyes were locked into mine.

‘We are also to have the honour of welcoming two experts in the martial art of Tae-kwon-do,’ he said. Zeris pronounced the Korean words like a native.

My heart leapt. Ben and Tim! So Zeris knows about them. I looked at Atik and then at Horos.

‘Yes,’ continued Zeris, ‘Bill’s school friends will be invited to train us in that discipline, to prepare our clansmen for battle against the forces of evil.’

I blushed and lowered my eyes. Would their parents agree to their coming?

‘Priam is due to leave for Earth the day after tomorrow and Bill will go with him. He will be the one to convince the boys’ parents.’

I was overwhelmed. How did Zeris know I had a wish for a quick visit home? And how did he know I had Ben and Tim in mind for the job of training them? I should have known it was hard to keep secrets from these Martians.

‘Sir,’ I ventured humbly, ‘If it is possible, could Sonia go with me?’

I waited for the answer, glancing at Sonia, who was studying my face.

‘Of course,’ was the reply; ‘on one condition.’ He paused and looked serious.

My eyes flitted from Sonia to Zeris, back to Sonia and then to Zeris again.

‘On one condition... that you bring her back to us.’ Gone was the serious look; replaced by a Zeris smile.’

I let out a sigh of relief. ‘Cool!’

Sonia flushed. She was clearly happy with the assent from Zeris.

‘But you go with a mission, Bill; a mightily important one. We meet tomorrow with Priam to discuss your brief. This is not going to be a restful weekend for you, don’t think it.’

‘Whatever I have to do I will do with all my heart,’ I said, and I meant it.

‘Good!’ said Zeris. ‘And now to other matters. Priam and Michu, please remain: you others may go now. Manu, spend some time with your father. Later there will be little time.’

Horos, Manu, Atik, Kiko, Sonia and I left our cushions and, after the customary bows, made our way out of the chamber and across the Grand Hall. The high roof towered above us majestically. Hundreds of sparkling crystals glittered as we walked. Our footsteps and our hushed voices echoed hollowly, coming back to us as faint whispered replies.

As we descended the gently sloping gallery, hugging the wall of the enormous cavern, I wondered at the friendship that bound us together; two Earth dwellers and a family of

exiled human beings, bonded by love and caring for our two threatened worlds. Earth needs Mars and Mars needs Earth: destroy one and the other is doomed. Together we must fight for our joint future.

At that moment, Atik, who was walking beside me, let out a sharp cry and pointed his finger at a little group of figures coming quickly up the slope towards us. I screwed up my eyes to get a better look.

‘It’s one of my men,’ whispered Atik into my ear. ‘What can this mean?’

The group drew near and Atik hurried on ahead of us. The two Zeronerans met and bowed, then embraced warmly. A few words were exchanged before Atik left us to accompany his clansman to the Grand Hall for an urgent and unexpected meeting with Zeris. But before parting, Atik turned to us and explained what the visitor had told him, in a few hasty words.

‘Zigismo has set his plan in motion. The Zoggs are on their way to Mars!’

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### CELEBRATION BISCUITS

‘G’day! Aunt Maud and Uncle Bert at your service!’

‘Bill, where on Earth have you been?’ exclaimed Mum, as she opened the front door to Sonia and me. She stood with her right hand clapped to her face; rooted to the doormat. She turned a lighter shade of pale and her eyes almost popped out.

‘Where on Earth’ is an interesting way of putting it,’ I said, sharing the joke with Sonia.

‘No telephone call, no message, nothing for...how many weeks is it?’ Mum sounded hurt; abandoned.

‘Sorry, Mum, I’m really sorry. I wish I could tell you,’ I said, stepping into the hall and putting my arms round her. It was then she started to cry, as I had known she would.

‘There, there, Mum. You see, we are fine. And Priam *did* come to tell you not to worry, didn’t he?’

‘Mmm... but... why could you... not call at... at least?’ she managed between sobs.

I tried to think of a single minute in the past month when I could have called her, but there had not been even one.

With my arm round her waist and her head resting on my shoulder, we walked down the hall and into the kitchen, followed by Sonia. At that moment, Dad came through the kitchen door from the back garden, kicking off his muddy gardening boots. When he saw us he almost dropped the tin he was holding in his hands.

‘Well I’ll be... Look who’s crawled out of the woodwork!’ His words sounded and his face showed a mixture of anger, surprise and relief. ‘Not a word for more than four weeks!’ The anger was dominating the other emotions. ‘What happened, and where have you been?’

‘Dad, steady on.’ I let go of Mum and put my arm round his shoulder in an attempt to calm him down. ‘Did you miss me?’ It was a risky thing to say under the circumstances.

‘What do you think, son?’ His anger was giving way to

relief. 'Of course we missed ya! You're our one and only son: how can we not miss you when we don't know where you are for a whole month!'

'Sonia and I have had some adventures: you wouldn't believe what we've been through. But we are fine, don't you think?' I spread my arms and made myself look as fine as I could.

Mum looked at Sonia and at me in turn. 'A little bit thin, both of you. And Bill, you shaved your head, and... you've gone a very strange colour, don't you think, Stan?'

I looked at Sonia and she laughed. Of course, it was the remains of the paste that was put on before Horos and I went back to Zeronera to rescue Sonia. However much I had tried, I couldn't get rid of it entirely. Maybe a steaming hot bath would do the trick.

Horos! Zeronera! Standing there in the homely kitchen of my house in Dover Street, it was hard to believe that the other world existed. Did it really exist or was it all a dream? The bubble journey from Mars to Earth had been so quick we hardly knew we had arrived until we saw our familiar town looming towards us. Then we were down on the ground and the bubble had disappeared. Priam had made almost as quick a vanishing trick.

'How have you been, Mr and Mrs Steadman?' Sonia asked politely, instantly realising that perhaps she had said the wrong thing. She looked very uncomfortable, standing with her hands twisted in front of her, head on one side.

'Worried to death, of course, dear,' said Mum.

'It's natural,' was all Sonia could think of to say. Then she stepped forward and gave my mother a hug. My father looked bashful as Sonia did the same to him.

'Now dears, let's have a nice cup of tea and you can tell us all about it.'

Heck! What was I to tell them? Nothing about Mars, of course, but how do I account for the last two weeks? Dad won't be fobbed off with any old yarn, I know him.

Mum filled the electric kettle with water and set it on the work top to boil, while Dad went to the sink to scrub the dirt off his hands. Then Mum got up on a high stool and reached into a top cupboard. She took out a packet of biscuits and passed it to Sonia.

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‘I keep these for a special occasion, Sonia. Chocolate digestive. I think this is special enough, don’t you?’

Sonia wiped away a tear that had made an unwelcome appearance on her cheek. She reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out a pink handkerchief, with which she blew her nose, turning to face the back door as she did so.

‘Here, let me help you down, Mum. Hey, you’re as light as a feather!’

‘It’s no wonder, my boy,’ said my father over his shoulder, ‘considering the worry you give us.’

The tea made, we tramped into the sitting room, led by Mum carrying the tea tray, followed by Sonia bearing the celebration biscuits on a doily-decorated plate. When we had all sat down, Dad cleared his throat and began to speak.

‘Now, tell us what you two have been up to these past weeks? What we know is this: we know you were kidnapped by Sonia’s father, then by some American outfit...’

‘CIA,’ I cut in proudly, taking a cup of tea from my mother’s unsteady hand. Not many my age can say they have hobbled with the hottest secret services in the world.

Dad went on. ‘That’s right, the CIA, and then by the Russians. We thought you’d been... well... done in.’ He winced. ‘The police reports about blood being found in Smith’s car: what else were we supposed to think when the tests showed the blood was yours? And then that car gutted by fire and the bodies inside burnt beyond recognition. I tell you, Bill, we were beside ourselves with grief.’ He looked at Mum, who was following his account and living every word. ‘Your Mum was frantic. Then that odd fellow, Priam you call him, came and told us you were safe, but couldn’t say any more. I can tell you, I was livid. ‘Can’t say any more!’ I very nearly clobbered ‘im.’

‘Sugar, Sonia?’ Mum’s hand was held suspended shakily over the bone china sugar bowl.

‘Only one thanks, Mrs Steadman.’ The spoon dived into the bowl and then reappeared, laden with sugar, most of which found its way into Sonia’s cup.

‘Priam might look odd to you, Dad,’ I said, ‘but he’s a good friend.’

‘That’s as maybe, Son, but we were still sick with worry. I know the CIA and the others, the Russians, wanted your sto-

ry; the story that monster... sorry, Sonia, your father cooked up. What trouble that man caused! I'd like to believe it was all lies.' He looked me straight in the eyes, but I avoided them.

'Lies, Dad,' I said softly, looking out of the window. My eyes followed a red van as it passed the house. 'We were kept by the Russians for ages, and then, luckily Priam found us and here we are. There's nothing more to tell.'

'Did they treat you badly?' asked Mum, searching my face. She passed a cup of tea to her husband. 'There, Stan, I've put in your three sugars. Biscuit, Sonia?'

'Thanks. No, Mrs Steadman, they treated us quite well really, didn't they, Bill?'

I nodded with a mouth full of chocolate digestive biscuit.

'Did they give you enough food?'

'The food was brilliant!' I exaggerated for the sake of her peace of mind.

'They even gave us vodka,' said Sonia, glancing at me with a giggle.

I laughed and, swallowing the mouthful of biscuit, I said, 'And Sonia almost choked on that vodka.' Sonia looked let down by my confession.

Mum's expression was full of disapproval. 'I've heard they're all alcoholics over there. But fancy giving alcohol to children!'

'Sonia *is* eighteen, Mum. Anyway, it was a toast to the glory of Russia.' I held up my cup to represent the imaginary glass of vodka and, waving it from side to side, I started to hum the Russian National Anthem, what little I knew of it.

Another look of censure from Mum. 'I hope you haven't become a communist.'

I stopped humming, threw back my head and let out a guffaw. 'You're joking, of course!'

My father looked impatient. 'Doris, that's utter nonsense.' He turned his serious expression on me. 'Did you know that MI5 was tipped off by the police?'

'I'm not surprised,' I answered. 'It's what you'd expect. Have they been around?'

'Not yet.' He peered out of the window, as if he expected to see them at the door.

'It'll take 'em a while; MI four and a half,' I said flippant-

ly.

‘But believe me,’ replied Dad, ‘they *will* be, as soon as they know you’re here....which we ain’t gonna tell ‘em.’

Sonia and I exchanged glances. The last thing we wanted was for MI5 to interrogate us.

Suddenly my father slapped his knee with the flat of his hand. ‘Okay, school starts on Monday. Forget all this nonsense: it’s time to get your head down.’

I looked up with a start. ‘Monday?’

‘Yes, Monday.’ There was a cutting edge to his voice.

‘Monday, the 3rd of September, right?’ I was furiously seeking the least explosive way of saying what I had to say.

‘It is. Have you lost all sense of time?’

‘No, it’s just that I hadn’t thought about it.’ I fidgeted in my chair, while my mind went blank. In the end I said flatly, ‘but I won’t be going to school.’

Two seconds of complete silence. I waited for the blast.

‘You what?’ roared my father, so loudly that both Mum and Sonia jumped. The cup and saucer in Mum’s hand did a dance and the cup overturned, spilling half a cup of tea onto the sitting room carpet. Sonia knelt down instinctively to mop it with her handkerchief. The accident momentarily distracted four minds from the subject. But my father soon recovered. He put down his cup on the tray and rose to his feet.

‘What did you say?’ He bent down and thrust his face close to mine.

‘I said it will be difficult for me to go back to school by Monday.’ I bit my lip.

‘Difficult? How difficult? Let me tell you, my boy, I’ll have no son of mine dropping out of school, and that’s final!’ he bellowed. When my father gets angry, he really gets angry.

‘But I’m not dropping out of...’

‘What is it then? That’s what it sounds like to me.’ He was still shouting. My mother cringed in her chair.

‘Listen, Dad,’ I pleaded. ‘I know it’s hard for you to understand, but I have a mission. It’s a matter of life and death for our planet.’

‘Poppycock!’ he shouted in a derisive tone, and turned to face the fireplace.

‘Dad, you have to believe me. This is important. Please!’

He turned to face me and his eyes narrowed. 'Are you going off again?' He did not wait for an answer. 'Because if you are, you needn't come back!'

Mum put her napkin to her mouth and her eyes began to water. Sonia leant over and put her arm around her shoulder. 'Stan, how can you say something like that?' croaked Mum, and burst into tears.

'This world's gone crazy, that's what it's done!' He threw his arms in the air and stormed out of the room, almost knocking the tray off the low table as he went.

Mum sat sobbing. Sonia sat on the padded arm of the chair and did her best to comfort her.

'He'll come round,' I said. 'And if he doesn't...' I shrugged my shoulders. 'But Mum, you understand, Sonia and I have to go again. We came to show you we're okay... But we can't stay.'

Mum nodded. 'But, Bill, you'll stay the weekend... won't you?'

'Today is Saturday. We have to leave tomorrow afternoon. Priam will be picking us up. We'll stay here until then.'

That seemed to cheer her up. She dried her eyes and sniffed. 'And don't worry about your father: you know how he is. Have another cup of tea and another biscuit. I got them out specially for you.' She managed a smile.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### ALARMING NEWS

‘But, Sonia, it’s dangerous to go out: suppose someone recognises you.’

‘Don’t you think the dark glasses and the scarf are enough?’ she asked, standing by the front door, with her hand on the latch. ‘Anyway, I have to go: Mrs. Rogers has been good to me and I must go and see her.’

‘What are you going to tell her?’

‘What she must know already from the TV and papers, nothing else. Don’t worry, Bill: I know what I’m doing.’ She opened the door ajar and peered out.

I could see there was no persuading her against going. ‘Okay, say ‘hi’ to her from me. And don’t forget, Ben and Tim are coming soon, so don’t be long.’

I bent down and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Her eyes lit up. She stood there expectantly, looking up at me. When I didn’t move, she put one hand behind my neck and pulled my head down. She put her lips to mine for a second before releasing my head and turning to the door. I watched her as she walked down the path, her slim form hidden by a long brown coat and head scarf. At the gate, she turned and gave a quick wave of her hand. I stood there for a while and then closed the front door. That girl is something, I thought to myself, as I went to the kitchen to find Mum.

She was busy cleaning out the fridge. I picked up the local newspaper from the kitchen table and scanned each page carefully for some extraterrestrial news. There was nothing. How quickly we forget! I read a couple of articles on environmental issues. When were we going to wake up to the fact that there are other forms of energy apart from oil? Imagine all that energy from the Sun going to waste. There was nothing else worth reading. The sports pages didn’t hold much interest for me. The football season was well under way: the hazy, lazy days of summer cricket were just a forgotten dream.

At that moment the front doorbell rang. It was Ben and Tim.

‘Hey, guys, good to see ya,’

‘You too,’ said Ben. They tumbled into the hall and there was hugging and back thumping all round.

‘Hey, what’s with the fancy hairstyle?’ exclaimed Tim. ‘And what’s that funny pale stuff you’ve got on your face? ’ave you bin at your mother’s face cream again?’

I cuffed him round the ear for his cheek. ‘Anyway, it’s great to see ya.’

‘You’ve got some explaining to do, mate,’ said Ben with mock seriousness, as I led them towards the sitting room.

Mum popped her head out of the kitchen door and greeted the boys, excusing herself for being busy with her chores. ‘Bill, make your friends a cup of tea,’ was her final remark before the kitchen door closed behind her.

‘Where’s Sonia?’ asked Tim.

‘Gone to the library; she’ll be back soon.’

‘Now, Bill, tell us everything,’ said Ben, pushing me into the nearest armchair.

‘And don’t miss *one* thing,’ added Tim, wagging his finger at me.

The boys sat together on the sofa and I told them the story, trying not to omit the slightest detail. I began with the morning Sonia and I had knocked on the neighbour’s door, only to find Albert Smith waiting for us in the kitchen. I could see they were developing a new respect for me, as I told of the car chase, the gun shots, the torching of the Americans’ car with them inside, the interrogation in Russia, the dungeons of Zeronera, the river escape and most of all, my going back into the lion’s mouth to rescue Sonia. There were ‘wows’ and ‘phews’ and astonished faces and also some laughs, particularly when I recounted the episode of the leaves for sleeping. I could see there were signs of envy. Here was their friend: having high adventures, internationally famous, wanted by all the secret services of the world, flitting across the solar system. Their greatest excitement was a cup of coffee at McDonalds and a bout of Tae-kwon-do.

I finished the story. ‘... the bubble vanished and there we were, outside the gate of our house.’

‘That’s *so cool!*’ exclaimed Tim.

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Ben shook his head. 'Now what, Bill?' 'Looks like were in real danger, with Zoggs streaking across the Universe to invade Mars, then heading for Earth.'

'It's a frightening picture, guys,' I admitted. 'Of course, we don't know for sure.'

'And the funny thing is, we'll be going to school on Monday,' said Tim, 'sitting at our desks, listening to boring old Jenkins rattling off equation after equation.'

'And the science teacher will be telling us how impossible it is to survive on Mars,' said Ben, shaking his blond head.

'That's what *you* think,' I said with a chuckle.

Ben was laughing. 'What, not surviving on Mars?'

'No,' I answered, 'not going to school on Monday.'

Both boys looked puzzled.

'How come?' said Ben.

'Coz you won't be going to school on Monday,' I said, smiling mischievously.

'We won't?' uttered Ben.

'Well, you *do* have a choice,' I replied. I was enjoying the game.

'We do?' said Tim.

'Well, let's put it this way: how would you like to be part of the salvation of the solar system?'

'The guy's gone bonkers!' exclaimed Ben, throwing his hands in the air.

'Completely crazy!' agreed his brother. 'Finally he's gone over the edge: too much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. We should have known this would happen.'

'Listen, guys; this is deadly serious. I'm inviting you to come to Mars with me.'

Ben and Tim looked at each other and then back at me.

There was a ring at the front door. 'That must be Sonia.' I got up to let her in.

'This is so funny, Sonia,' I said to her as we hugged.

'Have you told them yet? Do they know they're going to train Martians in Tae-kwon-do?'

'Not yet, only that they're going to Mars. Come, let's go back in there. This is too hilarious.'

We returned to the sitting room and Sonia hugged the boys.

'Sonia,' said Tim, shaking his head, 'your dear friend here

needs to see a psychiatrist right now. He's finally flipped.'

Sonia laughed out loud, much to the surprise of the boys. 'Why? Because he told you he's taking you to Mars?'

'Yeh,' said Ben. 'And..?'

'But he hasn't told you you'll be showing Martians how to do Tae-kwon-do.'

'Not you as well, Sonia?' cried Tim, pulling at his hair with both hands. 'Bro, get the men in white coats to come and take these cuckoo people away.'

'Now, sit down and listen to me,' I said. 'This is deadly serious.'

We all sat, the brothers in the armchairs and Sonia and I together on the sofa.

'Maybe you're not going to believe this, guys, but the Senior Elder of Similaria has specifically asked for Ben and Tim Armstrong to come to Mars to train his people in the art of Tae-kwon-do, to prepare for the attack by Zigismo and his army of Zeros.'

Ben and Tim looked at each other in disbelief.

'Straight, guys, this is no joke!'

Sonia supported me. 'It's true, absolutely true, cross my heart and hope to die.'

Suddenly, smiles lit up the two faces in front of us, as they realised there really was no school on Monday and they really would be going to Mars.

'I can't believe it,' breathed Ben, 'teaching Martians Tae-kwon-do.'

'This is your chance to do something for the Universe,' I said grandly. 'And you might get to play Sombrillo as well.'

'Wow!' exclaimed Tim. 'But...' He stopped. 'Will our parents agree?' Both boys were silent for a moment.

'Can you really tell them?' I said. 'Like, I haven't told mine. But they know I'm not staying. And of course Priam will visit them: he will tell them we're okay.'

'Hell! I don't know how we'll convince the old man,' Ben said doubtfully.

Tim shook his head. 'We *have* to, Ben. We can't miss this one. Deals like this only come our way once in a million years.'

'So, what do you say? Ben? Tim?'

'Count me in,' said Ben with enthusiasm.

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‘Me too,’ agreed his brother, with equal fervour.

‘Good! That’s settled. So how’s Mrs Rogers?’ I asked, turning to face Sonia.

She laughed. ‘Dear Mrs Rogers, she’s such a sweetie.’

‘Has she got someone else for your job?’

‘Sure, that job’s gone. But my father was right: it was a pretty boring job.’ She became serious. ‘My father’s been to the library.....looking for me. He told Mrs Rogers he was sorry for what he did and he wants me back home. He says the house is like a morgue without me.’

‘Will you go and see him?’ I asked.

‘Bill, I’m not ready to face him, not yet. Let him suffer a bit longer. To tell you the truth, I don’t trust him.’

‘Better we leave him,’ I agreed. ‘Besides, we have work to do before we all fly off to Mars.’

There was another ring at the front door.

‘I’ll get it,’ said Mum, passing the door of the sitting room.

I heard voices in the hall and the next moment Priam walked into the sitting room, dressed in his city outfit: dark suit, grey tie and furred umbrella.

‘I’m glad to find you all here,’ he said, bowing elegantly. He addressed me. ‘Your father is well?’ He looked tense, unusual for Priam.

‘My father doesn’t understand; won’t understand,’ I said. ‘By the way, have you discovered the traitor in your organisation?’

‘Not yet, and it’s very worrying. I just cannot understand who it can be.’

I offered him a place on the sofa. Sonia and I moved up to give him a Priam-sized space. He settled himself and gave me an enquiring look, which I knew was his way of asking if Ben and Tim had been told. Then he nodded: he had read my mind.

‘Now my dear friends,’ he began, ‘we leave tomorrow morning. Ben and Tim, you will stay and prepare for your journey, either Monday or Tuesday. And not a word to anyone; is that clear?’

Both boys nodded their agreement.

‘We have a meeting with Ivan and his scientists, and Hermann too,’ said Priam, turning to me. ‘Sonia, you will

stay here until we return.’ She appeared disappointed, but Priam’s tone was final and she accepted the decision.

‘In Russia?’ I asked in an anxious voice. ‘Not Russia again, please!’

‘No, a neutral location, top secret though.’ Priam paused and rubbed his newly shaved chin. ‘There is something else I need to tell you.’

All eyes were on Priam’s face, which was lined with anxiety.

‘Bill, you know the Russians have been tracking Earth-crossing asteroids for some time.’

I said I had been told.

‘Well.’ He paused again. ‘Ivan has told me.... this is strictly confidential, mind you. Ivan is very worried. They have discovered an enormous asteroid, roughly seventy five kilometres in diameter. It is very dark, almost black: that’s why it hasn’t been found before.’

‘Wow! Seventy-five kilometres,’ I said gravely.

The others looked expectantly at Priam.

‘This asteroid; they have named it Attila. You know who Attila was, of course?’

‘Attila the Hun,’ said Tim.

‘Correct,’ said Priam. Then he said solemnly, ‘this asteroid *may* be on a collision course with the Earth.’

There was silence. Full attention was on Priam.

A lorry rumbled down Dover Street, rattling the windows.

Ben broke the silence. ‘How do they know it will hit us?’ Deep lines creased his forehead.

‘Latest calculations say it is almost certain to plunge into the Earth, that is, unless it is deflected by other large bodies like Jupiter, which is unlikely, or the stress on it breaks it up into small pieces.’

‘If that happens, what then?’ I asked.

‘Smaller pieces would do tremendous damage to the Earth and probably kill millions of people.’ Priam’s face showed the horror he felt.

‘And when is this likely to happen?’ asked Tim.

‘If there is no change in its plotted orbits between now and then, it is due to hit the Earth on 25<sup>th</sup> April next year, at 5.35 in the morning, GMT.’

I did some calculations on my fingers. April was the

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month the Zoggs were due to land on Mars; eight months from Zogg. It never rains but it pours!

‘If the asteroid doesn’t break up,’ said Sonia quietly, ‘if it hits the Earth as it is, seventy-five kilometres wide, what will happen?’

We all looked at one another. Nobody said a word. There was no need for Priam to reply. You see, we all knew the answer.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### HOTEL DES MONTAGNES

‘Double vodka for me,’ said Ivan to the waiter.

‘Orange juice *pour moi*,’ said Professor Resichenko, ‘and for the doctor the same. We never drink vodka before lunch, do we George?’ The lady professor peered over the top of her glasses at her colleague, Dr. George Kaznikov. ‘*N’est pas?*’

Dr. George raised his bushy eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

Priam turned to me. ‘And you will take lemonade, I think.’

‘Fine,’ I said. I looked across at Hermann, who was sitting on the far side of the table. He was staring out of the large window at the hazy, blue mountains across the deep valley, capped by cloud. There was no snow, it being late summer. Fluffy white, fine weather clouds scudded past, borne on a stiff breeze that chased rounded shadows across the grass meadows, dotted with white and blue flowers, in front of the *Hotel des Montagnes*. Priam decided to order an orange juice for him, rather than interrupt his concentration. Who knows, he could be on the verge of a breakthrough that could alter the course of history! There is nothing like crisp Alpine air to aid the creative mind.

The dining table at which we sat was in the corner of a large dining room, far from the other tables; well arranged by Priam so that we could talk without being overhead. Only one other table was occupied, by a young couple who might have been on their honeymoon, for they only had eyes for each other.

Priam ordered. ‘*Un vodka, trois jus d’orange et une limonade, s’il vous plait.*’

‘*Oui, Monsieur,*’ said the waiter, bowing his head and twirling his tray deftly.

‘Now, gentlemen,’ began Priam, adjusting his bright yellow tie, ‘and not forgetting the lady Professor, I hope you approve of the venue for our little meeting.’ He looked round

clockwise at each of the assembled VIP's in turn, starting on his left with Professor Resichenko, then Dr. Kaznikov, then Ivan Ivanovich, then Professor Hermann Winke and finally at me.

The lady Professor and the Doctor both nodded approvingly.

Ivan scratched the side of his pitted face. 'It might have been better nearer Russia,' he said. 'It is *so* far from the nearest airport. And the vodka in Switzerland is like water!' He almost spat out the words. After a pause he added, 'are you sure the room is not bugged?' At this point he ducked his head under the table and made a quick search for any signs of a listening device. The two scientists did the same.

'Be assured, I have thoroughly checked the room,' Priam said. I knew Priam was taking all the precautions he could, especially while the mole was still at work.

Hermann continued to stare across the valley, his mind far away. I hoped he was making use of the time, something we had very little of.

It was my turn. 'It's cool, Priam, really cool....ha! I don't mean temperature wise; I mean the place is really great. I've been on a school trip to Calais, but never as far as Switzerland.' I thought: that's really weird. I had to laugh at myself. Never as far as Switzerland, but I'd been to Mars and back twice!

'In winter, this is a centre for skiing. See those ski lifts over there?'

'Have you been skiing, Priam?' I asked.

'Oh yes! Last winter we were here; a Martian get-together, you might say. It was paradise. Unfortunately, there is nothing like it on Mars. Are you surprised?'

'Fancy, Martians skiing!' I said.

'And why not? We share the same genes with Earth people, one hundred per cent.' Priam smiled.

'We share over ninety percent of genes with the common fly,' put in the professor dryly, 'but flies don't ski.'

'How do you know, my dear Emilia?' said the doctor with a grunt. 'How many fly ski resorts have you visited?'

The professor gave her colleague a fierce stare but could not find an answer.

The drinks came and Priam signed the bill, adding his

room number. Priam had decided that we should spend the night in the *Hotel des Montagnes*, to give us plenty of time to discuss progress on Hermann's work and to allow our Russian guests the whole day to travel back to Moscow. For us, of course, transport was simple. It was a matter of minutes from London to here by bubble. Priam had yet to introduce Ivan to the joys of bubble riding. All in good time, he had told me.

I studied Ivan and wondered what had caused his face to be so pockmarked. I had had my misgivings about meeting him again after what he had done to me; the days in solitary confinement. I might have died, and what did he care? In fact, when we finally met at the reception desk of the hotel, it was as if nothing had happened. He was polite, even warm, if Ivan could ever be that. I guess he had only been doing his job.

'*Alors*, let us get down to business,' Priam said, rubbing his hands together.

Hermann switched his attention from the far off mountains to the faces before him, peering through his thick glasses, as if seeing us for the first time. Ivan reached down for his briefcase and pulled out a thick writing pad and pen, which he placed on the table in front of him. He then took a sip of his vodka, grimaced and knocked the rest of the fiery spirit back in one swift movement. The two scientists drew themselves up to the table. We were all ready to begin. Priam cleared his throat.

'Ivan, as the Head of the Russian Mars Programme, perhaps you will kick off.'

'Yes, I am happy the ball is in my centre circle,' he said in his thick Slav accent. 'We Russians like taking the cow by the horns. We are not afraid to lead. One day Russia will lead the world again.'

His head turned to the right, seeking support from his two countrymen. The professor and the doctor both nodded enthusiastically. The lady said something in Russian, which drew an admiring look from Dr. George.

Ivan continued. 'Napoleon and Hitler both made the same mistake: they misjudged the power of the Russian people. The Americans too, but they are finished: they are decadent; weak.' He waved his hand casually. 'China will be strong,

but for now they are immature. Russia will lead the world. Under the dynamic leadership of...'

'Yes, yes, Ivan, you are right,' said Priam, with as much diplomacy as he could muster, 'but let us get on with the business in hand.'

Ivan did not like being toppled from his soapbox, when he was just getting into his stride. 'Professor,' he said stiffly, eyeing the lady to his right, 'perhaps you can give our Martian friend an up-to-date summary of progress.' The stress he placed on the word 'friend' had a touch of vindictiveness in it. He took off the top of his pen and began to doodle on the pad.

Professor Resichenko put her hand inside her tweed jacket and pulled out a wad of papers, which she proceeded to unfold and flatten out on the table with her large pale hands. She adjusted her round spectacles, coughed twice and then began. 'Honourable gentlemen, let me first say what a great pleasure it is for me to be addressing you here today. I speak on behalf of the people of Russia, who have suffered throughout the centuries, first from Tsarist oppression and later from the Communist dictator ...'

I looked out of the window. An enormous dark brown bird of prey was circling round over the sloping meadow, its forked tail twisting from side to side. It climbed effortlessly against the breeze and then, wings suddenly swept back, it dived towards the ground, swooping up at the last moment. The huge bird's antics were far more interesting than the professor's patriotic speech, which continued as a monotonous drone in the back of my mind.

'... Winke in the electro-magnetic reactor...'

At the mention of Hermann's name, I drew my mind back from the dive bomber to the large, Russian Nuclear Physicist in her little round spectacles.

'... balancing the forces of attraction with the forces of repulsion. Professor Winke, would you like to elaborate on what I have said?'

I swear that Hermann had been day dreaming again, because he looked startled. Puckering up his mouth and squinting through his glasses, he scratched his bald head as if to stimulate his brain. He looked across at the Professor.

The lady continued. 'Tell us, now that you have had the

opportunity to experiment in the advanced facilities provided generously by the Russian Government, what is your estimate of the probable month and date on which we can expect to unveil the..?’

‘What our eminent colleague is trying to say,’ cut in Ivan impatiently, ‘is: when can we use your invention to get rid of Attila?’ He looked at the hefty Professor with some trepidation, fearing he had upset her.

Hermann brightened up. He took off his glasses and twirled them in his fingers, leaning forward towards the big lady opposite him. He seemed not to have heard Ivan’s interruption. His eyes disappeared into his face. ‘Simple, Madam, simple! There is nothing to it. We have already achieved 10 to the power 10 attraction and the same for repulsion. We are half way: in less than one year we are ready.’ Hermann then went off into a long scientific explanation of the process of creating electromagnetic power. I understood nothing. He was interrupted by Priam.

‘Hermann, thank you; we are impressed with the progress you are making. However, we have a deadline.’ Priam paused and looked round the table. ‘In exactly 235 Earth days from now, Attila is due to strike the Earth and, around the same time, our enemy from deepest space could land on Mars. These two events could see the end of civilisation on Earth and Mars. We have to be ready before then. Nothing else will do.’

It was Ivan who broke the silence that followed Priam’s dramatic statement.

‘We are committed, even if we have to work twenty-five hours a day. We shall, if necessary, burn the candle in the middle.’

I stifled a laugh behind my hand.

Ivan looked over at me and smiled. ‘Even thirty hours a day, if that is what it takes. Russia is not to be daunted, my friend.’

He had not understood the reason for my amusement, and I was glad.

He went on. ‘Whether the threat from outer space is animate or inanimate, we Russians will not be deterred. Both will be defeated!’ At this point Ivan punched the air with his fist. ‘We shall kill both birds with one rock.’

There was muffled applause from around the table. Ivan looked pleased. He reached for his glass, intending to offer a toast but, on finding the glass empty, he withdrew his hand.

When order had returned to the gathering, I turned to the dapper little Martian. ‘Priam, tell us about the Zoggs. What are they like?’

Priam appeared to be embarrassed. ‘Mmm, well,’ he began, ‘nobody has actually seen one.’

‘Nobody?’ I said in amazement.

‘You see, the planet Zogg is seventeen light years away, and it is impossible as yet to reach there in one lifetime. The Uninet hasn’t given us a clue either.’

‘It is hard to fight an enemy you have never seen, isn’t it?’ I enquired.

‘You are right. We know that they can travel at twenty times the speed of light. That is about all we know about them.’

‘What weapons do they have?’ I asked.

‘Atik has told Zeris that they use the same particle that allows them to exceed the speed of light, but more than that, nothing.’

Ivan spoke. ‘Even if they are twenty metres tall and carry atomic weapons, we shall defeat them.’

The Professor, who knew heaps more about nuclear physics than Ivan, looked horrified at the prospect, but she quickly hid her doubts and applauded her colleague. Dr. Kaznikov followed suit. Priam shook his head almost imperceptibly and kept quiet. Then Ivan went to pick up his glass once more, determined to raise a toast, and, remembering with annoyance its lack of vodka, turned sharply in his chair and clicked his fingers loudly at the waiter, who was standing by the door to the kitchen. The waiter hurried over, tray balanced expertly on the five fingers of his right hand, his white cloth folded neatly over his left arm.

*‘Vodka pour toutes les personnes, si l vous plait.’*

The lady Professor glanced at her watch, and then at the doctor beside her. She was torn between her unbreakable rule, according to which vodka was strictly forbidden before lunch, and her duty to share a toast to the glory of Russia. Duty won, the unbreakable rule was shattered and she smiled a triumphant smile.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### IN THE ALPINE MOONLIGHT

Lunch was served at the table at exactly 1.30. The Russians ate caviar on toast and drank vodka. Ivan said the caviar was not like the caviar back home, but he looked to me like he enjoyed it. Hermann took soup and bread rolls, thickly ornamented with scoops of butter, which gave a yellow tinge to his thick and normally grey moustache. Priam, still not a fan of Earth foods, ate plain vegetables and drank sparkling water. I read the menu from start to finish, and was glad of the English translation, offered for English speaking tourists. I chose *ratatouille avec pommes frites* and non-alcoholic cider.

The meal was enjoyed and we chatted amiably. Even Hermann entered into the conversation, which ranged from Martian foods to Martian living conditions, from the life-lengthening affects of vodka drinking to the effect on the world of American culture, the last drawing derisive comments from Ivan.

After the dishes had been whisked away by the waiter, the meeting reconvened. Priam extended an invitation to the Russians to visit Mars to see for themselves the finer points of Martian culture. Hermann was also invited to assess the atmospheric conditions existing on the planet. It was considered wise for them all to experience the conditions on Mars. The Russians, for their part, were apprehensive about the journey, not having had the pleasure of bubbling. But finally, Ivan, misquoting English proverbs as he liked to do, said that nothing ventured, nothing gained, or something similar.

The group dispersed as the sun lowered itself behind the hotel, spreading a long shadow over the meadow and painting the far mountains in shades of orange. The wind had freshened. Grey waves chased dark green waves across the meadow, only to find a fresh attack from a green army rolling up behind.

The evening was spent round a roaring fire, while the

wind whistled outside. Hermann and Priam had retired early to bed. The Russians had stayed behind, Ivan drinking vodka as if he needed to exhaust the hotel stocks before his departure in the morning. Dr. George, who had spoken little during the day, chatted about his belief in the future of hydrogen fuels, puffing away on his pipe, his tongue loosened by at least six vodkas, until I could hardly keep my eyes open. I left the three of them sitting round the fire, which by that time had been reduced to a few red embers.

As I came to the top of the stairs and entered the third floor corridor leading to my room, I spied a man at a right hand bedroom door halfway along. At first I couldn't decide if he was coming out or going in. When he saw me he started to walk away from me towards the fire escape. He was short, about Priam's height, with a mass of curly, black hair. He wore jeans and a red T-shirt. With my plastic key card in my hand, I walked slowly towards him, glancing up at the room numbers written on the doors to my left, 312, 313, 314, 315, my room. I put the key card in the slot, at the same time following the man with my eyes. He reached the end of the corridor and turned. I pushed open the door of room 315, but hesitated to enter. The man was walking back towards me, dawdling, as if he was unwilling to meet me, hoping I would be inside my room before he reached my door. As he approached, I called out to him.

'Can I help you?' I immediately realised he was probably French and may not have understood me.

'No, no!' he said in reply. 'I think I'm on the wrong floor.'

'This is the third,' I said.

'Is it? Oh! My room is on the fourth, sorry.'

As he passed me on his way towards the stairs, I couldn't help feeling I had met him before somewhere. And another thing, I was pretty sure the hotel only had three floors.

'Haven't we met,' I said to his back.

'Impossible,' he replied, without turning his head.

Yes, for sure, I had seen him before. But where? I tried to place him. Earlier in the day? Back home? There was something about him that was familiar. I went into my room, closed the door and went into the bathroom. Where can I have seen that man before? I undressed, folding my clothes

over an armchair. The thick carpet was soft under my feet. The bed was warm and comfortable and I was soon asleep. My last thought before entering dreamland was the face of the man in the corridor.

I was woken by the sound of voices. I sat up with a start. Surely it cannot be morning. I got out of bed and drew the curtains. It was dark outside. I looked at the clock on the bedside table. It read 1.25 am. I had no mobile phone to check the accuracy of the clock. It had been taken away from me during the kidnapping and I had not had the chance to replace it. The voices were coming from along the corridor. I went to the door and, opening it slowly, I peered out. I was surprised to see Professor Resichenko and Dr. George Kaznikov standing in the red carpeted corridor. The Professor was waving her arms about and shouting in Russian.

I returned to my room and quickly dressed in shirt and trousers, not bothering with footwear. When I reached the scene of the action the two Russians turned to me.

‘Look at my room!’ shouted the Professor, throwing open her door and showing me the interior. The room was turned upside down; clothes and papers scattered everywhere. She put her hands to her ears. ‘My papers, the reports on the project, all gone!’

Then I remembered the man I had seen on my way to bed. It was outside this very room he was standing when I reached the top of the stairs.

‘Professor, I saw someone here, while you were sitting by the fire.’

‘Who was it?’

‘I don’t know, but I think I have seen him before somewhere.’

The two scientists took hold of me, one on each arm.

‘Think!’ cried the Doctor, ‘think!’

‘Wait!’ I struggled to free myself. ‘Let me think.’

Where oh where have I seen that man before? Then it came to me. ‘The library!’

‘Which library, boy, tell us!’ cried the professor pleadingly.

‘The old man in the library; it’s him for sure. Take off the black curly wig and put on a white wig... and it’s him. We have to wake Priam!’ I cried. I remembered Priam’s room

was on the second floor. I left the two scientists there and ran down the stairs and along the corridor, until I reached room 209. I hammered on the door.

‘Priam, Priam! Wake up!’

A few seconds later a sleepy Priam opened the door, tying a belt around a thin, green dressing gown.

‘What is it, Bill?’ But he saw my face and he knew there was a panic on.

‘Come! Someone has ransacked the Professor’s room.’ I ran on ahead of him, passing a woman who had come to her door to find out what was the cause of the commotion. I told her it was nothing important and ran on. When we reached the Professor’s room, we found them sitting on her bed, shuffling the contents of a brief case.

‘Mr Priam,’ called the Doctor, ‘the reports on the Mars Programme have been stolen.’ He stood and indicated the scattered clothes and papers.

Priam was visibly alarmed. He stood looking down at the distraught lady.

I tugged at Priam’s arm. ‘I know who it is.’

‘You do?’

‘Yes, he was sitting in the library that day Sonia and I went disguised as old people. That day he was wearing a white wig; tonight he had a curly black one. Or maybe it’s his real hair, but it is the same person, I swear it!’

‘What did he look like, Bill? Think!’

‘Er... small, like you, nothing unusual about him... But wait, yes! He had unusually small ears.’ I looked at Priam hopefully.

‘Of course,’ breathed Priam, his face brightening. ‘Of course: Krion.’

‘Who’s Krion?’ I asked.

‘No time to explain; we must get after him.’

The two Russians looked puzzled as Priam and I left the room. On the way out, Priam called back, telling them not to wake Ivan, but to pray we find the thief before he gets away.

‘What time did you see him, Bill?’ asked Priam, as we hurried along the corridor.

‘About half past midnight, it must have been.’

‘Now it is one-thirty: he will be well away by now.’ Priam beat his fists together. ‘Of course, he may not have a bubble,

in which case we might catch him. If he has a bubble, well, we have lost him.'

'He's a Martian?' I asked, needlessly.

Priam dismissed my question, and I assumed the answer was yes. I followed him down the stairs and over to the reception, where the night porter slept peacefully in a chair behind the counter. Priam punched the bell on the counter and the porter jumped.

'*Monsieur?*'

'*Un petit homme avec des cheveux noirs boucles: est-il parti?*' asked Priam.

'*Comment?*'

'*Avez-vous vu un homme partir cette nuit en taxi?*'

*Oui, Monsieur, en taxi, il y a une demi-heure,*' he said, glancing at the clock.

'*Merci Monsieur,*'

We left the disorientated night porter gaping in astonishment at a tiny man in a thin dressing gown and a dishevelled boy without shoes on his feet, as they hurtled through the swing doors into the darkness, leaving them rotating. I surveyed the parking area in front of the hotel, bathed in moonlight. The night air was chilly and sweet-smelling. But there was no taxi in which we could follow. What was Priam intending? At that moment he drew an invisible object from his dressing gown pocket. He shook his arms and before him appeared a large bubble, glowing in the light of the moon. Before I knew it, he had pushed me inside and the bubble was off over the treetops.

'This bubble is unprogrammed,' said Priam over his shoulder. 'We have to navigate it. Luckily, I know the road down into the valley quite well. It takes an hour and a half to drive all the way down. The road is very winding and in the dark you have to drive very slowly. Fortunately, there is a moon to guide us and bends in the road will not matter to us.'

The bubble sped downhill, about a hundred metres above the ground. The waning moon stood in the eastern sky, a little less than half full. Bathed in its light, the meadow grass was shivery silver and the scattered trees stood like sentinels, throwing out dark shadows.

'Keep your eyes open for a taxi,' said Priam.

As luck would have it, there was no traffic and we saw no

vehicles for some time. Priam seemed not to be guiding the bubble and I wondered how it knew where to go.

‘I have to talk to it, Bill,’ was his reply.

After about three minutes, I saw a faint light ahead, perhaps five kilometres away.

‘There! Down the valley!’ I shouted excitedly.

‘Let’s take a closer look,’ said Priam.

The bubble whistled downhill at an unnerving speed, but within a few seconds we were hovering fifty metres above two shafts of light, with a pair of red ones in tow. Priam edged the bubble lower until we were only metres above the vehicle.

‘It’s a taxi,’ I breathed.

‘I will put it into invisible mode and we can look into the windows without being seen,’ said Priam. ‘We don’t want to intercept the wrong one.’

Skimming along beside the taxi, we had a good look inside. In the back sat a little man, the same one I had seen in the corridor of the hotel. He and the taxi driver were unaware of our presence.

What Priam did next will always stay in my memory as one of the biggest surprises of my life. Out of the side of our invisible bubble appeared another, bigger bubble. As we glided along beside the purring taxi, the bubble slowly enveloped it, slowing it down, until it stopped completely. The driver was thumping the steering wheel, convinced that his taxi had developed a mechanical problem. The man in the back seat was leaning over the front seat, yelling at the driver. He was surely aware of the real reason for the sudden end to their journey.

Suddenly, the little man opened the back door on the far side of the vehicle and scrambled out, carrying with him a small case. It was then that he came in contact with the skin of the bubble. Being a Martian and understanding how bubbles work, he gave the side a slight push and was free. In a moment he was running away across the moonlit grass, which stretched away on both sides of the road.

‘After him, Bill!’ yelled Priam.

I set off after the man, leaping barefoot over the tufts of grass and lurching through the hollows. He saw me coming and put on a spurt. But he was smaller and older than me. I

closed the gap and in a few strides I was right behind him. The grass was uneven and both of us were struggling to keep our balance. It was then that I rugby tackled him, bringing him down on the soft grass. He let go of the case, which flew high into the air and landed a few metres away. Off came the black, curly wig he had used in the hotel, revealing a bald head that shone in the moonlight. A few words of Kisoro were lost in the damp grass, as he struggled to free himself from my tight grip on his legs. I leapt on top of him and pinned him to the ground.

‘Well done!’ called Priam, as he ran up to us. ‘Now, Krion, I have you at last.’ He removed the cord from his dressing gown and tied Krion’s hands behind his back. I picked up the attaché case, which fortunately had remained shut during its flight, and together we escorted Krion back to the taxi. The driver was bewildered at the sudden change in his fortunes. He was partially mollified when Priam explained to him that his passenger was a thief and if he called at the *Hotel des Montagnes*, he would be paid for the trouble he had been put to. There was some haggling over the price. The driver attempted to extort a few extra francs for the trauma he had suffered, but finally the deal was done and we departed, leaving him open-mouthed at seeing us fly off in the bubble.

The journey back to the hotel took only a few minutes. As we entered the hotel, I noticed the night porter had returned to his sleep, leaning back in his chair with his feet on top of the counter, so we tiptoed up the stairs to Priam’s room, which had two single beds. We tied Krion down on the bed that Priam was not using.

Taking the case with him, Priam left the room, while I guarded the prisoner. Priam decided it was only fair to take the good news to the Russians and save them any unnecessary anxiety. He returned after ten minutes and we sat down to wait for morning. Priam attempted to question his prisoner, but the man remained sullen and uncooperative.

‘Priam, who is this Krion?’

‘His mother is a Zeroneran and he was brought up there. His father is a Thorean, another nearby clan.’

‘And how do you know him?’ I asked.

‘He works in London with me. At least he has been up to

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now. He must be the one who's been passing secrets to Zeronera.'

'The spy?'

'Yes, Bill: the spy.'

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### VOWS OF TOGETHERNESS

‘How did you sleep?’ I asked Ivan, as I approached the breakfast table.

‘Like a tree trunk, a good Siberian tree trunk. How about you?’

‘Oh, perfect,’ I lied. In fact, I was feeling a bit groggy from lack of sleep, but I tried to look as cheerful and as refreshed as possible. He knew nothing of the excitement of the night. A blessing!

He was alone at the table, tucking into eggs and bacon with obvious enjoyment. The dazzling sun was just clearing the distant mountains, sending powerful rays of sunlight almost horizontally straight into the dining room, flooding the whole room with warmth and radiance. As I sat at the table, Priam’s small form was seen in the doorway, accompanied by two large Russians. We said our good mornings and the others took their seats. Dr. George placed his pipe on the table, reached for the menu and studied it. The Professor removed her round glasses and wiped them on a large, spotted handkerchief. Then she wiped her eyes and blinked several times before replacing the glasses. After concluding the peasantries, Ivan attacked his breakfast with fresh enjoyment.

Hermann was the only one missing.

‘And Hermann?’ I asked.

‘He was up with the early bird... had breakfast early... went walking,’ said Ivan, returning his coffee cup to its saucer. He kept his eyes on the plate before him.

Priam looked shocked. ‘He is the key to the whole operation: how can we let him go off on his own?’ All except Ivan had been alarmed by the events of the night and were therefore conscious that things could actually go wrong.

‘Do you think I am not aware of his importance?’ Ivan retorted stiffly. ‘I got one of the staff to go with him, with instructions not to allow him to go out of the grounds of the hotel.’ He tucked the remaining forkful of food into his

mouth and mopped the remaining grease with a piece of bread.

Priam looked relieved. Then he rose from his chair. 'Excuse me; I have to go to my room for a minute.' He cast a knowing glance in my direction and left the dining room. I watched him go. We had decided to check on the prisoner every ten minutes, even though he was well secured to the bed. Priam soon returned, his face showing that all was well, and we ordered our breakfast. Ten minutes later, Priam nodded to me and I understood it was my turn. At that moment a plate of succulent mushrooms was placed under my nose. Hungry as I was, I decided to attend to my duty first, and enjoy the mushrooms with a clean conscience.

I leapt up the stairs like a gazelle, two at a time. I strode down the corridor to room 315, slipped the key card into the slot and opened the door.

I stopped in my tracks, frozen in horror. The bed was empty; Krion had gone. I rushed into the room, leaving the door open. I was about to turn and go out, with the intention of alerting Priam, when my world went black and I knew no more.

How long I remained there I don't know, but Priam, worried about my overdue return to the breakfast table, had come to find me. He was dousing my head with cold water and calling my name. I opened my eyes to see him bending over me. I was on the floor just inside the door of the room. He was relieved to see my return to consciousness.

'Bill, Krion has escaped,' he said. 'I am worried about Hermann. I have to go in search of him.'

I nodded, and as I did so, a searing pain ran through my head. I winced. Priam twisted my head gently to inspect the damage.

'Your head is cut and bruised: you will need treatment.'

'I'll be fine,' I said unconvincingly, screwing up my face.

Not quite sure what to do first, attend to me or go off to find Hermann, Priam hesitated. 'Can you make it to the bed?'

'I think so,' I replied.

'We cannot afford publicity,' he said. 'Stay here for a bit, while I make sure Hermann is safe, then I'll be back.'

He helped me lie down on the bed and then disappeared, closing the door behind him. I lay there very still, with a gen-

tle throbbing in the back of my head. I moved sufficiently to see the hands of a clock on the telephone handset point to ten o'clock. After about half an hour, I heard the key in the lock and Priam entered the room.

'The boy came back without Hermann,' Priam said. 'As they were passing a copse, Hermann heard an unusual sound; said it was a bird, and wanted to get a closer look at it. The boy waited at the edge of the trees for a few minutes, then went in to find Hermann, couldn't find him, and came back to the hotel to report. I think Hermann wanted to be alone and gave the boy the slip.' Priam looked annoyed. 'Are you alright, Bill? I need to go back. We have a few of the staff searching for him.'

'I'll be fine; more important to find Hermann.'

Before leaving the room, Priam turned and said, 'with Krion on the loose and Hermann missing, anything can happen.' I heard the door click shut. I tried to forget about my sore head and prayed for Hermann's safe return. Hermann in the hands of the enemy would be a disaster. Things were tough enough without that. However, after about fifteen minutes, the door opened and a smiling Priam entered.

'Hermann is having coffee in the dining room,' announced Priam. 'But of Krion there is no sign whatsoever. Never mind; let him go: he will not bother us. We recovered the papers and Hermann is safe, that is the main thing. Now, to get you some treatment; but first, I'll have your breakfast sent up.'

I recalled the delicious aroma of fried mushrooms, but the appetite had gone.

'Just a cup of tea will do, Priam, thanks.'

Priam was able to secure the services of a local doctor, who attended me in Priam's room. He stitched and dressed the wound and advised against sleeping in case there was concussion. He administered a pain killer and told me to visit my doctor immediately on returning home. Priam managed to find a woollen hat that hid the dressing from difficult questions. Dressed so, Priam and I said goodbye to Hermann and the Russians. We stood outside the revolving doors of the hotel, waving them off in their taxi. I mouthed a prayer for Hermann's continued health and for Ivan to protect Hermann against anyone wanting to harm him, or steal his priceless

knowledge.

‘Now for the journey home,’ said Priam, as the taxi crunched the gravel and disappeared out of the driveway of the hotel.

He performed the marvel and we were off in the newly created bubble, soon to be flying high over the Alps. The jagged, rocky peaks slipped away beneath us, interspersed with deep, green valleys, through which glinted winding ribbons of silver. Within minutes we had passed the checkered countryside of lowland France, with its long, rectangles of gold, brown and green, and were crossing the English Channel. Soon we were passing over the familiar green and yellow fields and woods of Southern England, appearing now and again through gaps in the cloud. Before I knew it, we had zoomed down into our little town and were landing in the front garden of our house. The bubble, which had brought us from sunny Switzerland to cloudy Britain, disappeared.

The trip had been a success, Priam later assured me. We had agreed that Hermann and the Russians would visit Mars as soon as Hermann had reached a certain point in his programme. There was still some concern that the technology might not be available in time for April, when Zoggs and Attila were determined to bring terror to the solar system, but Ivan had promised that every effort would be made to speed up the process. He had actually said: ‘no rock will be left not turned over.’ Dear Ivan!

‘But, Priam,’ I had said, ‘shouldn’t we alert the British Government? The Western powers could maybe do something.’

‘I thought about that too,’ he had replied. ‘We think, on balance, it would be better not to. As things stand at the moment, could we really expect the Russians and the West to agree on how to combat the two threats?’

‘Well, these threats are common enemies, and they might just agree to bury their differences for the sake of the world.’

Priam had shaken his head. ‘I doubt it. Anyway, there’s no time, my friend. Let it be: I think we are on the right track.’

I had shrugged my shoulders and agreed. But I had that unsettling feeling again that I was being a traitor to my country.

The other success had been the unmasking of the mole in Priam's British organisation, even though the man had escaped. Priam was not unduly worried about this. Krion would return to Zeronera, with whatever new secrets he had been able to steal, which Priam hoped would not be much. He would not have had time to study the stolen Russian papers, which we had recovered in the nick of time. Oh! And I relived the glorious rugby tackle with which I had brought down Krion.

I was pleased to see Sonia again and, of course, my parents. They were concerned about my wound, but I made light of it. I did visit the local hospital in the afternoon, but the damage was nothing a few days would not take care of.

Final arrangements were made with Ben and Tim for the trip to Mars, which was to take place the following day, Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> September. We met at my house early that morning. Departure was timed to reach the Similaria landing ground during daylight hours, Priam having told us that it was not advisable to travel to Similaria at night.

The atmosphere in the front lounge of No.16, Dover Street on that dull, late summer morning was electric. The boys chatted away excitedly. Visions were seen of their classmates sitting at their desks, cramming 'useless' knowledge, when they themselves were about to embark on an Earth-saving mission, spreading eastern martial arts to the furthest reaches of the Solar System.

'Hey, Bill!' joked Tim, 'you're a frequent flyer now. What are the stewardesses like on this Martian airline?'

Sonia and I frowned at him. 'Tim,' I warned, 'I think you need to be serious about your responsibilities. A great weight lies on your shoulders.'

Tim looked hurt. 'Oh I do, I do! But we are going to have fun too.'

'There'll be time for serious work and time for fun and games,' said Priam.

Was I losing my sense of humour? Tim was right; no matter how serious our mission and how frightening the prospects, there should always be a joke to lighten the atmosphere.

Priam drew us together with his arms. 'Now, Ben, have you left everything settled with your parents?'

‘Aha,’ Ben replied. We decided it was better to tell them we’d be away for a while.’ He grinned. ‘Hey, it wasn’t easy! Bill was good though. He convinced them, without giving away any of the details. I was really surprised they swallowed it, especially the bit about missing school for a whole term. Dad said he would write to the school and tell them we had transferred for a while. Mum, of course, was worried about our safety. Bill had to reassure her on that one. Space travel was not mentioned: that would have given them instant heart attacks.’

‘My father has given up on me completely,’ I said ruefully. ‘He doesn’t even want to talk about it. And Mum, well, she just cried some tears and said I had to write at least once a w...’

‘Don’t worry,’ Priam interrupted, ‘I will be visiting your parents every week without fail, don’t worry.’ He turned to Sonia. ‘And your father?’

Sonia’s brow creased. She shook her head and seemed on the point of tears.

‘I wrote him a note,’ she said.

‘I will go to see him, in any case,’ said Priam kindly.

Sonia nodded and tried to smile. She said nothing.

‘Right,’ said Priam brightly. ‘For the boys’ benefit, I need to explain about bubble travel.’ He set about enumerating the various capabilities and features of individual bubbles, group bubbles, short-haul bubbles, long-haul bubbles, space bubbles, high speed bubbles; in fact all the different bubbles in use on Mars. The boys sat spellbound: every now and then one of them would let out a whistle, or let out a soft ‘cool,’ or ‘amazing,’ or similar exclamations.

At last it was time to leave. Dad had already left for work and Mum had gone off for an appointment at the hairdresser. She wanted to postpone it so that she could wave us goodbye, but I persuaded her against it. She and Dad were totally in the dark about bubbles, and it was better kept that way.

Priam, Ben, Tim, Sonia and I stood in a circle on the back lawn, Priam in dark suit and tie, the rest of us in casual dress. Priam led a prayer for a safe journey and for faith and strength to carry out our respective duties for the benefit of the Universe. All of us, with the exception of Priam, were nervous. No-one spoke. At any moment we knew we would

be off into the void, carrying into weightlessness weighty responsibilities. Excitement and anxiety showed on the faces and in the eyes of the boys. I knew what was going through their minds: I had been through it myself. What would we feel, landing on another planet? Would we fulfill the duties entrusted to us? Would we ever return?

We knew that, in less than eight months, two momentous and terrifying events were due to happen, possibly sentencing the entire human race to slavery at the hands of an alien race that had never been seen by human eyes, or even worse, heralding the end of life as we knew it. These were daunting visions; nightmare possibilities, and we were part of a small group of people, only a minute proportion of the human race, who had any idea what was about to appear round the corner. We carried on our shoulders a great responsibility, and we all knew it. It is hardly surprising that the atmosphere surrounding that little group was heavy with feeling.

‘Well, it is time to say goodbye,’ said Priam, ‘or, should we say, *‘au revoir,*’ because we will meet soon?’

We all stared at Priam.

‘You’re not coming with us?’ said Ben, Tim and I in ragged unison.

‘I have to stay: I have duties here in London and in Moscow. But don’t worry, the bubble is preprogrammed. You will have nothing to do, and you will be met as you land.’ He looked round at our nervous faces and smiled a reassuring smile. ‘May the Almighty protect you.’

With that, he threw out his arms and a large bubble materialised in front of our eyes. We all tottered backwards to make room for it, Sonia almost losing her balance.

‘In you go!’ cried Priam.

No sooner had we pushed our way inside and sat down, than the bubble soared into the dull September sky. None of us knew when we would see England again, if we ever would. The most dangerous part of our great adventure was about to begin. As if one mind were working our limbs, eight arms stretched out and eight hands united, linking forty fingers tightly together. Without a word, a silent vow was made, that whatever happened, come hell or high water, that whatever faced us, we would face it together.

**PART TWO**

**BATTLE FOR THE RED PLANET**

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### PREPARATIONS

‘This beats Rugby!’ beamed Tim as he sauntered up to Sonia and me.

‘You’re getting pretty good at the game,’ I said. It was true: after a lot of practices and several proper games, both my friends were making a real contribution to their team.

‘Here comes Ben, and Manu too,’ said Sonia, taking a few steps towards them. ‘And Ben looks exhausted. Look at him.’

‘It takes years to get used to less oxygen in the air,’ I reminded her, ‘and the lower pressure.’

‘Phew!’ Ben wiped his brow with the back of his hand. ‘That was a brilliant... game.’ He was still gasping for air. He bent over, resting his straight arms on his knees. Another player passed behind him and patted his back.

‘Well done!’ Manu congratulated both boys. ‘You’ll make the first team yet. You still have to be careful not to jump too high, Tim. It is better to find the *sombro* on the way up rather than on the way down. You get me?’

‘It’s his enthusiasm, Manu,’ I said. ‘He gets so excited.’

‘You bet!’ cried Tim. ‘Next year we’ll be playing *Sombrillo* at school, you wait.’

‘I doubt it,’ cut in Manu, shaking his head and laughing. ‘With the gravity you have on Earth, it wouldn’t be the same.’

‘No, your right, Manu,’ I agreed. ‘The joy of this game is soaring into the air, the skill needed to make contact with the *sombro* and keeping your balance.’

‘When is our next match, Manu?’ asked Ben.

‘The Junior team is playing in a few days,’ replied Manu, ‘and practice is tomorrow. But with your busy Tae-kwon-do schedule, I doubt you’ll make it.’

‘Right,’ said Ben, ‘duty first.’

‘We’ll excuse you two from practice but not from the match,’ said Manu with a smile. And then he added, ‘it’s good to see you taking the game so seriously. But don’t for-

get, the joy of the game is in the playing, not the winning.'

'Dead right!' agreed Ben.

Manu had been appointed the coach for the junior team in which both my friends played regularly. Manu himself played for the first team. His reason for excusing the boys from the pre-match practice was that the programme of Tae-kwon-do training had been accelerated, as any day we could expect Zigismo to launch his invasion, and our rendezvous with Attila was approaching agonisingly fast.

But I am getting ahead of myself! I need to go back and fill in the space since that day, 4<sup>th</sup> September, wasn't it? It was the day that Sonia, Ben, Tim and I zoomed away from Earth and landed on the Red Planet. Of course, it wasn't 4<sup>th</sup> September on Mars. It was almost the end of the first *surama* of the Martian year 7445. There are eighteen *suramas* in the Martian year. If I remember correctly, most *suramas* have thirty-eight Martian days, and Mars takes 687 days to make one orbit round the sun. I hope I've got it right. At that time, 4<sup>th</sup> September, the Zoggs had already begun that eight month journey, Earth months of course, there being no such measurement of time on Mars, and the Russian space watchers had estimated that asteroid Attila would strike the Earth on 25<sup>th</sup> April next. We call it AZ Day, 'A' for Attila and 'Z' for Zogg. Naturally we have no way of knowing exactly when those feared invaders that no-one has ever seen, would land on Mars. But if our information is correct, both events are due at about the same time.

Now it is the 32<sup>nd</sup> day of the 6<sup>th</sup> *surama* of the year 7445. Michu confirmed that this morning. After some mind-bending mental arithmetic, -oh for a calculator!- I have worked out that the date today on Earth is 14<sup>th</sup> March, and we are only 42 days, Earth days that is, from AZ day. How confusing it all is!

Only forty-two days to go! That is why the Tae-kwon-do schedule has been speeded up. Ben and Tim, and of course all the students, have been drilling hard. Everyone is amazed at the progress towards excellence shown by so many, not only Similarians but by some thirty or more neighbouring clans. Over seven hundred young Martians have received training from Ben and Tim personally. Not that the older ones have been slow in showing interest. To spread the work,

the boys selected eighteen students who had shown such terrific progress that they in their turn had become instructors, and have already been sent out to other more distant clans to train more young Martians. In that way, the art of Tae-kwon-do has already spread to more than half the clans on Mars!

Of my friends, Manu is among those who excelled at Tae-kwon-do, but Manu is needed in Similaria and was not permitted to join the team of trainers that went out among the outer clans.

Naturally, proficiency in Tae-kwon-do itself is not enough. A football team full of the world's best players cannot win the World Cup if they are not moulded into a working machine. An army of brave fighters cannot win a battle unless they are trained to work as a fighting unit. This is where Atik and Kiko come in. They have worked like slaves, using their valuable experience of the Zeroneran army, in order to create an efficient fighting force in Similaria, as well as in other clans.

So that is how a peace-loving people, who have never raised their limbs in attack, or even in self-defence, have been made ready for the imminent and inevitable assault from Zeronera.

Meanwhile, Zigismo has been quiet. We wonder how it is he hasn't got wind of the training. Perhaps he has, so why the silence? Did he laugh at it? Is he so confident of his army's invincibility that he waved away the threat to his plans? Does he know something about his allies, the Zoggs that we don't know? Whatever the reason, he is being mighty quiet! Atik has tried hard to put himself in Zigismo's shoes, to guess at his strategy, but Atik is puzzled too. Is Zigismo waiting for the Zoggs to arrive before he launches his attack? Anyway, soon there is an important meeting of the Council, and this, together with all the latest news from Earth, will all be discussed again, so let me leave it there.

On the personal side, life in Similaria has been great. I have found time to have fun with my friends. Michu and I have remained close, without the strain of strong feelings towards each other. Sonia has taken to subterranean life like a fish to water, always looking for ways to contribute. We have had very few opportunities to be alone together, but there has always been a deep understanding between us, to the extent

that words are often superfluous.

As AZ Day moves closer, the atmosphere in Similaria becomes more and more electric; tense; a turbulent mixture of dread and excitement, not just one or the other but a complicated blend of both. Forty-two Earth days: not long in anyone's calendar!

When is Zigismo going to move? What secret weapons will he unleash upon us? What do the Zoggs look like? Are they monsters with ten heads and twenty arms, with poisonous fangs? Do they wield cosmic armaments that can vapourise a human being in the blink of an eye? These are the questions dominating nightmares and daydreams. And we are going to know the answers to these questions before long, very much sooner than we would wish.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### LIEUTENANT STEADMAN

One hundred and two expectant beings sat under the soft light of the crystal-studded ceiling of Chamber 13, next to the Grand Hall of Similaria. They sat on simple cushions arranged in straight lines: adults and children, men and women, in fact the entire population of the clan and invited guests. There was complete silence. The whole assembly waited patiently for the arrival of the five elders, who would enter the raised area in front of them from the right. Even the children were quiet, while mothers held babies on their laps or to their breasts.

I sat with Sonia in the fourth row from the front. In the row before me sat Sofu, Anamaru and Diana. Manu sat in the second row, together with his father, Atik, and the other two Zeronerans, Kiko and Horos. I couldn't spot Manu's mother, Tania, and I decided she must be somewhere behind me. I knew it was not polite to look behind you at these meetings. Michu and her father, Priam, were seated in the front row. I let my eyes wander across the chamber. I spotted the woman who had disguised the colour of my skin for the venture into Zeronera to rescue Sonia. The memory automatically twisted my eyes to the right to rest on Sonia, sitting beside me, deep in thought.

A little further along our row was the mother of Kim, with the small child nestled in her arms. Kim had been born at the time of my first visit to Mars and would now have been about six months old. He was very pale, with enormous green eyes that stared back at me as soon as he knew he was being watched. I wondered how he came to have eyes that colour. I knew that the original band of outcasts sent to Mars thirteen thousand years ago were an exotic concoction of races with similar beliefs, rather like the mix of races found in an ashram in modern-day India. Green eyes; a Persian characteristic perhaps! I set about thinking of what it must have been like living under the sea in that strange, advanced civilisation

that ceased to exist thousands of years ago. Civilisations come and go, I decided: the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans. Now it is the Western Nations; in fifty years, the Chinese? Ivan would say the Russians. I was willing to consider Africa as a possible future force in the world in a century or two. What makes civilisations decay and die? Excess, I am sure is one reason. Nero became debauched and burned his own capital. Look at the Similarians, thirteen thousand years and their culture still survives. There must be a moral in that story somewhere.

My philosophical wanderings were interrupted by the appearance of Zeris at the head of the Council of Elders. They strode majestically across the stage to their cushions and sat down, Zeris in the middle. On Zeris' right, I recognised the liaison officer who had arranged for my Zeronera disguise. I had not realised she was a Council member.

A prayer was said and Zeris stood up to speak. Even though his words were unintelligible to me, apart from references to our names, I felt the power of his eloquence. His voice reverberated around the chamber. From time to time, he would pause theatrically and survey the gathering. Then he would launch into another part of his address, his booming voice sending shivers up my spine, the movement of his fingers, hands and arms adding effect to his speech. The audience was spellbound. Not a sound could be heard apart from Zeris' voice.

After almost ten minutes, Zeris' voice trailed off and his opening address was over. No applause greeted his efforts: it was not the custom in Similaria. But surveying the faces around me, I knew the message had hit home. Wasn't he going to give an English translation?

'I know our dear visitors will be expecting me to speak in their tongue,' said Zeris, as if in answer to my thoughts. 'They will not be disappointed. Very well! First, let me welcome our brothers and sister to this meeting. We Similarians will never forget the contribution you have made.'

He looked at Ben and Tim, who were obviously pleased to receive such formal recognition for their hard work in Taekwon-do training. Then he continued. 'We Similarians are peaceful people and abhor violence. We believe in the freedom of the individual to work with others for the good of the

whole. No clan member is forced to work: all do so, not for personal gain, but for the satisfaction of making a contribution to the clan. You can call it a form of Communism, and it is, but where no-one ever becomes more powerful than any other.

‘Brothers and Sisters, we are reaching a critical time in our history. Never before have we faced challenges as monumental as we are facing now. What we have built in the past few thousand years, with determination, fortitude, love, peace and unity, is threatened with extinction at the hands of a section of our Martian family; a small section that has broken the age-old traditions, which were put in place to maintain our civilisation in a stable state for as near to eternity as is possible in a changing universe. The leader of this one clan is the first in our long history to become a dictator. It has never happened before. This clan leader, with no respect for the wellbeing of his own clansmen, let alone the other clans on this planet, having all but destroyed the healthy environment of his own home and having polluted his own water supply, now intends to take over all peace-loving people and make them his slaves. He intends, indeed he has already pressed the button, to bring to this peaceful world a foreign power from out in space, whose nature we do not understand. This power is bent on domination. It will not come to protect but to destroy. Having destroyed our own existence, this power intends to launch an invasion on our nearest neighbour, the beautiful planet, Earth, with the intention of making the inhabitants their slaves, as he would have us become.

‘Brothers and Sisters, we are not going to lie down and let these forces of evil overcome us. We are not going to hide in our chambers and see our world destroyed in front of our eyes. We are not going to give in. We, side by side with our Earth friends, will stand up to the tyrant with all the tenacity we can muster. We shall fight him! We shall fight to the last one! We shall never give in!’

I saw a vision of Winston Churchill, cigar clenched between his teeth and two fingers raised in the victory salute, making a passionate speech to the people of Britain in the dark days of 1940, when the Nazis were overrunning Europe. Now here was a Martian who was rallying his people with similar rhetoric.

Zeris sat down and Lumura, the elder on his far left, stood to address the assembly. He was considerably smaller than Zeris, thin-faced, with dark hair greying at the temples and dark piercing eyes. He spoke for a while in Kisoro. I heard names mentioned, including mine and Sonia's. Then he made some announcements in English. Zeris was to act as the Head of Anterison, an alliance of all the clans opposed to Zigismo, and Atik had been appointed Commander of the Anterison Defence Force. Each clan was to have a commander, and Manu was to take charge of the Similaria fighting unit. Horos and Kiko, who had been involved in shaping groups into effective fighting units, would be posted to other clans that lacked military leadership, for the purpose of intense training. Two lieutenants would serve under Manu, Kul and...

At the mention of my name, my heart missed a beat. Lieutenant! Me? But Lumura was speaking again. Michu had been put in charge of a temporary hospital, to provide nursing services to any possible wounded on either side, and Sonia was to be her assistant. I glanced at my fiancée, whose face was flushed with emotion. Having asked all those who had been named to remain behind after the meeting, Lumura handed over the floor to Zeris, who rose to his feet.

'Brothers and Sisters, if you will remember, way back at the beginning of 7445, in our first meeting, we talked about an expected soft landing on Mars by an American craft. It is due to land near here on the first day of the 7<sup>th</sup> Surama, only five days from now. Well, we now know that the landing site is only a kilometre from our own landing ground. A wheeled vehicle is expected to be deployed and to travel more than a kilometre from the landing craft, taking film and collecting rock and soil samples. Such activity is extremely dangerous, especially as we can expect Zigismo to come out at any time. We cannot allow any information about any Martians to reach Earth. I assure you that we shall take steps to deactivate the equipment as soon as it lands.

'One last thing,' said Zeris, 'we are expecting a visit from the Earth friends who are working on sophisticated technology that we pray will overcome the threats to our solar system. Our friends are due to arrive the day after tomorrow, in advance of the American spacecraft. Your Council of Elders is

ready to answer any questions.’ He repeated the sentence in Kisoro. ‘Then, if there are no questions, I close the meeting.’

Zeris bowed and sat down. Immediately, the five elders drew together and began to talk in hushed voices. A hubbub spread through the audience, starting with a few whispers and becoming louder. I looked round at Sonia: she had tears in her eyes. She closed her lids tightly and the drops, deprived of their resting place, trickled down her face. I squeezed her hand gently.

‘I am ..’ she began, ‘... overwhelmed by... by these people.’ She brushed away the tears with the back of her hand. ‘All these thousands of years, living in peace, and now... they *have* to survive! We’ll help them, won’t we Bill?’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘And what about our own world, Sonia? If Mars falls, Earth may be next, whether they are right about Attila or not. We can’t let that happen!’

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### ATIK'S STRATEGY

Lumura conducted the meeting that followed. Atik, as Supreme Commander, took the seat on Lumura's right. Michu sat on his left, with Sonia at her side. Manu, as Similaria's Captain of the Guard, was on his father's right and Kul and I, as Lieutenants, sat next to Manu. Ben was on Sonia's left and Tim next to me. Kiko and Horos were asked to attend the meeting, as they would both be going out to outlying clans and would take with them the strategic plans. They sat opposite Lumura and completed the circle.

A prayer was said in accordance with custom. Then Lumura opened the meeting with a few words. He spoke in English for the benefit of the Earth people. All the Martians understood our language perfectly well.

'Friends, our respected Anterison Head, has given us a challenge, which I am sure we all intend to take up with total dedication. Do I speak for all?'

There was assent from all those present. Tim clasped his hands above his head and shook them vigorously.

'Good! Now, our Supreme Commander has already done a lot of training and, with our natural discipline, and with our Tae-kwon-do trainers' hard work, he is creating an effective defence force. Atik, tell us what you have done, and what plans you have for the defence of Similaria.'

'Brothers and Sisters,' said Atik, drawing himself up straight and surveying the faces before him. 'I am amazed at the response from the people of Similaria. I believe we will repulse the strong and highly trained soldiers of Zeronera. Zigismo is paying the price of self-isolation. We have a weapon they do not have, and I believe they are unaware that we possess it. That weapon is surprise.' Atik's eyes scanned the circle and he smiled. 'Surprise is one of the most valuable of all weapons, if used properly. Many a battle has been won using this weapon. Therefore, our strategy will be as follows...'

Atik then went on to elaborate his plan, which was to be set in motion as soon as Zigismo's troops were detected. Zigismo would certainly use invisible-enabled bubbles, in which he hoped to mount a surprise attack. Therefore, there was little time to prepare. All Similarians would have to be in a state of readiness at all times. The plan was simple and clear. How lucky we were to have an experienced soldier to lead us!

Lumura next called on Michu to explain her preparations to deal with injuries that may be suffered. Michu flashed her dark eyes and smiled a Michu smile.

'All the herbs we need are growing in the deep caves of Similaria,' she said, 'and the healing potions can be ready within a short time. Sonia has learned how to prepare these as well as any of our own people.' She turned her eyes to Sonia, who flushed. 'We have a small group of nurses who can be relied upon to work with selfless dedication. Let me say that we will not neglect injuries to Zeroneran soldiers. They too will be treated, that is for sure. They are Martians like us and deserve the same treatment. There is no more to say. We are ready.'

Lumura said a few words to Ben and Tim, encouraging them to continue drilling the younger clan members daily. The boys were in their element as instructors and promised to put in as many hours as necessary.

'Lumura,' said Atik, as soon as there was a lull in the conversation, 'I have another hope.'

'What is that, Atik?'

'We do not know how much opposition to Zigismo there is within Zeronera. Suppose Zigismo is overthrown.'

'Hmm, unlikely,' said Lumura.

'A slim possibility, I would agree,' said Atik, 'but nevertheless an outside chance. It may possibly save a lot of unnecessary bloodshed.'

'We cannot take it into our plans, Atik,' said Lumura. 'There's no time.'

'We cannot, I agree,' Atik replied, 'but it would save a lot of suffering.'

'Who is going to overthrow him? Tell me that!'

'One of his captains,' suggested Atik.

'Zigismo would have replaced you with someone utterly

loyal to him. Are there any other captains likely to do it?’

‘Only one that I know of,’ said Atik.

‘There, I think we can put such a hope out of our minds.’ Lumura threw his piercing gaze on Atik, who lowered his eyes politely, not wanting to argue further with an elder.

‘There is one other thing to announce,’ continued Lumura, ‘and that concerns the visiting American spacecraft, Opportunity II. At about two *somos* after sunrise on the 1<sup>st</sup>, it is due to land close to our own landing site. A bubble, suitably invisible, will be there to deactivate it. I know that our Earth-friends would be interested in witnessing the event. The Council has agreed that Bill, Sonia, Tim and Ben, together with the visitors we are expecting, will be invited to witness the landing.’ He looked round at us. His normally serious face showed the faintest of smiles. ‘Meeting ended,’ said Lumura, as he rose nimbly to his feet.

The boys were visibly thrilled at the news, as I was. I couldn’t wait for the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 7<sup>th</sup>, to see with my own eyes the landing of Opportunity II, though I had a brief pang of guilt. After all, many people had worked for years to send the latest Mars probe into space and they would be sitting in Mission Control at Cape Canaveral, with beating hearts, waiting for the moment when the legs of the craft sank into the red, powdery Martian soil. They would breathe a communal sigh of relief when they saw Opportunity II come to rest safely upright. And intense excitement would grip them as the first pictures came over the airwaves from the surface of Mars, and pride in their achievement would swell their hearts as the rover trundled over Martian soil. My guilty feelings soon dissolved, however, at the realisation that pictures of human life on Mars would very quickly lead to manned landings and disaster for our Similaria friends. There was no alternative but to deactivate Opportunity II. If only NASA knew what was coming!

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### TWO ARRIVALS

The first day of Surama 7 came at last. Ben, Tim, Sonia and I chatted excitedly as we waited inside the main entrance of Similaria for the group bubble to arrive. With us were two Similiarians I had not met, although I had seen them at the Council meeting. It was their job to vandalise Opportunity II. They talked to each other in Kisoro. Small and slim, both with pale faces, blue eyes and fair hair, they could have been twins.

There had been one hitch. Priam, who had gone back to Earth as soon as the Council meeting was over, communicated with Michu the following day from Moscow. He had just been in a meeting with Ivan Ivanovich, Dr. George and Prof. Resichenko. It had been a stormy meeting. Ivan had not mentioned their Mars trip and was solely concerned with Russia's bid for a manned landing on Mars before the Americans, and the impending collision with Earth of asteroid Attila. For the time being, it seemed, the Russians were not too concerned about the Zogg invasion of Mars, seeing it as something that was a long way from affecting them. Priam had become annoyed, which was very unusual for him. He had threatened to take Hermann out of Russia, at which Ivan started screaming, saying that Hermann was now Russian property. Ivan said Priam would not be allowed to see Hermann and that the scientist was close to perfecting his experiments.

Later, when they had all cooled down, and when several glasses of vodka had been knocked back, and an equal number of toasts to the glory of Russia had been proposed and executed, diplomatic relations were restored and the question of the trip to Mars was broached once more. Ivan had said it was inconvenient for them to come at that moment because Hermann was on the point of success. Priam had told him that if they landed on Mars before the American spacecraft, they would have the opportunity of seeing it put out of ac-

tion. Well, as you can imagine, that did it!

Priam later communicated with Michu and told her that Hermann thought he would be in a position to travel by 20<sup>th</sup> March, the day before the scheduled landing of Opportunity II. It was then agreed that, unless Hermann was not ready after all, they would lift off from Russian soil early on 20<sup>th</sup> March and be on Mars a few *somos* before nightfall.

The bubble appeared and we pushed inside one by one. The faint pink light of dawn could be seen on the horizon. Both Martian moons were in the sky, the largest one strangely irregular in shape. Both reflected the rays of the still hidden Sun, which would rise above the distant hills before long. By that time we wanted to be in a position near enough to be able to see the landing clearly. Of course, if the bubble was in invisible mode, the cameras aboard Opportunity II would not reveal our presence.

Only one uncertainty was there to cloud the morning. The Russians had not arrived the day before as expected. Hermann had absolutely refused to stop work, saying he was hours away from a breakthrough. Priam had communicated again to say they would wait until Hermann was ready, hoping they would arrive in time for the Opportunity II landing, but not very sure if they would.

We sped up the rock-strewn side of the valley and onto the plateau. The bubble skimmed the surface, a few metres above the red desert soil. I looked towards the horizon where the sun was shortly due to appear. The sky was unusually red. I turned to the two Martians, who were also studying that part of the sky.

‘Why is it so red?’ I asked.

‘Dust storm,’ said one, whose name was Akrion. The other nodded his head.

‘Is it coming this way?’ Ben asked.

‘I hope no. If it is, we will have big trouble,’ Akrion said slowly.

‘Dust storms on Mars can cover big regions and can last for *suramas*,’ said the other man. ‘And being inside one is extremely dangerous.’

We were all looking at the dust storm on the horizon, silently hoping it was going in the opposite direction.

‘What happens if it *does* come?’ asked Tim, a worried ex-

pression crossing his face.

‘It depends on the wind,’ said Akrion, ‘how powerful it is.’

‘Yes,’ confirmed the other. ‘Winds can blow many hundreds of kilometres a *somo* and even small rocks can be blown into the sky. It would be very dangerous if we were unlucky to be caught in a storm.’

‘Oriko, we might have to return to Similaria if the storm comes this way,’ said Akrion. ‘And Priam will not be able to land. He would have to divert to another, safer place.’ He stopped and stared again in the direction of the storm.

Oriko spoke in a level voice. ‘Of course, if the dust storm attacks Similaria, Priam will not be able to come at all.’

We four Earth-people looked at one another. As the significance of this scenario sank in, we showed signs of group panic. Similaria: cut off from the rest of Mars, cut off from Earth too, Zigismo with freedom to subjugate the rest of Mars. What if the storm lasts for more than twenty Martian days? The Zoggs arrive, and Similiarians, the leaders of the resistance, are powerless to do anything. The Russians are left to deal with Attila, and ignore Mars completely: surely the Almighty was not going to let that happen.

‘If you believe in prayer, now is the right time,’ said Akrion.

For the rest of the way to the landing ground, there was complete silence in the bubble. Every so often, we would look across at the horizon, where the Sun was soon due to show its face. But the red dust would mean we would not see the Sun for some time.

The bubble came to a halt.

‘We are there,’ announced Akrion.

The flat, red, pebble-strewn surface of the plateau stretched away in all directions, eerie and desolate. The Sun still had not appeared, obscured by the gigantic cloud of red dust, hovering threateningly over the distant horizon.

‘I don’t think it has moved any closer,’ I said to Ben, who was sitting beside me.

‘It can stay just where it is,’ he said pleadingly. ‘It looks kind of grand.....in a menacing kind of way.’

‘No sign of the Russians yet,’ remarked Sonia, sweeping the landscape with narrowed eyes. Her freckled face was

flushed with excitement.

‘No,’ agreed Akrion. ‘And Opportunity II will land soon.’ As he said it, all eyes turned up to the sky, searching for the enormous parachute that would slow the landing craft down and bring it softly to the ground. So far we could see nothing but the pale sky.

‘Akrion, can we be seen?’ I asked.

‘No, we have been in invisible mode since we left Similaria. We are no longer allowed to travel any other way. We do not know if invisible Zeroneran bubbles are around here, spying on us. You understand?’

‘Of course,’ I replied. It occurred to me then that Zigismo may also have known that the American spacecraft was landing that morning. I chuckled to myself at the thought of an invisible Zeroneran bubble, sitting right next to ours, none of the occupants of either bubble having any idea of the others’ presence. Then I thought: the first one to discover a way of ‘seeing’ another ‘invisible’ bubble without being seen, would have a strong advantage. I put it to Akrion.

He just laughed and said, ‘Do you not think we have thought of that?’

We sat there waiting, surveying the surrounding desert, searching the sky and watching the dust storm anxiously.

‘How will we know when Priam’s bubble lands, if it is invisible?’ asked Tim.

‘I have just had a thought wave from Priam,’ said Akrion. ‘In less than half a *somo* he will be here. We will both flash visible mode until we stand together.’

Suddenly, Sonia cried out. ‘I can see it! There! Up there! See!’ She turned her head towards me, and her red pigtailed swung with the rapid movement of her head.

We all strained our eyes in the direction of her pointed finger.

‘I see it!’ shouted Ben excitedly.

We could all see it now, a small object suspended from a large, white parachute, floating gently down towards us, but as yet still hundreds of metres above us. It was still high enough to reflect the pale rays of the Sun, even though that glowing ball was still hidden from our eyes by the dust storm. But there was still no sign of Priam’s bubble.

Down came the silvery, angular spectacle. Clusters of

round airbags hung underneath to cushion its impact. It was close enough now to see the US flag proudly displayed on its side. And then, a cloud of red dust, at once carried away in the slight breeze, hailed its arrival on Martian soil, barely a hundred metres from where we watched, spellbound. The parachute deflated and drifted off to its own resting place. The multi-million dollar lander rocked briefly before settling, its multi-million kilometre journey finally at an end.

I could imagine the jubilation in the control room at Cape Canaveral: the joyful cries, the enthusiastic hugging and clapping, the hearty congratulations. Another pang of guilt hit me as I remembered what Akrion and Oriko had been sent to do.

‘Priam is about to land,’ announced Akrion.

We all tore our eyes from the latest arrival and looked up into the sky, but nothing could be seen. Then, suddenly, it was there, a bubble, with several figures inside, streaking towards the ground, as if to crash. A second later it disappeared again. The next ‘flash’ and it was on the ground, no more than thirty metres from us, only to vanish again. Another few seconds passed and our two bubbles were side by side in the red dust.

‘*Dobraje ootra,*’ said a disorientated Ivan Ivanovich, as he stepped into our bubble. He was followed by two equally disorientated Russian scientists. Hermann, his little eyes peering through his round glasses, entered next, quite uncertain where he was, while Priam brought up the rear. Their bubble vanished as soon as he had stepped inside ours.

We greeted one another enthusiastically, and Ben and Tim were introduced. There was a lot of shaking of hands, except that Akrion and Oriko bowed and kept their hand behind their backs. I explained this quickly to the Russians and they understood. Nervous smiles showed on their faces and some attempts at bowing were made. I knew how they felt, being suddenly thrust into a very strange environment and meeting Martians for the first time. Priam, as far as they were concerned, was just like an Earth person, but of course, Martians working on Earth took care to treat their skin with the cream Priam had told me comes over the counter at Boots the Chemists.

‘Is that the American thing?’ asked Ivan in disgust, when

he had collected himself.

‘Yes,’ said Oriko, ‘do you like it?’

Ivan gave Oriko a strange look and grunted. ‘It will not work. Look at it! It is as dead as a finger nail!’ He looked at his colleagues for support.

‘*Da!*’ agreed Professor Resichenko, with derision.

‘*Eta nje harasho!*’ laughed Dr. George. ‘That thing is not going to work!’

The two Martians looked at each other and I could see they were puzzled at the vindictive attitude displayed by the Russians.

Just at that moment the landing craft shuddered. Akrion shouted something to Oriko in Kisoro. Immediately, our bubble moved off in the direction of the alien metal object. Then the two Martians pushed one by one through the skin of our bubble into one that formed around them, and then separated itself from ours. In less time than it takes to draw breath, the new bubble had expanded and enveloped Opportunity II, leaving it entirely enclosed.

‘There,’ said Akrion triumphantly, ‘as he suddenly appeared inside our bubble, with Oriko behind him. ‘We have put the American intruder out of action. Nothing will be seen through it. The monitors in the control room will show nothing and they will think their equipment has failed.’

‘Aha!’ cried Ivan, clapping his hands with glee. ‘I like that!’

‘What about the rover?’ I asked Akrion.

‘We have sealed all the openings. Nothing can come out.’

The three Russians joined hands and started singing a Russian song, much to the surprise of their Martian hosts.

‘A toast, a toast!’ yelled Dr. Kaznikov.

Ivan felt in his pocket and pulled out a small metal flask, which he proceeded to unscrew. He held it in the air, shouted something in Russian and then took a swig. He passed it to his lady colleague. The Professor glanced at her watch to see if the hands had moved sufficiently to allow it. Then, realising that time on Mars had no relation to the time on Earth, gratefully took hold of the flask and held it to her lips. Dr. George, having no such strict rule, took a good swallow of the fiery liquid, prompting a frown from Ivan, who may be pardoned for thinking that his precious stock might not last

until his return to his native country. We others declined to join the toast and Ivan did not show the slightest sign of insisting. The toast over, he returned the flask gratefully to his pocket. The three of them chatted in Russian.

The Sun, which had risen above the cloud of dust a little earlier, once again disappeared from view. The Martians studied that part of the sky anxiously.

‘It is time to go home,’ announced Akrion. ‘The storm is getting closer.’

It was true, and we all knew it. The dreaded storm had moved nearer.

The bubble moved off, leaving Opportunity II abandoned in the desert, to lie for ever on the dry Martian plain, derelict and dust covered. If the storm did pass that way and turned out to be a severe one, the pride of NASA would be whipped up and blown around like a flimsy, empty paper bag, to be smashed and mangled. Its fate could not then be attributed to Martian interference.

As we sailed steadily towards Similaria, all eyes were on the approaching storm. The wind was freshening. I could feel the bubble rocking slightly and thin dust was blowing across from left the right. But we were now speeding down the hill towards the entrance to the cavern and in a moment we would be safe from the storm.

Safe for now! But the fears may return to haunt us. With Similaria cut off, we knew the dangers. We knew that Operation Stargazer was in jeopardy. And we knew we were powerless to influence this work of Nature.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### THE MAGNOBILE

‘It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to Similaria,’ said Zeris in his deep, soothing voice. He bowed his head, allowing his long white hair to fall forward over his shoulders, cloaked in black.

‘We are happy that we are here,’ replied Ivan, bowing his head slightly. ‘I speak for my two comrades, Professor Emilia Resichenko, renowned nuclear physicist and Dr George Kaznikov, eminent scientist and inventor.’ Ivan swept his arm ostentatiously, as if to lift the two scientists onto pedestals large enough to justify pride of place in Red Square in Moscow, Russia’s capital city.

‘And we are honoured to have with us the famous Professor Hermann Winke,’ said Zeris, ‘whose brilliant mind is contributing as much to our knowledge of the Universe as Albert Einstein’s.’

Hermann, who had been lost in his own world, stirred at the sound of his name, and looked in the direction of the welcoming voice. He removed his round glasses and thrust forward his round face, his mouth disappearing into his untrimmed moustache, and his eyes sinking into their sockets. He wiped the lenses with a handkerchief, which he drew from a trouser pocket, and replaced the spectacles on his little nose. Then he peered round at the assembled seated figures. I wondered if the cleaning exercise had actually improved the quality of his vision.

While Hermann was engaged in this operation, Dr George was fingering his big brown pipe, stroking it lovingly, raising it automatically to his mouth and then lowering it, conscious of the fact that smoking it in Similaria was out of the question. He kept looking into its large bowl, with a frown that caused his great bushy eyebrows to meet in the middle.

The Professor, perched precariously on top of five cushions, the only way she could be persuaded to sit comfortably, kept glancing sideways at her companion in science. Al-

though a non-smoker herself, she knew how hard it was for him to be without the pungent aroma of blue smoke curling around his red face. Finally, she patted his arm affectionately, and he slid the pipe regretfully back into his jacket pocket with a sigh. But he patted the pocket periodically, as if afraid his pet would escape and run away.

Ivan meanwhile was studying the ceiling of the chamber in which we had gathered to introduce the visitors to the two elders of Similaria.

‘The technology came from an ancient Earth civilisation,’ I was telling him proudly, as if I had made them with my own hands. In truth, I knew no more than he did why the crystals gave light. But there were many things about Mars that I could not fathom. There was the fresh water system: there was the extraction of oxygen from water. Then there was the cultivation of fruits and vegetables in bubble greenhouses, from which oxygen was transferred to the subterranean cavern of Similaria. I knew that there were many questions in the minds of the scientists, and they would want to know the answers. But how would one explain the mystery of bubbles that belonged to the pages of science fiction books? You might as well be telling them how Indian Masters materialise objects with a wave of their hands, or dematerialise their bodies, only to appear in another place moments later. It is done, there is no trickery involved and that’s that!

During this time, Zeris was holding a whispered conversation with Lumura and Atik, the subject of which I could only guess. Michu, who was sitting next to Atik, was listening intently, nodding now and again, her bright eyes full of life.

Zeris cleared his throat, as a means of gaining the attention of the circle, and looked around before speaking.

‘I know we are all dying to know the results of the scientific experiments that have been going on without respite over the past months. Ivan, please tell us, in plain and simple language: how far have you reached?’

‘Very well,’ said Ivan. ‘We have a prototype ready for testing. Its simplicity is astonishing.’ He shook his head from side to side. ‘It looks like a cross between a power boat and a shoebox. I can not describe it any other way. There are hardly any controls to be seen; amazing! No rocket motors, only two

screens, a small instrument panel with a few dials and flashing lights and switches; incredible! Why I say it resembles a shoebox is because it is square at the front and back...' Here he squared his hands to demonstrate the shape, '... square, completely against the principles of aerodynamics.' He had some difficulty with the last word. 'And here is the secret.' Ivan grinned roguishly, his pockmarked face flushed with excitement. 'The front and back panels are composed of...'

He turned to Hermann, for him to reveal the secret. 'Magnetised panels!' shouted Hermann, punching the air with his right fist.

'Magnetised panels?' whispered Atik.

'*Da!*' cried the lady Professor, clapping her hands so furiously that she nearly toppled off her pile of cushions.

Dr Kaznikov forgot about his pipe momentarily and beamed.

All eyes were on Hermann.

'Didn't I tell you it was simple, so simple, Mr Priam?' The inventor was looking everywhere but at the one he was addressing.

Priam was smiling. He was the one who first had faith in Hermann, when everyone else thought the German scientist was a loony, a crackpot; completely barmy.

'But friends,' warned Ivan, suddenly becoming serious, 'we have yet to carry out tests. We must not count our turkeys before they are born.'

I couldn't resist a laugh at Ivan's expense.

'Tests!' cried Hermann indignantly. 'Are you suggesting my creation will not work?'

'No no!' uttered the scientists in loud unison, waving their arms at Hermann.

'Of course not,' said the nuclear physicist, 'we are only saying...' But she was not permitted to finish the sentence.

'It will work!' cried Hermann again, and thumped his fist on the floor.

Ivan had no alternative but to assure us all that Hermann's pride and joy would definitely work, but there was the tiniest degree of doubt in his voice.

Hermann had now become excited. He launched into a completely incomprehensible explanation of the theory behind his invention. I caught words like 'attraction' and 're-

pulsion' and 'ten to the power ten magnetisation,' but by and large I was completely blinded by science. The Russian scientists followed his speech with frequent nods and 'da's'. When he had finished, the three Russians cheered him heartily. Ivan reached into his pocket, hesitated and then decided against it. I knew he wanted to propose a toast to the glory of his homeland but then guessed it wouldn't go down well.

Priam now spoke. 'Zeris, if I may be allowed to, I would like to put into simple words....I mean words, what our eminent Professor Winke has told us in scientific jargon. What it means is this.' He paused and waited for some response from the Russians, but none came, so he proceeded.

'The panels are highly magnetised, meaning that they have the power to attract or repel, depending on the circumstances. The front and back panels can both be reversed, avoiding the need to turn the vehicle round. I am not talking about the power of a common magnet, ladies and gentlemen, but a magnetic power beyond our wildest imaginings. Any object, provided it has a significant mass, can be attracted or repelled, even at a very great distance, by Hermann's... what should I call it...? space vehicle ...? spaceship...? shoebox...?'

'Magnobile,' said Hermann matter-of-factly.

'Magnobile,' echoed Priam. 'This marvellous piece of ingenuity is mounted on a swivel that slots neatly into a solid base. In its fixed position it is a powerful weapon. Aimed at an approaching asteroid, or anything else for that matter, its power is astronomical. It has such a strong attraction that it can pull the asteroid right into... Well, hmm, one would hardly want to do that. One would actually use the repulsion panel on an asteroid heading for Earth. But, ladies and gentlemen, the beauty of this shoebox... er... Magnobile is that it can be detached from its base; detached, do you hear me? Depending on whether you want to repel or attract, the panels of the Magnobile can be turned accordingly. You can even repel in both directions or attract in both directions at the same time. Its repulsive rear end, pardon the term, zooms it into space, where it becomes thousands of times more effective, without the influence of the Earth's gravity, you understand. In space it can operate, according to our genius, at a distance of more than five hundred million kilometres from its target. It is with this capability and the opposite power of

attraction that we hope to throw the Zoggs off course, exactly where to, I am unable to say, and Attila too, when it comes close enough. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the bare bones of Hermann's invention. I only hope it works.'

'It vil vork, it vil vork!' cried Hermann.

'I am sure it will work, Hermann,' said Priam soothingly. 'I am only saying we have to carry out tests. Ladies and gentlemen, I am sure you will agree that this incredible creation, if used correctly, has the ability to solve most of the problems facing us.'

There was silence. I tried to imagine what the Magnobile looked like. Then I attempted to figure out how it could be magnetised enough to be able to deflect seventy-five kilometre wide asteroids. I was afraid I would remain with the skeptics until tests proved positive.

'Friends,' said Zeris, 'as you know, since the exile of our ancestors from Earth all those thousands of years ago, we have shunned technology.'

There was no sign of surprise from the Russians and I realised that Priam must have explained to them the origin of the inhabitants of Mars.

Zeris continued. 'We have no metals, no machines, no weapons, no artificial materials, only the cloth from which our tunics are made, and that is not produced on Mars. We have survived on fruit, simple vegetables and fungus and we have remained healthy and content. But we understand that to combat the technologically advanced societies that threaten us, we must accept the assistance of others who have taken a different and more complicated route from us, but who respect our rights to live the way that suits us.'

The Russians listened and I could tell that they were impressed by Zeris' eloquence.

He went on. 'Societies on Earth have opted for industrial progress, and it has given them machines, materials and medicines that have made life more comfortable and have made communication simple and cheap. But that progress has brought with it unexpected and unwelcome problems: overpopulation, rivalry, jealousy, famine, mass starvation, the appearance of new and deadly diseases, desertification, destruction of forests, global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, etc. etc. You have only recently realised the damage

that is being done to your environment by your destructive lifestyles, and many of you are now taking steps to reduce the damage. But you have left it very late. It will take a miracle to reverse the trend. But friends, I believe in miracles. It is still possible if you work together.'

'True,' agreed Ivan. 'What you say is very true, Zeris. We in Russia are now committed to preserving the environment. It was not always that way. Under communism,' he spat out the word, 'under communism, industrial development was all that mattered. Pollution went on unchecked. But under the wise leadership of our present Government, we are at the forefront of environmental protection.' Ivan was surprised at his own eloquence and command of English.

There were nods of agreement from the other two Russians.

'But beware!' Zeris cautioned, raising his hand. 'Our ancient civilisation destroyed itself by pursuing material progress at the expense of all other aspects of life. The majority of people forgot God completely. *Don't* make the same mistake!'

Those were powerful words and the gathering was suitably impressed. I tried to imagine what that society must have been like, and how much pain must have been suffered by the people at the time of destruction.

Some further discussion followed on some of the practical aspects of the deployment of Magnobiles, the speed at which trials could be carried out, and how quickly further Magnobiles could be made and put into service.

'But there is very little time to conduct trials,' said Dr George.

'Right!' agreed his colleague. 'In thirty-five days, Attila will be upon us and...'

'It vill vork!' cut in Hermann. 'Zere is absolutely no qvestion, no qvestion at all; it vill vork!'

'...and we hardly have time to build more machines,' said the lady Professor.

'We will not stop,' said Ivan emphatically. 'We will need them against the Zogg invasion, even if we have only one Magnobile at the... the time Attila...' He seemed too overwhelmed to finish. Could the vision of a monstrous rock looming into view be too much for him? But his composure

soon returned.

Atik spoke. 'Brothers and sisters, the odds are heavily stacked against us, but we must not give in.' Everyone took up the words of Atik and confidence slowly returned to the meeting.

'We must go back to Earth,' said Ivan suddenly. 'We have so much to do.'

'I am afraid you will not be able to leave until the storm has passed over,' said Zeris sympathetically.

We had forgotten about the storm raging outside. Deep inside Similaria, there was no way of telling what it was like above ground. Ivan became dejected again.

'Fortunately,' continued Zeris, 'we are near the edge of the storm. We should be clear in a day or two. Of course, we cannot be sure, but we must not lose hope. It is only a pity that you will not have time to do the sightseeing we had planned for you. I do understand your need to return to Earth as quickly as possible. But you will come back to Mars in less anxious times.'

At that moment, a young Martian appeared. It was Diana. She approached Zeris, bowed and spoke to him.

'Friends,' said Zeris, 'we thought you would be interested to hear the news from Earth. Diana has been browsing the internet, and has come to tell you what NASA has announced to the press concerning Opportunity II.'

There was excitement around the circle at this news.

Diana stood behind Zeris and delivered the statement as if she were reading it.

'Cape Canaveral, March 21. Opportunity II, NASA's latest unmanned probe, made a successful landing on Mars this afternoon. The sophisticated module, carrying high definition cameras and a host of scientific instruments, landed in the Chryse Planitia at precisely 15.46 EST. Immediately on landing, Opportunity II's camera and recording equipment were deployed. The four wheeled rover is expected to roll out as soon as a minor technical problem has been solved. NASA is confident that the minor hitch, which involves the release of the main door of the module, will be resolved soon, paving the way for the most extensive exploration of the surface of Mars yet undertaken. It is expected to provide answers to many questions, and finally silence the speculation that life

exists on Mars. Further bulletins will be issued in due course.'

While Diana had been speaking, Ivan had been smirking to himself. Now that she had finished, he turned to his compatriots and muttered something in Russian. The three Russians laughed.

'What we did to it, had to be done for our own survival,' said Priam softly and with some suppressed anger in his voice. He understood what had been said in Russian and expressed his disapproval. 'I don't agree with heaping scorn on the efforts of others. In Similaria we do our duty but we respect the ways of others who choose another path.'

'Enough,' said Zeris kindly. 'Now...'

Another interruption. As Diana left the chamber, another girl entered, looking tense. She bowed to the circle and then to Zeris. She knelt beside him and whispered in his ear. I was unable to make out the words but I sensed fear in her voice and her lips quivered. For five minutes she remained in that position, hands joined in front of her. At first, Zeris listened calmly, but then he became more and more worried and his pale face took on an even paler hue. It is bad news, I thought. Finally she rose and left the chamber.

All eyes were on Zeris now. Many scenarios flashed through my mind: red dust storms mingled with four-wheeled rovers, landing Zogg spaceships and giant asteroids.

'Friends, do you want the good news first, or the bad?'

We all looked around at one another.

'Good news first,' I said.

'The good news is that we are on the very edge of the storm. It will have passed by tomorrow morning. Ivan, you will be able to return to Earth and complete your work.'

Ivan nodded. 'And the bad news?'

'The bad news is... well, it is not really bad... we knew it was coming sooner or later... anyway, the news is...' I sensed Zeris was searching his mind for the right words; words that would deliver the news in the most humane way.

In the end he said simply, 'Zigismo has made his move. He has already conquered the ten clans nearest to him. Brothers and sisters, the time has come for action.'

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### WAITING FOR ZIGISMO

Coming from a Tae-kwon-do session in the Grand Hall, Ben, Tim, Sonia and I met Manu walking towards us up the steep gallery towards the dining area. He was wearing the orange scarf, signifying the rank of Captain of the Guard of Similaria. He greeted us warmly with low bows.

‘How is the weather?’ I asked him.

‘The storm has subsided, fortunately for us,’ he replied.

‘And the Russians, did they get off okay?’

‘Yes, they have gone, Priam too. I provided them with an escort as far as the landing ground. We cannot take chances, with Zigismo’s forces on the move. Bubbles have to be switched to visible mode for initial liftoff. Anyway, they are safely on their way to Earth.’ Manu suddenly chuckled to himself.

‘Can we share the joke?’ said Tim.

‘Ivan...’ said Manu through the laughter, ‘Ivan couldn’t wait... As soon as they were inside the space bubble, I could see him with his bottle to his lips.’

‘Vodka!’ I laughed. ‘Russians love their vodka.’

‘Like the English and their tea,’ said Sonia. ‘And their beer.’

‘And,’ continued Manu, suddenly becoming serious, ‘George, he wanted to light his pipe in the bubble. Priam was shaking his finger at him. One thing you must never do in a bubble is strike a light. The bubble could burst. The lighter should have been taken from him when he first landed here.’

The merriment subsided at those words. Of course, Martians, except those who had been to Earth, did not know fire, as there was not enough oxygen on Mars to allow combustion to take place. They had no heating apart from naturally heated water. Anyway, there was nothing much on their planet that was combustible, except bubbles obviously. Volcanoes would have spewed fire in their time, but that time was long gone.

‘Did you see any Zeroneran soldiers?’ asked Ben.

‘No, but of course their bubbles would be invisible,’ Manu explained.

‘Manu,’ I asked, ‘how did we get to hear the news about Zigismo’s attacks on the other clans?’

‘From refugees, Bill. Some people from Atria and Zerovia escaped in group bubbles and they were taken in by another clan, Astrova, I believe. One young Zerovian came to warn us. Those clans over there in Utopia were totally unprepared and they surrendered to Zeronera without a fight.’

‘And the ones who didn’t escape?’ asked Sonia.

‘Taken prisoner,’ said Manu. ‘They are being kept in Atria until Zigismo decides what to do with them.’

‘The beast!’ said Sonia through clenched teeth.

‘How many clans are there in Utopia?’ I wanted to know.

‘Oh, I think around twenty-five,’ said Manu. ‘Zigismo should have no problem mopping them up. It’s a pity we didn’t get as far as Utopia with our Tae-kwon-do training.’

‘Damn shame!’ cried Ben.

‘But some of them came here to our classes, I thought,’ said Tim.

‘That’s right; two or three weeks ago,’ agreed Ben. ‘But it takes more than that to master the art, and more time still to organise themselves into a fighting force.’

‘By the way,’ I asked Manu, ‘did you see Opportunity II?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Manu. ‘But it’s now on its side, blown about by the strong winds. Looks pretty damaged too.’

‘And what does NASA say?’ I asked. ‘Have they issued any more statements?’

‘They have just told the truth, Bill. Storms are a real hazard, and at least the disaster was the work of nature and not NASA’s fault. But listen,’ said Manu, more seriously, ‘it will be our turn soon. As soon as Zigismo has dealt with those Utopia clans, he will be moving this way. Are we going to let him defeat us?’

‘No!’ said Ben with determination.

‘No way!’ said Tim emphatically.

‘Not me!’ said Sonia defiantly.

‘Me neither!’ was my reply.

‘Good! Now, you all know your orders. We must be ready and organised. This is the time for discipline. Now I must

eat; I was up early this morning.'

Manu continued on his way to the dining room. Sonia said she had to report to the sleeping area that had been set aside as a temporary hospital to house and treat the injured. Ben and Tim set off towards the Grand Hall for another Tae-kwon-do training session, while I headed in the direction of the chamber designated as the military HQ, where I was to meet Kul, my fellow officer.

I was to learn later that, as we prepared that morning for the inevitable invasion, Zigismo's troops had already overpowered the remaining clans of Utopia and were regrouping for an attack on the clans of Chryse Planitia, and his highly trained fighters, more than four hundred, were receiving final instructions from their commander.

Kul was waiting for me. He was a slim, handsome young man, about my own age, in Martian years that is. The top of his head stood level with my shoulder when he held himself erect. He had dark hair and dark eyes, perfect teeth and the usual pale, almost translucent complexion. He was one of those who had progressed amazingly at Tae-kwon-do, but was not among those appointed trainers, as his leadership skills were such that Atik and Manu had specifically asked for his promotion to officer.

We bowed to each other as I entered the chamber.

'Kul, let's see if we remember everything.'

We went over the instructions we had been given. After some time Manu appeared and Kul and I repeated them to him.

'Good!' said Manu, 'I think we are ready for them. Let them come soon: the suspense is killing me!' As it turned out, Manu was to be away from Similaria at the time the Zeronerans attacked.

A permanent watch had been placed on the entrance to Similaria. I had asked why they could not prevent the enemy from gaining access to the shaft. I was told that all entrances to underground communities on Mars were permanently open to all, and that there had never been the need to prevent anyone from entering, since the people of Mars had never known anything but peace. My prayer was that Zigismo and the Zoggs would be driven out and peace would once more reign on the Red Planet.

The plan was this: at the first sign of the enemy, a signal would be sent to two guards stationed midway up on either side of the cavern. They would in turn signal to others located further back and each arm of the defence force would be alerted within seconds. At that time, everyone would take up their prearranged positions.

There was nothing to do now but wait. So we waited, expectantly, nervously, for the signal. Nothing happened that day, or the next. We were all on tenterhooks. The slightest sound would make us jump. We ate more quickly than usual, bathed more quickly than usual and slept with eyes closed but minds and ears open, all the time conscious that, at any moment, the signal could come that would see us all scampering in different directions. The attack could come by day or by night, so while some slept, others watched and waited. Similaria was unusually quiet. People went around solely or in small, nervous groups.

Due to the alert, the game of *Sombrillo* that had been planned for that day was postponed. But Ben and Tim continued with Tae-kwon-do training for an hour each morning and another hour in the afternoon: it kept them on their toes and maintained their confidence, and the confidence of their students.

On the following morning, that is two days after the departure of Priam and the Russians, I was making my way along one of the galleries, the uneven wall of the cavern on my right and the rough retaining wall on my left, when I heard a shout from far below, the sound echoing, reverberating around the interior of Similaria. I stopped, routed to the spot for no more than a few seconds. Then, realising what that shout meant, I leapt to the retaining wall and peered down into the far end of the cavern, towards the entrance, my eyes searching for the source of the sound. Far below me, a small figure was shouting and gesticulating wildly. Further up on the other side of the cavern, another was now calling, hands cupped to his mouth. Simultaneously, I heard another series of shouts from a little way down on my side. The sounds crisscrossed and mingled, echoing around the enormous interior of the cavern, as if they came from every single part of the Universe.

The attack on Similaria had come at last. Our days of

waiting were over.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### FIRST BLOOD

I started to run, skipping and jumping over the uneven, rocky surface of the gallery, in the direction of my designated post. As I galloped down the steep path, scarcely giving thought to the danger of falling and injuring myself, I could see and hear other Similarians hurrying to their own positions, some silently; some calling to others. I passed a young woman hurrying up the slope on her way to the area set aside for those who were not part of the defence force. She gave me a word of encouragement as I swept past her and I responded, hardly turning my head as I did so.

In less than two minutes I had reached the chamber that had been shaped out of the rocky wall of the cavern, halfway between the Grand Hall and the entrance to the vertical shaft leading to the hostile outside world. On passing through the narrow opening of the chamber, I saw that three young men had beaten me to it. We greeted one another, nervously; breathlessly, and immediately several more men and two women hurried through the entrance. Their faces were tense. Within seconds, the remaining seven came, one by one, each carrying with them their fears and expectations. Now my platoon was complete: eighteen young and not so young determined Similarians; eighteen people, who had never in their lives had to face an enemy; never had to fight for the future of their society. But now they were bracing themselves for the fight of their lives. They knew the odds, they knew the risks, but they also knew the rewards of victory.

‘Now, calm your minds,’ I said to them. ‘Remember what you have been taught, and use it intelligently. Do not fear the size and strength of the Zeroneran soldiers: they have been trained to fight using their strength. You have been trained to use your speed and agility, and your intellect. May the Almighty be with you.’

I positioned myself just outside the entrance to the chamber, to see better the action down below. My platoon re-

mained at the back of the chamber, awaiting my command. Looking down, I could see a group of our fighters standing fifty metres from the entrance to the cavern, poised for action.

Suddenly, a number of figures burst out from the base of the shaft. I could tell instantly from their build that they were Zeronerans. I drew in a sharp breath. The group I had seen a moment before had already hidden themselves. The Zerone-ran soldiers stood together: eight of them, upright, legs apart, fists clenched across their chests. Less than a minute later they were joined by another eight, who took up positions beside the first. They stood together, sixteen men at the ready. Another eight soon made a company of twenty-four. My heart pounded against my ribs and my mouth went so dry I could hardly swallow. They looked a formidable body of men. Would they pound us into the dust?

It was obvious that their initial force was complete, for they immediately split into two groups; one took one path up the far side of the cavern, while the other group of twelve marched across to the path leading up our side. How many more soldiers remained outside, I had no idea. I guessed that this first body of men was a test of our resistance, and would be followed by more troops.

In accordance with the plan, I rejoined my platoon at the far end of the chamber. We all pressed ourselves against the walls and remained motionless, waiting for the thud of tramping feet. Soon the sound reached my ears, the steady stomp, stomp of sandaled feet, drawing nearer and nearer, competing in volume with the thumping of my heart. They passed the entrance of the chamber and the noise gradually faded into the distance.

I stuck my head cautiously out of the narrow entrance. Across the far side of the cavern I could see the other group of enemy soldiers, marching briskly in tight formation up the steep slope, disciplined and proud. From further up I could hear the sounds of wailing. It didn't cause me pain because the wailing was part of the plan, to lull the enemy into a false state of confidence.

We stood inside the chamber at the ready, and we waited. I was trying to imagine the scene in the Grand Hall, where Ben and Tim and their crack team would be waiting for the

arrival of the Zeronerans. It was now that the result of months of training would be given its final test. With Manu temporarily absent from Similaria, Ben and Tim would be hard-pressed to overcome the invaders. I stood at the entrance to the chamber, straining my ears for the slightest sound, and prayed for my friends.

From high above came the faint sound of bodily movement: thumping, scuffling, and the indistinct murmur of voices, louder calls and the occasional screech rising out of the general hubbub. After a few minutes, the level of noise suddenly increased. Then I saw them: they came running down the gallery towards us, the Zeronerans, four or five. No, seven, eight. Behind them, I could see a band of our fighters, Ben in the lead, chasing the fleeing soldiers. When they were fifty metres away, I gave the command and our platoon of eighteen eager Similarians stepped out into the path and blocked their way. As they saw us, they slackened their pace and their pursuers did the same.

Eight soldiers approached us slowly, drawing themselves up to their full height. But they had received a setback and their confidence had been dented. As the first four men came within five metres, ten of our number retreated to the chamber, leaving just eight to face the foe, four behind four. Ben and his group waited behind them: they had done well, but now they looked all in.

I braced myself for action. Suddenly, one of the Zerone-rans leapt at me. I dodged him and, as he lunged at the air, I took hold of his arm and twisted it with all my might. At the same time, I knocked the legs from under him. He went down and took me with him. I managed to break free of his grasp and stood up, waiting for his next sally. He was off guard, unnerved at my agility. My arm shot out, then the other, then one leg, and then the other. He was caught on the jaw and he reeled. But he soon recovered, and came at me again. I twisted round and sent a kick into his face, sending his flying to the floor.

I was so engrossed in my own individual battle that I was hardly aware of the other fights going on around me. Now, while waiting to see if my opponent would rise from the floor, I saw that six of the enemy had been lured into the chamber, and furious tussles were going on there. But my

own battle resumed. My opponent, furious at not having put me out in one move, charged at me with surprising speed and I was knocked against the short wall that separated the path from the sheer drop to the floor of the cavern below. I managed to hold onto a jutting out piece of rock, which saved me from plummeting to my death. He was onto me again, pinning me down. The rough rock dug into my back and I cried out in pain. The soldier's face was inches from mine, his mouth frozen in a determined grimace. He raised his fist: I saw the end of my life seconds away.

Suddenly, he was not there. I heard an ear-splitting scream, which trailed off and then ceased altogether. The soldier's face was replaced by that of Ben, leaning over me.

'Are you okay, Bill?' the pale face asked anxiously.

'I think so,' I managed to say doubtfully. 'But my back; I think I've hurt it.'

Ben turned me round to see the extent of the damage.

'It's nothing very serious; a few gashes, but you'll need to get it cleaned up.'

I turned my head to see three Zeronerans disappearing down the path, glancing over their shoulders every few strides. Behind them was a gang of jubilant Similarians, with flaying arms and victorious shouts, not anxious to engage the fleeing trio, but encouraging them to continue their flight. Having seen off the enemy, they returned, panting and smiling.

I got to my feet and took stock of our situation. Out of my platoon, there were three injuries apart from my own, two minor and one woman with a dislocated shoulder. The enemy had fared considerably worse. Four of them lay inside the chamber, bound tightly. One had blood streaming from his head, where it had struck the floor. Another was muttering quietly to himself.

'We have twelve prisoners in the Grand Hall,' said Ben, bending over the injured woman. 'We had better get this one to the hospital.'

'I will see she gets there,' said one of my men. 'Come, Saran, help me.'

'That's right,' I said, 'and the man with the head injury too.' Then I called out to Ben, 'what happened to the one I was fighting?'

Ben motioned with his head in the direction of the retaining wall. 'He went over.'

'With a bit of help from you, I think.'

Ben nodded and hung his head. 'Maybe, but honestly, I didn't mean...'

'I know.' I squeezed Ben's arm gently. 'Poor soul!' I crossed to the balustrade and looked over. Down below, I could see a little figure lying spread-eagled on the floor of the cavern, surrounded by several equally small figures. I looked down at the entrance to the shaft and noticed that the three enemy soldiers, who had fled from our battlefield, had surrendered.

Ben and I hugged each other.

'Hadn't you better go back up to join your group, Ben?' I suggested. 'As soon as they know their first attack was unsuccessful, they will send reinforcements. We have won the first battle, but the war is not over. We must not become overconfident.'

'You're right, Bill,' said Ben. He went off to round up his men and they marched back up the path towards the Grand Hall.

I took the remaining fifteen members of my platoon back into the chamber. We sat and rested, knowing very well that another attack could come at any time. One important thing was in our favour. Atik had told us that Zeronerans' ability to read minds had been mostly lost, as a result of their adopted lifestyle. This meant that those troops outside Similaria, however many there were, may only know about the success or failure of the conquest of our clan if one of them managed to get out to report. This, as far as I knew, had not happened. Another contingent of their troops, sent to ascertain the result of the first attack, would not be far behind.

We did not have long to wait. The sentry I had posted outside suddenly appeared at the doorway.

'Another attack!' he yelled.

We were on our feet in a trice.

'How many?' I called out.

'Eight so far.'

'More will come: keep me informed.' I wondered then why it had not been decided to send a group to attack the first eight Zeronerans, before the second batch descended the

shaft. I decided it would have caused too much confusion, and it was better the way we had decided.

I stood in front of the remnants of my platoon.

‘Now, forget the first attack,’ I told them. ‘They don’t know our strategy: we follow the same procedure as...’

‘Sixteen now!’ cried the sentry.

I repeated my words. ‘We follow the same plan as before. Those are the orders.’

‘Twenty-four!’ the sentry reported.

We waited expectantly.

‘Thirty-two!’

I wondered how many more Zeronerans we would have to fight. With a total of no more than fifty fighters on our side, we would soon be outnumbered.

‘Forty! And they are moving!’

The sentry came to the doorway of the chamber. ‘Twenty this side and twenty the other, I think,’ he called.

‘Let it be a hundred,’ I said. ‘We will knock them all to Zogg!’ I tried to back up my words with inner courage, but I hardly felt the confidence I was thrusting on my men.

As before, we retreated from the entrance and waited. The second Zeroneran raiding party passed by. This time, the sound of sandals on the rocky ground was louder. Have faith, Bill! I was telling myself.

Some time passed before the sounds of the battle in the Grand Hall reached my ears. There was no way of knowing who had the upper hand. How I wished to be there, side by side with Ben and Tim. I felt left out. I should not have felt that way. I could not hope to match the skills possessed by my school friends. And in any case, my part in the plan was to harass the retreating invaders. But what if there were no retreating invaders? What if our forces were being overwhelmed? We had been told by Manu to hold our positions, Kul on his side and I on mine, until we received a message that we were needed in the Grand Hall, at which time, in coordination with each other, we would march there in good order, to reinforce Ben and Tim’s group.

Time passed and I became anxious. I guessed that our fighters were not having it all their own way. I signalled in a prearranged code to Kul across the cavern. He returned my message, saying we should wait. But, immediately, another

message flashed across to me. It was a sign to move. With as much bravado as I could muster, I led my men smartly up the path towards the Grand Hall. Kul's platoon kept pace with us, separated by the whole width of the cavern. I did a quick count and was shocked to see he had only eight men, which added to my fifteen, made a total of twenty-three.

As we drew near, I could hear the sound of fighting. Passing into the Hall, our two platoons side by side, I quickly took in the scene. Furious tussles were being played out in the centre of the hall. A number of figures lay about the stone floor. I caught sight of Tim as he leapt nimbly over a prostrate body to avoid a charging Zeroneran. Wham! A foot darted out like lightning and his opponent went sprawling to the floor. My eyes searched for Ben but in the melee he was not to be seen. I turned to Kul.

'Do we attack?'

'Wait!' cried Kul. 'Divert their attention!'

'Right,' I agreed.

We set up a hullabaloo, enough to wake the dead; twenty-five open throats issuing forth a noise equivalent to a hundred angry stampeding elephants, or so it seemed to me. The result could not have been more effective. The Zeronerans stopped and turned *en masse*. We charged, keeping some distance between each of us, with the intention of appearing more numerous, and to give us more space to engage individual fighters. The diversion gave Ben and Tim's men time to collect themselves. As the Zeronerans moved raggedly in our direction, their erstwhile opponents attacked them from behind. Several enemy soldiers went down. They didn't know which way to go; whom to fight. And that was their undoing. With arms and legs flying, we lay into the enemy.

Within ten minutes, there was not one standing. Tired but joyful, Similarians were trussing up their bewildered captives like Christmas turkeys, with rope they unwound from around Zeroneran waists.

But our joy was short-lived. From the entrance to the Grand Hall came a figure, running and shouting, not in English but in Kisoro. But there was one word I knew well. I turned sharply to Kul, who was beside me. My blood froze in my veins as I heard his words.

'More Zeronerans,' Kul reported, 'and this time there are

many of them.’

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### BATTLE OF THE GRAND HALL

The task of binding the rest of the prisoners was attacked with increased urgency. Those engaged in this activity worked frantically, urging one another on. Heads shot up periodically to take in the scene, hoping against hope that the enemy was not about to come streaming into the hall and praying for extra seconds to complete the work, knowing that one more soldier immobilised was one less soldier to fight.

My mind went back to the time of our second escape from Zeronera, to the herbs we used to anaesthetise the guards; the leaves for sleeping. If only we had those. But they were Zeroneran herbs, unknown in Similaria. Why didn't the enemy use them? What a weapon they would be! Perhaps they considered them unnecessary, hand to hand combat being the manly way to fight. On the other hand, could we be about to see those dreaded herbs in use? I was grateful that my fellow fighters were ignorant of this possibility.

Our injured had already been carried over into a chamber at the side of the hall, where two women and two boys were attending to them. Our casualties were surprisingly light, or perhaps it was not surprising: the training they had received included learning how to fall on hard stone floors.

Meanwhile, Kul and I were organising our men into four groups. We put Ben and Tim in charge of one each and Kul and I led the others. The former two groups were to advance towards the enemy and engage them. The Zeronerans would not have had time to know our fighting methods and would be surprised at the ferocity of the attack. What happened next would depend on how many Zeronerans we were dealing with.

And so we waited. Outwardly I may have looked as solid as stone, but inside I felt more like jelly. My heartbeat kept time with the drumming in my forehead and my throat was as dry as the desert sands. It was then that I wished Manu was there with his men.

Then the Zeronerans came, marching three abreast, one line, two, three, four, five... and still they came. My legs began to shake. I turned to Kul, at the head of his group. He glanced at me and smiled ruefully. With or without Manu, we can do it, I knew he was thinking. The advancing troops, having room now to spread out, stretched sideways to make rows of six, but they kept close, making it difficult for our fighters to find enough space to engage individuals in combat. There were nine rows now, fifty-four soldiers, marching as one, arms crossed on chests, fresh and ready for conquest, compared to our forty battle-weary amateurs.

I saw Ben and Tim whispering to each other. Then each gave orders to their men, and immediately they spread out in a flanking movement. This was a move we had practiced many times. Momentarily suspicious, the advancing formation slowed and then came to a halt. Twenty Similarians, sixteen men and four women, stood in readiness, several metres apart, all dressed in grey tunics, all barefooted; twenty lonely defenders facing fifty-four closely grouped Zeronerans. Neither side seemed in a hurry to make the first move.

Silence reigned in the Grand Hall, save for the occasional groan of an injured man and the sound of struggling from bound prisoners, who lay around the feet of us remaining twenty Similarians, watching from further back in the hall. Should we advance? I glanced across at Kul. He turned immediately but his face was expressionless. So we waited.

The tension was electric. It was beginning to tell on the enemy: there were signs of restlessness, heads turning, feet moving, hands wavering from chest positions. On the contrary, the twenty young people facing them remained bravely firm. This was psychological warfare. Fearful as they were inside, the defenders showed an outward calm that surprised and delighted me. On the other hand, doubts must have been chasing one another round the fifty-four Zeroneran minds, trained to fight with their physical strength, but not used to such situations. I was sure that, with only a handful of fighters, they easily overran the weak clans of Utopia, making them believe they were invincible. They must have thought: what are these people going to do? Why aren't they shaking with fear at the sight of us? What secret weapons are they hiding?

Suddenly, one of the Zeronerans in the first row, who must have been their commander, stepped out of line. He shouted something in Kisoro. Hearing this, Kul, as the senior officer, stepped out from among the prostrate forms and walked calmly down the hall towards the speaker. Stopping about twenty metres from the enemy commander, he replied in Kisoro, in a loud and confident voice.

Then Kul spoke in English. 'Fellow Similarians, the Zeroneran has asked us to surrender. He says we will be well treated.' Kul raised his voice and stretched his arm above his head, his hand clenched. '*Inon dereza?* 'Do we surrender?'

There was a unanimous 'Naaaaaaaaa!' from the throats of forty fighters. The sound echoed round and round the chamber, coming back to the ears of the Zeronerans time after time, wave after wave, long after the mouths that had uttered that single word had closed. Kul turned and nonchalantly walked back to his position. As he passed me, he flashed me a smile of encouragement.

The Zeroneran officer gave the command and his men spread out to engage the waiting Similarians, who were outnumbered more than two to one. Meanwhile, Ben and Tim's groups moved slowly outwards, creating the space they needed. At the same time, Kul's groups and mine moved forward to fill the gap. This move meant that the Zeronerans had opponents on three sides. It was then that we charged them, Kul's men and mine. Although they were superior in number, the enemy had now to fight on three fronts. Ben and Tim's men took advantage of the enemy's brief confusion to attack, with all the extravagance they could muster. Arms and legs flew like swifts and lithe bodies darted in and out like striking cobras, twisting and turning. From behind the surprised invaders, Kul and I brought in our contribution to the confusion in their ranks.

But they were tough and we were tired, however determined we must have seemed to them. And they were superior in strength and in numbers. We fought bravely, but I could see our fighters were flagging. We were losing the battle. Ben went down with a cry of pain as a Zeroneran fist caught his jaw in a moment of lapse in concentration. I leapt onto the back of Ben's opponent, as the man bent to finish him off. With all my might I squeezed his throat with my right

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arm. He flailed his arms in an attempt to shake me loose, but I held on, squeezing as hard as I could. The pain in my back from the scratches suffered in the first battle hurt me now, but I shrugged off the pain. Finally the man sank to his knees as the oxygen in his body gave out. Ben was shaken, but he staggered to his feet, briefly massaged his jaw and bravely sought another man to tackle. I was about to shout to him, to warn him to be careful, when something came crashing down on my head. That was the last thing I remember. For me the battle of the Grand Hall was over.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### MISS NIGHTINGALE THE SECOND

‘Stay still and don’t complain so much.’

‘But, Sonia, that stuff stings.’

‘You want your back to heal, so keep still,’ said the nurse with the freckly face and red hair. ‘I still have that lump on your head to bathe. Oh, Bill, stop turning round!’

‘But I want to have a good look at Florence Nightingale.’

She lifted her eyes in a gesture of mock contempt.

‘None of those Zeronerans has made as much fuss as you.’

‘I notice you getting on well with them,’ I said, with a touch of jealousy in my voice.

‘Rubbish,’ she muttered, but she blushed.

‘I’ve seen you talking to those two there. What do you talk about, the weather?’

She laughed, but then she bent over and put her lips to my ear.

‘Actually,’ she whispered, ‘I have been doing some undercover work. You’ll be surprised to know that many Zeronerans are anti-Zigismo, even in the Army. Those two don’t want to go back, Bill. There, you didn’t know I was a spy in my last life, did you?’

‘Cool,’ I said, turning round to look Sonia in the eyes. ‘By the way, you have beautiful eyes, Florence.’

She slapped me on the shoulder and blushed again. ‘I have a lot of injuries to deal with,’ she complained. ‘I can’t give you all my attention. Now let’s have another look at your bump.’ She bent my head roughly, as if to punish me for my comments, and examined the red lump that had put me out of the battle of the Grand Hall. ‘Does that hurt?’ she asked, applying some liquid.

‘Ouch! Yes!’

She bathed my head and made me lie down on the stone bed. Then she went off to attend to another wounded Similarian, whose head was bandaged in grey cloth, some ripped up

uniforms, I guessed. I lay and watched her, thinking how strange it was to be here on Mars. I remembered the first day I met her in the local library. What a long time ago it seemed. What would her father say if he knew she was tending wounded Martians with a devotion she couldn't have felt for dusty old library books? There was no doubt she had found something she was good at. Dear Sonia, how I loved her!

Manu had come into the ward earlier to see me. He had told me the story of the rest of the Battle of the Grand Hall, as it was now being called. Our fighters had given their best but had found the Zeronerans just too much for them. At the moment the battle was clearly turning against us, Manu had appeared with reinforcements; a contingent of forty men from a neighbouring clan. Manu had gone to meet the captains of that community and, while he was there, he had received in his mind a message from Michu that Similaria was under attack and he should return. He had been offered help and had accepted gratefully. The reinforcements had come just in time to turn the tide. All the Zeronerans had been overpowered and taken prisoner. Those on both sides who had been injured were now in the dormitories that had been converted into a temporary hospital.

'I can't stay long Bill,' he had said. 'I'm on my way to an urgent meeting with Lumura and Atik on the current situation. There is no knowing whether Zigismo will risk another attack on Similaria. He has already lost nearly twenty percent of his Army. We think he is likely to attack other clans in this area; clans he thinks are weaker. Atik has been checking on their readiness, and has offered assistance.' Manu had laughed. 'We may be the only ones who can really stand up to him. But he can't afford to lose men at the rate he has so far. That's why we think he may prepare for another attack...' Manu's face had creased in a worried frown as he said... 'Using his secret weapon.'

'Do you know what it is?' I had asked him.

'That's the problem: we don't.'

'Are you sure he *has* one?'

'He has, that's for sure,' Manu had said.

Then I had enquired after Ben and Tim.

'Ben was slightly hurt, otherwise they are fine, Bill. Wonderful fighters! You all did a great job.'

‘I wouldn’t have missed that battle for all the gold in the world.’

Manu had gone hurrying off, leaving me happy to hear that my friends had come out with no serious injury, but sad at having missed the climax of the battle and final victory. Then I had begun wondering what Zigismo had up his sleeve; what kind of secret weapon he was about to unleash on us. It must be something deadly for it to poison his water supply.

Michu had also come to talk to me. Her dark eyes had flashed as she asked me how I felt.

‘Good, thanks,’ I had said, ‘and all the better for seeing you, Michu.’

We had talked for no more than two minutes, chiefly about the battle, when she had said she needed to get back to work.

I was now feeling much better. Sonia and Michu were in and out of the ward, hurrying about, giving instructions to the other nurses working with them. I got up from the bed and wondered over to the two Zeronerans whom Sonia had befriended.

‘*Ekinome!*’ I ventured in Kisoro. I bowed slightly. Too much movement still sent shooting pains through my head.

They smiled. One of them, a man about Atik’s age, with fair hair and a trimmed greying beard, sat up and leaned on his elbow. The other was lying full length on the bed, unable to sit. He was younger, with a pale, handsome face, dark hair and attractive dark brown eyes. No wonder Sonia liked him.

‘Your Earth-friend; she is very good for nurse,’ said the older man.

I nodded and smiled, an unwelcome feeling of jealousy invading me.

‘Similaria people; they good fighters,’ he continued.

‘But you are also good,’ I said to him.

The other soldier tried to speak, but it was difficult for him.

‘We are teach to use strength: Similaria people they use...’ He tapped his head and I understood his meaning.

‘Tae-kwon-do,’ I said, exaggerating the pronunciation of the words.

‘Tyk...’

I repeated the words and went on to explain to him where

the art came from and how my friends from Earth had trained Similarians. He was impressed.

‘Your friends; they teach us,’ he suggested, indicating his friend in the bed beside him. It was not a question, but a statement.

I was uncertain what to say. After all, these men were part of the army that had been sent to destroy Similaria. The man understood my dilemma. He laughed.

‘We no go back there: that Zigismo he no good for Zeronera.’

I looked at him and then at the prostrate figure on the bed.

‘We go back only to fight him. Captain Atik; he great soldier and leader. He take us and we fight that Zigismo. Anyway, my name Sondor and he, Arctur.’

‘My name is Bill.’ I was beginning to like these two soldiers.

Sondor continued. ‘We teach Tyk... Your friends; they teach us and we all go together to Zeronera and we fight that Zigismo.’

‘But Zigismo is bringing power and glory to Zeronera,’ I countered, expecting him to reveal the realities of life there. I was not to be disappointed.

‘Ach! Zigismo he rule like... like tyrant, you say. No good air, no good food; no good anything. Always: ‘don’t do this or that.’ Sondor shook his head solemnly. ‘We no visit family in other place: we no see children.’

‘Yes, and he wants to make slaves out of other clans too,’ I added.

‘Ach! Zigismo no make slave of my children. I eight children, all old now and I no see them... how many years? Fifteen?’

‘But Zigismo has called the Zoggs from Altair to come to help him,’ I prompted.

‘Zogg, they no want Zigismo; they want power. Zigismo he no see; he blind.’

‘But the Zoggs are already on their way to Mars. In thirty days they will be here.’

‘Zeronera people we fear Zogg.’ He looked around him, as if a Zogg were about to pounce on him, like a cat on a mouse.

‘Do you know what they look like?’ I asked him.

‘We never see Zogg, ever! We not know how Zogg they look.’

‘But surely Zigismo knows what they look like. How can he invite beings to work with him if he doesn’t even know how they are?’

‘He know, but he no say. He meet Zogg once, also Kazak. They go together in bubble: they meet Zogg out there.’ He waved his arm to indicate outer space. ‘Zogg they come to see how they get Earth for them. They have big ship; many chambers for sleep and it stay there, no move.’

‘How do you know all that?’

‘One friend he hear Kazak say Zigismo he make promise with Zogg leader, he called Kogogouogok, but we say Kogo. They agree Zogg they get Earth and Zigismo he get Mars. They be friends and help each other. That what they agree. We no trust Zigismo, or Kogo.’

I put my hand on his pale arm.

‘First, we must overthrow Zigismo, then, with all the people united, we will repel the Zogg invaders.’

Both Sondor and Arctur looked pleased. Just then Sonia came past.

‘Sonia!’ called Sondor. ‘Your Earth-friend; he help to fight Zigismo, and then we fight Zogg together.’ Sondor was like a dog with two tails.

Sonia flushed. ‘When you’re better,’ she said, and continued on her way.

‘Rest now, Sondor,’ I said. ‘We’ll talk later.’

I went back to my bed. I lay down and stared at the crystal-studied ceiling, but my mind was far, far away, at the gates of Zeronera, at the head of an army of a thousand Martian fighters, bristling for battle, with Ben and Tim at my back, about to overthrow the dictator of Zeronera and unite the people of Mars.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### NEWS OF ALBERT SMITH

Dreams are often better left as dreams: that way we can make them go the way we want. Once dreams become reality, they have a habit of sliding away from us, out of control. Real people become involved, rather than shadowy figures that slip in and out of the action according to our will. Each one of those real people has a dream of their own, in which we are probably as pliable as they appear in ours. Conflicts were never meant to enter into our dreams, but conflict is never far away, and it is sure to mar the dream's perfection when it becomes reality, just as unwelcome consequences come to spoil the results of foolish acts that are carried out at the time with innocent enjoyment.

I knew I could never command an army to liberate Zeronera from Zigismo's rule. But I had no doubt now that it could be done, and Atik was the one to lead. He knew Zeronera like the back of his hand, he understood its dictator and his ways and, above all, he was an experienced military tactician and could count on the loyalty of his men.

The next day, an emotional meeting was held in the Grand Hall. Present was not only the entire Similaria clan, except a handful who were still receiving loving care from the nurses, but many veterans of Zigismo's army, who had, as one man, pledged to rid the planet of the dictator of Zeronera. Also present were representatives from many other neighbouring clans, equally determined to contribute to the fall of the Martian who had threatened to turn them into slaves.

'Brother and sisters!' Zeris boomed in his commanding voice. 'People of Anterison, we have come together today in friendship and solidarity.' Zeris had already made a speech in Kisoro, and was now giving the same in English.

'The days of Zigismo's tyranny are numbered. With the promise of support from within Zeronera and the combined strength of our clans, Anterison now has the power to bring to an end his reign of terror. Once again the people of Zero-

nera will breathe fresh air: once again the people of Zeronera will enjoy the fruits the Almighty has given them: once again the fathers of Zeronera will know their children: once again the children of Zeronera will receive love from those of other clans who fathered them: once again the people of Zeronera will live in peace, and pursue the age-old traditions of Mars.’

Zeris surveyed his listeners. A murmur went through the audience seated there in the chamber, and it increased in volume. One woman, who was sitting in the front row, stood up and bowed politely. Then she spoke in a soft voice that hardly carried to the third row in which I was sitting. She sat down again.

‘Marika asks about the Zoggs,’ Zeris told us. ‘Let us not concern ourselves with them yet. First, all the people of Mars must unite. Only united will we have the strength to face that threat from Altair.’

There was a murmur of agreement from the gathering.

‘Atik will lead the forces of Anterison, as soon as he has organised himself. He will give Zigismo as little time as possible to strike with his secret weapon. For the first time in our long history, and I hope it will be the last, our peaceful people will take up arms against another clan. But we have no choice, dear brothers and sisters. Now that evil has raised its ugly head and threatens our very existence, we would be failing in our duty if we did not do all in our power to crush it. May Atik and his army go with the protection of the Almighty! Meanwhile, we must be ready to resist any attack Zigismo may make against us. Let us not be complacent. Victory is not yet ours!’

Later, when the meeting had ended and we were streaming from the hall, I joined Ben and Tim, and we were part of the sparkling, chattering river of humanity. The mood had lifted with Zeris’ emotive speech. Confidence pervaded the whole of Similaria.

‘Hey Bill!’ Tim came up beside me and slapped me on the back.

‘Ow, careful! That’s sore!’

‘I just want to say thanks to you, man.’

‘Thanks for what?’ I asked.

‘For getting us the invitation to Mars. I could never have dreamed in a million years we could’ve had such a great time

throwing Martians about.'

'Forget it, mate! Without you guys, Similaria would've been squashed. These people are so peaceful: they had no idea how to fight before you came.'

'But that's how wars should be fought, isn't it?' said Ben. 'No guns, rockets, tanks, grenades: no horses, not even a measly stick, just bare hands.'

'And brains,' said Tim, slapping me on the head.

'Ouch, that hurts!' I cried.

'What's up with 'im?' said Tim to his brother. 'You can't touch 'im anywhere.'

'Anywhere but the two places you've just hit me on. I suppose you don't have any injuries, you two?'

'Not me anyhow,' said Tim, carefully inspecting his body. They both laughed.

'So you'll be joining Atik's army then?' I suggested.

'Do you think we'll be allowed?' Tim said.

'Have you asked?' I enquired.

Tim looked at his brother. 'Well no, but maybe we should, eh Ben?'

'Yes, we should. Let me find Manu.' Ben went off in search of the Captain of the Guard.

'No seriously, Bill,' said Tim, 'when I think of the fabulous time we're having here and I think of those poor guys stuck to their desks, I... I have no words.'

'Tim,' I said, 'these are not games: this is serious business. A civilisation of thirteen thousand years is at stake. Ziggismo is real, not some invented character in some comic strip, and the Zoggs; they are real too. If they are as powerful as we are made to believe and they succeed in defeating the Martians, their next target is our own planet, that is, if Earth is not blown to smithereens on 25<sup>th</sup> April. However much you are having a great time, don't forget it's for real.'

'You're always too serious, Bill. Anyhow, point taken.' At once, Tim assumed a sober mood. 'Of course I know it's for real,' he said. 'It's so damn real, it's scary as hell.'

We walked in silence for a while. Both of us were wrapped in thoughts of the dangers that still lay ahead.

'Let's go to visit the hospital,' I said suddenly to Tim.

'You mean: let's go and chat up the nurses!'

'If you like,' I said.

‘Actually, it’s my favourite pastime,’ he responded with a whoop.

We made our way to the temporary hospital. As we entered the first ward, we met Michu and Sonia standing together at the foot of a bed where a man lay sleeping.

‘Hello, you two,’ I said.

‘Hi there!’ said Tim, with more volume than was necessary.

Michu bowed and smiled at us.

‘Don’t speak too loudly: this man is still sick,’ said Sonia, her finger to her lips.

I looked at the face of the sleeping man. He was very pale. I surveyed the ward, which was now practically empty.

‘I see you’ve been healing,’ I whispered to Sonia.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘we’ve discharged most patients. These herbs we are using; they are amazing.’ She spoke with a new kind of voice; the voice of someone who has the wellbeing of the whole world in her heart.

‘Sonia, when we get home, why don’t you become a nurse?’

‘I have thought about it, Bill,’ she said with a smile. ‘By the way, do you remember Mrs Rogers?’ She drew me to one side, away from the sick man.

‘Of course I do.’

‘Priam has told Michu, who has told me, that my father has been visiting the library. You remember, Priam said he would look him up and tell him I’m okay? Well, Priam says Dad’s a new man. He told Priam he had gone to talk to Dawn about me and they had somehow hit it off, you know, they became friends, and well, Dad has changed.’

‘Changed how?’ I asked.

Sonia laughed. ‘He has smartened himself up: he doesn’t drink or smoke anymore. It seems the lady has had a good influence on him.’

‘That’s cool!’ Then I said, ‘So it’s Dawn, is it?’

‘Yes. Dawn Rogers. You didn’t know?’

‘She’s always been Mrs Rogers to me. But isn’t she already married?’

‘Was,’ said Sonia. ‘Husband died five years ago.’

‘You never told me.’

‘You never asked,’ she replied, looking pointedly at me.

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I shrugged. 'And is your dad working?'

'He got his job back at the Post.'

'Wow!' exclaimed Tim. 'A miracle!'

'I know,' agreed Sonia, 'and he never had a good word to say about the place.' She gave a quick laugh.

'I'm *so* happy for you,' I said to Sonia.

'Thanks. Now, I have work to do.' She reached up and gave me a kiss on my cheek. Then she was off down the ward, her red pigtails swinging in time with her hips.

'A happy girl,' said Michu, giving me a warm smile.

'Yes, a happy girl,' I repeated.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### THE RIBBON OF DEATH

Three days later, after flitting around the Chryse Planitia like a butterfly on a summer's morning, Atik announced that he was ready to march against Zeronera. Actually, 'march' was hardly the right word, since the troops would be gliding to the battlefield in invisible bubbles, but the word had become fashionable in Similaria at that time.

When Ben had asked Manu if they could join up, Manu had said he couldn't imagine them going without the two trainers who had contributed so much, but the decision was theirs: there was no compulsion. And if Bill (that's me) was willing to go, he would also be welcome. So, after discussing the matter, we all decided to join Atik's army and see the war through to its conclusion, whatever that was to be.

The morning of departure arrived, and Similaria was a hive of activity. Contingents of eager young men and women had been arriving from nearby clans, swelling the army of liberation. Atik was busy discussing tactics with Manu and the other captains. Kiko and Horos had returned from their tour and would be going along. Kiko, as Atik's second in command, was inspecting the arrivals, assessing their readiness for battle. I was to command the same platoon as before, and Ben and Tim were each put in charge of a platoon of their own. Sondor, the soldier I had met in the hospital, was one of Tim's men. Arctur, who had been in the hospital bed next to Sondor, was still not fit for action.

Group bubbles, big enough to carry twenty men, were to be provided by Similaria. This bubble was the largest permitted, for maneuverability and safety reasons. These bubbles were preprogrammed to take us to the entrance to Zeronera and would be dispatched at short intervals to avoid the risk of collision, because the bubbles, as well as those travelling inside, would be invisible. On that subject, I had questioned Manu and Michu at different times and their answers had been similar: why was it that bubbles never went inside the

caverns? The answer had been that they just didn't work there. I really couldn't understand why not. Bubbles travelled through space and also into the Earth's comparatively dense atmosphere, but I was reminded that space bubbles were very different from those used for low level flying. Who was I to argue? In life there are things one has to accept: one cannot understand everything. But it occurred to me that Hermann could help them develop anti-collision facilities for their bubbles, using his repulsion technology. Or maybe bubbles were beyond the reach of technology.

One hundred and forty souls lined up for departure later that morning. The galleries overlooking the floor of the cavern were dotted with old people, children and those whose duties inside Similaria would keep them inside. The onlookers were mostly silent. There were some who waved and some who wept. Mothers held small ones up so that they could see. Older children stood and marvelled, while a few chatted excitedly.

Sonia was there too, her red hair and pink complexion contrasting sharply with the paleness of the others. I knew what was going through her mind. Never was she likely to forget the traumatic days spent in the damp, dark, noxious atmosphere of Zeronera. Her future husband was about to risk his life in an invasion, the success of which was far from certain, despite the confidence displayed by the army of Anterison.

Never in the history of their civilisation, had there been such a scene as on that morning, the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> *Surama* of the Martian year 7445. Never in all their long history, had an army gathered in Similaria to bear arms (not to be confused with armaments) against another clan. It was no wonder that the atmosphere was so emotional.

At last we moved off, twenty in each bubble, and at intervals of about two minutes; seven large group bubbles carrying their silent, tense cargo. The one in which I was riding climbed to a height of about a thousand metres above the sterile, red desert. Mars has a high iron content and it is the rusting, the oxidation of iron, that creates the red dust. I wondered to myself why Martians hadn't utilised the ore for making steel, but then they would need heat. The temperature on the surface of Mars never rises above about minus 30 degrees

centigrade and there is not enough oxygen in the atmosphere to allow combustion. And then I was happy that they had not entered the industrial age, with its catastrophic consequences. It was enveloped in those scientific daydreams that I passed the silent journey to Zeronera.

Since we had no idea how many soldiers Zigismo had to defend his empire, and how many would desert him on seeing the liberating army arrive, and since his secret weapon was his best kept secret, Atik decided that he would lead half his force into Zeronera by the main entrance and wait for Zigismo to make a move. The bulk of our men would remain outside, until they were commanded to enter. Seeing Captain Atik in his Zeronera uniform may just convince some of Zigismo's men to defect, or at least weaken their resolve to fight against their former captain. My platoon was part of the advance party and the second platoon, after Atik's, to enter the hostile world of Zeronera.

Not knowing what to expect when we reached the bottom of the shaft, we descended in a state of mental and physical readiness. Atik had already gone down with twenty men in two batches, and we followed almost immediately. As I stepped out of the shaft into a small cave that I had not seen before, I saw that Atik and his men were lined up with their backs to us. Thirty metres away at the far end of the cave and facing us was a contingent of Zeroneran soldiers, thirty or more. Their leader stood a pace in front of the first of four rows. They stood just as I had always seen them, green cloth tunics and helmets and rough sandals, feet apart and arms crossed over their chests. Not one moved. Atik was addressing them in Kisoro, his voice reverberating around the small space. I knew he was attempting to convince them to defect to our side and help the forces of Anterison to displace Zigismo. There was no sign that his words were having any affect. Not a muscle could be seen moving.

The entrance cave, hardly worth the name 'cavern', was about forty metres long and about thirty metres wide. The ceiling rose more than twenty metres above our heads and was studied with crystals, like the ceiling of Similaria, except that the crystals emitted a pale, lacklustre light, giving the impression of sickness. There was no room for the network of pathways and galleries along the walls that made Similaria

so charming. Instead, the depths of Zeronera were reached by two wide passageways that exited the cave at the far end. The walls of the cave were tinged green and a strange, damp, caustic smell pervaded the atmosphere.

I noticed that Atik was no longer speaking. The echoes of his voice had faded slowly away, as if they had sunk into the damp walls of the cave. A heavy silence was left behind, broken only by the sound of water dripping slowly but steadily over to my right. Whatever thoughts were following Atik's words round and round the minds of those men, there was as yet no visible evidence.

Suddenly, the leading Zeroneran stepped forward smartly. He raised his arm above his head and uttered a few Kisoro words in a clear voice. Then he turned to his men and spoke quietly to them. Once again he took his place. Silence again. What had he said? I had heard the name of Zigismo, but had understood no more. But it looked like this bunch was not going to defect to our side. They remained motionless like wax dummies.

Then, to my surprise, a soldier standing at the end of the first line took one step forward, so that he was level with the officer in charge. No-one else moved. Then another from the second row pushed forward between those in front of him and stood next to the first man. Another soldier joined them, and then another. The leader who had spoken never moved a hair while this was going on, but finally, when the entire body of men had made their decision to join the first one, he pushed his way through the ranks and strode off towards the left hand exit. Then he turned to face us and once more raised his arm.

'*Zigismo ho!*' he cried with all his strength, his sentiments visiting every crack and cranny of the cave, lodging there for future generations to hear. Finally, silence reigned again. The officer swivelled round and marched into the mouth of the passage. His hollow footsteps faded away and he was gone.

Slowly and sheepishly the Zeronerans crossed the thirty metres of space between the two sides. They gathered around Atik, silently at first. Then a few murmurs and smiles broke out and before long the murmurs and smiles had become chattering and laughter. Atik was clearly overwhelmed by the response to his call to defect. There was some initial coolness

between Zeronerans and the clans making up our force, but after a while they were bowing and greeting one another like long lost friends.

Atik's new confidence in our chances of victory was obvious. In response to a message sent to the remaining men outside, they joined us. Atik called his officers: Manu, Kul, Kiko, Horos, Ben, Tim and I, and gave us a briefing, after which each of us grouped our men together. The Zeronerans made a separate platoon.

'Fighters of Anterison!' Atik began boldly, 'we march into the unknown. Zigismo still has a sizeable army, how big we do not know. What lies before us we can only wait and see. He claims he has a secret weapon, which he keeps hidden from all but his closest henchmen. He could use it on us at any time. We must be watchful. Be brave, fighters of Anterison! Together with those Zeronerans who long for freedom from tyranny, we shall defeat the tyrant. *'Ito Zigismo slo!* Does any man here deny it? Speak if you do!'

There was not a sound but the echo of his words. Then Kiko raised his voice.

*'Ito Zigismo slo! We will defeat Zigismo!'*

Another throat issued the same words, then another, and another. Soon, from every mouth came the words.

*'Ito Zigismo slo! Zigismo ban!*

*'We will defeat Zigismo! Down with Zigismo!'*

Atik held up his hands to restore quiet. Then, in Kisoro, he said a few more words of encouragement, before leading us off towards the passageway on the left; the one that the lone loyal officer had used a short time before.

The tunnel was wide enough for us to march six abreast, but the roof pressed down on us with an uncomfortable weight and the air was stagnant and oppressive, causing me to breathe more deeply to satisfy my body's need for oxygen. The walls were rough and patches of green with brown streaks bore witness to the humidity. Dim crystals gave enough light to see the way, but no more. As we wound our way gradually upward along the snaking passage, the air became fresher and the atmosphere drier. We met no-one. I began to wonder what Zigismo and his remaining loyalists were doing and what they were planning for us. Zigismo would already have heard the story of the mass desertions from the

officer returning alone. He would be angry; raving mad. I tried to imagine his livid face and realised I had never seen him. I was yet to have that pleasure.

The ground dropped suddenly and at the same time the roof rose higher above us, until we found ourselves in another small cave, its lofty vault shrouded in dark grey mist. Large orange-grey stalactites hung majestically from the roof like gigantic needles. From the floor beneath them rose their sister stalagmites, growing over the millennia ever upwards, as mineral rich water dripped from the needles above, drip by drip, drop by drop, depositing minute specks of minerals, speck upon speck. Eventually, after hundreds of thousands of years, the lengthening pinnacles would meet to form a solid column, giving a cathedral-like aura to the cave.

From the far end of the cave issued another tunnel, darker and more sinister than the last, and narrower too, stretching our small army of 170 tense souls into a long, thin line. It was practically dark, a few small crystals throwing only a dismal glow, like oversized glowworms. Another cave, and yet more tunnels, but Atik knew the way. I had the feeling I had passed that way before on one of my other visits to Zeronera. The last time I had been there, we had met Zeronera guards stationed along the way. Now the passageways were deserted. Strange, I thought. What is Zigismo up to?

Eventually, we came across the curtained doorway, through which I remembered passing with my escort on the way to our meeting with Kazak. The curtain was there but the doorway was unguarded. I could not understand why. Soon we reached the entrance to the long hall, but still we met no guards. Into the Great Hall of Zeronera we filed; slowly; gingerly; expecting at any moment to be faced by a... a what? We had no inkling of what trump card Zigismo held in his hand.

I cast my eyes to the far end of the hall. In the dimness, I could just make out the shapes of people, exactly how many it was hard to say. They stood motionless, like a block of cardboard figures. But what was drawing my eyes like a magnet lay between us and the cut-out assembly. It stretched like a pale red ribbon across the whole width of the hall and, at each side an archway was cut into the wall. The ribbon gave off a thin mist, pinkish in colour, and a faint caustic

smell that caught in the back of my throat.

Atik turned to Kiko and they exchanged words. Then they moved forward, motioning us to follow. As we approached the red ribbon, its true nature became evident. It was a river flowing gently, almost imperceptibly, from left to right, issuing from the left hand archway and disappearing into the right hand one. It was at least ten metres wide; too wide to jump across. The pinkish mist curled into the still air, its harsh odour biting my nasal passages, forcing me, and others around me, to cover our mouths and noses. We stopped, fearing that the foul vapour was toxic. The leading row pushed back, forcing those behind to do the same, until we were far enough from the river to remove our hands from our mouths. There we remained, waiting for the still distant crowd to make a move.

Out of the crowd, a cloaked figure was coming towards us, taking on a definite shape, distinct from the solid mass behind. As he drew nearer, I recognised him. He was the Chief of Security, Kazak. There was no mistaking his long black hair and black beard. He halted about thirty metres from the river, swung back his cloak, tossed back his black mane and shouted across to us. His voice sounded hollow and distant, due to the vast expanse above us.

‘I see the Earth-boys are with you. Therefore I speak in their tongue: I want them to hear what I say.’ He thrust out his right arm and pointed at the red river. ‘See that! Pretty, isn’t it? Nice red colour, just like your blood. But, my friends, anyone who touches it faces instant death. Ha! And death is shortly coming to all of you. But this is just a sample, this mild river, just a taste of the power of this *zofold*. Atik, Kiko, Horos, *orobani*, traitors, all of you!’ He spat out the names. ‘You will die a death that befits traitors. And you, Earth creatures, you think you will spoil my plans. You will never defeat me. There is no escape. All exits are blocked. Ha!’ And there is no way across here.’ He swept his arm in front of him, indicating the direction of the flow.

Instinctively, I turned to look at the entrance to the hall. How had they blocked the exits? Or was he just bluffing? Suddenly, a shout behind us made us all turn. There, spilling into the hall was a contingent of Zeroneran soldiers. As we watched, they kept coming, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, nine-

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ty, a hundred, I was losing count, and they kept on coming, one hundred and twenty, one hundred and forty, and still they emptied into the hall. I stared in horror, my blood turning to ice in my veins. We were trapped!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### ZIGISMO UNVEILED

On one side a poisonous red river, on the other a legion of Zeroneran soldiers, more than two hundred strong. And beyond the river a black-cloaked Kazak, his pale face creased in vengeful mirth. My eyes could not make up their minds which way to look, at the evil smirking Kazak or at the menacing army advancing slowly towards us. Time stood still. The nightmarish scene was wrapped in a mist of unreality. It had to be a bad dream. At any moment I would wake up to hear the birds twittering in the dawn light. But nightmare it was not.

Atik was rallying his men with a rousing battle cry that soared into the heights of the hall and came back to us in snatches. But still the Zeroneran troops came on, slowly but surely, aching slowly, as if they wished to extend our torment indefinitely. Kazak, beyond the ribbon of death, paced up and down, throwing his head back now and again and laughing his cruel laugh.

Then a curious thing happened. At first I could not comprehend it. Then I began to understand. The senior officer of the approaching army had raised his arm as a signal for his men to stop. I watched wide-eyed as he knelt down and placed his hands flat on the floor. As if they were cells of one body, all the other soldiers did the same. It took just a minute and the entire force was kneeling on the floor of the hall facing us. I could hardly believe my eyes. They were not going to fight!

I swung my head to gauge Kazak's reaction to this surprising turn of events. He was coming forward now, a shocked expression on his pale face. As I watched him, his face became paler and paler until it was as white as snow. A villainous scowl crossed his face and he ran towards the river. As he came within ten metres, he covered his nose and mouth with his cloak and stopped.

*'Orobani, orobani!'* he cried. His wrath was terrible to

behold. He stamped and shook his fist and yelled, but he knew he could not come any closer.

Meanwhile, the senior officer had risen and had come forward. Atik separated himself from us and advanced to meet his fellow Zeroneran. They bowed to each other respectfully, but full of emotion. They needed physical contact. They embraced each other warmly. At this, our men sent out a rousing cheer, fists punching the air above them. The opposing army followed suit, emitting a sound greater than ours. The combined volume was enough to bring down the lofty roof of the hall. It echoed up and down and round and round, sending Kazak into an even greater rage. He stamped up and down, swinging his black cloak this way and that, screeching like a pig under the knife and spitting fire.

Behind him, the assembly of figures that had previously been a lifeless mass was thrown into turmoil. Zeronerans were running about like a plague of mice suddenly discovered in the larder. Kazak strode angrily away from us in the direction of the confusion.

On our side of the river, the scene was one of intense joy. The bulk of Zigismo's army was now with us. Zigismo had unveiled his secret weapon, a poison so powerful it would kill anyone who came into contact with it. The river was just to show us its strength. Where did the river come from and where did it go to? Was it the means by which Zigismo had blocked the exits to Zeronera? How was he going to use this weapon?

I sought out Atik and I put my fears to him.

'Yes, Bill, you are right. We must be watchful. Zigismo has lost most of his army and more may desert, but now he has his back to the wall, he may unleash his weapon.'

'How are we to cross the river?' I wanted to know.

'*They* must have some means of crossing,' Atik said quickly, searching the roof above the river, his eyes straining in the dim light. He beckoned to the officer who had led the latest defectors and he spoke to him rapidly in Kisoro. Four eyes penetrated the vault above. They hurried off towards the river, covering their faces as they drew near. Then they returned.

'No sign of a way across, Aron,' said Atik. He and Aron crossed the hall to study the left-hand archway, from which

the river flowed into the hall. Then they crossed to the right-hand arch, trying to find some clue as to the means of reaching the other side.

At that moment a group of figures came running towards us from the far end of the hall. One of them called out in Kisoro to Aron. All eyes were drawn to the river, which was beginning to lose its colour. In a matter of seconds, the water became clear and then the flow lessened until it was a mere trickle. It was then I realised that the river had only been a few centimetres deep.

We wasted no time in crossing to the far side. The army of liberation, now nearly three hundred strong, marched triumphantly up the length of the hall, singing a rousing song as it went. A group of civilian Zeronerans came to meet us. The atmosphere was emotionally charged. Having joined together, the human wave swept onward towards the raised platform, where Horos and I had sat in the meeting with Kazak. There, in front of the high gilt chair, stood Kazak, his arms held by four strong guards. Atik, Aron, Ben, Tim and I approached him.

‘So, you have won!’ cried Kazak bitterly. ‘But your victory will not last. The Zoggs will come and you will all die.’

‘If that is so, you will die with us, Kazak,’ said Aron.

Kazak’s face suddenly lost its bitter aspect and a sly smile crept over his pale features. ‘But wait, friends,’ he smirked. ‘There is a way.’

‘And what is that?’ asked Atik contemptuously.

‘I can help you,’ said Kazak with a sly grin. ‘Release me and we talk.’

‘Talk?’ cried Atik. ‘We can only talk to Zigismo!’

‘Zigismo!’ cried Kazak equally loudly. ‘Zigismo has gone; escaped!’

Atik, Aron and I all looked at one another in disappointment.

‘So where is the tyrant; the despot; the murderer?’ I cried angrily.

‘I am here!’ The voice came from somewhere above us.

All heads shot up and all eyes focused on a figure standing on a ledge about fifteen metres above us in the rough wall above the raised platform. Behind him, against the blackness of the small entrance to a cave, were ranged five figures, per-

haps the last remaining loyalists.

Zigismo himself stood proudly, arms outstretched. He wore a deep red cloak, trimmed with gold, and held at the neck by a thick golden chain, linked by a large 'Z'. He wore a long, dark green tunic under the cloak, studied with glittering gems. His long bright yellow hair, flecked with black, hung down over his shoulders, and a long beard framed his pale face, from which two eyes glowed like burning coals. His mouth was set wide in an evil smile, showing a set of teeth, alternately white and gold. The gold teeth glinted in the light of a crystal just above his head.

'Ha!' cried Zigismo. 'You fools, all of you! Kazak, you are just like the rest: I have no more use for you. I wait for the Zoggs, and together we will finish all of you!' ... Zigismo's words were interspersed with Kisoro. 'You think I will surrender! Never! Never! ... I will be back to have my revenge. ... You will all become my slaves. Then I will conquer the Earth. ... Mars and Earth will be mine! *Zifaa yo!* All mine!'

Zigismo swept his cloak in front of him and bowed. 'Now I must go: I have work to do, but you will see me again soon; very soon.' And with that he turned and disappeared into the darkness of the cave, followed by his five guards.

Kazak yelled something in the direction of the disappearing Zigismo, struggling to free himself from the grip of his captors. But the arms holding him tightened their grip. Realising that Zigismo had gone, Kazak stopped struggling.

'Aron,' said Atik, when the noisy excitement of Zigismo's sudden appearance and disappearance had reduced to a level that allowed speech to be heard. 'Aron, who is the senior officer here?' He spoke in English for the benefit of the Earth people present.

'I am the senior officer here,' said the Zeroneran proudly, 'apart from you, Atik. You are the only one to lead us.'

Atik smiled and bowed graciously. 'And the members of the Council of Elders?'

'Alas, Zigismo disbanded the Council a long time ago. Have you forgotten?'

'No,' said Atik, and he mentioned three names, apart from Zigismo and Kazak.

'We should call a meeting and elect two more elders,'

suggested Aron.

‘Good! We shall do that without delay. But first, Aron, organise some of your men to check all the exits from Zeronera and make them safe. Then put a strong guard on all of them. Next, send a force to liberate the clans that Zigi conquered, and lastly, take me to the place where he kept his *zofold*. We must decide how to destroy it, so that it cannot pollute our water or our air any further. Then we will call the three elders to a Council meeting. All Zeronerans must attend. By the way, where are all the women and children?’

Aron was visibly distraught. ‘Atik, they were all locked away in the dungeons. Kazak said he didn’t want them to see the things he was going to do to the invaders.’

‘Get them released immediately.’

Ben, Tim and I looked at one another.

‘The beast,’ I said under my breath.

‘The monster,’ Ben said, grinding his teeth.’

Tim said nothing, but he walked over to Kazak and stood in front of him. Kazak glared at Tim with his fiery red eyes.

‘Tim!’ I yelled, ‘don’t strike him: you can’t hit a man when he’s held down!’

Tim turned to me and I could see the anger in his eyes. He stared at Kazak for a few seconds and then came back over to us.

‘It’s not worth dirtying my hands,’ he said with contempt, brushing his hands together.

A soldier brought round a stone jug of cool water. It was a welcome gesture after the excitement of the day. I drank the refreshing liquid with gratitude.

Atik was speaking again. ‘Aron, I thank you on behalf of the people of Zeronera for your good work. Now go and carry out my orders. Report back as soon as possible.’

Aron went into action immediately, dispatching his men to fulfill the commands Atik had given him.

Atik called Ben, Tim and I together.

‘Friends of Anterison,’ he beamed, ‘I cannot thank you enough for the work you have done. Now you must go back to Similaria. Take with you all the non-Zeronerans and report to Zeris what has transpired here today. My duty is here, but I will come as soon as Zeronera is safely established again. We still have a challenge to face, a possible invasion by the

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Zoggs, whom we had never set eyes on. I believe Zigi is no threat, for now at least, and Kazak will be kept locked away.'

We bowed to Atik and thanked him for his leadership, and most of all for his friendship. We were three happy young men, and proud too, to be taking back to Similaria the news of Zigismo's defeat. So far so good, but now, as well as the shadowy Zoggs, we had another threat looming on the horizon; the dreaded monster, Attila.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### EARTH NEWS

Ten days after our triumphant return from Zeronera, I was sitting with my young friends in the area next to the library, where Michu had given me the news, all those months ago, that I was being sent back home. My feelings towards her had softened with the passing months but a meeting of our eyes still turned my insides over.

The day was being spent at leisure, after a few days of furious activity. We sat together, relaxed and happy, chatting of this and that.

We had made another trip to the Valles Marineris and Olympus Mons, mainly for Ben, Tim and Sonia's benefit. They had all been overwhelmed by the staggering grandeur of these gigantic natural wonders. We had also visited the fruit farm. Tim had said he could eat fifty fruits and Zigal had laughed. Tim insisted, but after eating five of the juicy purple fruits he had to admit he was full. We had not had time to view the monuments of Cydonia. Four days had been spent calling in on some of the clans that had contributed to the success of our final mission to Zeronera. A game of *Sombrillo* had also taken place the day before, in which Sonia had played for the first time.

We sat on cushions in a rough circle, Ben, Tim, Sonia, Sofu, Anamaru, Diana and I. Manu had wanted to come but he had been called to a meeting with Lumura to discuss some matter of security. Michu had gone with Priam to Futoria, his home, some few hundred kilometres away to the east.

We had received several reports from Zeronera since our return. The new Council of Elders had been formed and Atik had humbly accepted the position of Chief Elder. The stock of *zofold* had been sealed in a chamber deep down underneath Zeronera and was being guarded continuously. The people were busy cleansing the atmosphere inside Zeronera, detoxifying the river and establishing a new fungus farm. Atik had personally come to tell us how relieved and happy

the people of Zeronera were to be free from the domination of the tyrant, Zigismo. As for the whereabouts of the fallen dictator, no-one had seen hair or hide of him or his five cronies. Atik was quick to point out that they were happy for that, but faintly nervous not to know what he was up to. While the evil monster was still alive, he posed a threat to the stability of the whole planet, and we feared that he was biding his time, waiting for the arrival of the Zoggs.

As we sat in our circle, arguing about the relative merits of Mars food and English cooking, who should enter the library but Michu and Priam. Michu held onto her father's arm affectionately.

'Hey, Priam!' Tim called out. 'Michu, come and join the party!'

We all rose to our feet as the two visitors approached. There was plenty of bowing and greeting. We made room in the circle and Priam and Michu sat with us.

'How's the weather in England?' I asked.

'Why is it you Earth people always have to talk about the weather?' cut in Sofu, before Priam could reply.

'Actually, Bill,' said Priam, 'believe it or not, it is snowing.'

'What, in April?' I said. 'What is the date today on Earth?'

'Yesterday, the day I left, was the seventh of April,' said Priam. 'The weather was so bad that British Airways cancelled sixty flights. Heathrow was in chaos, with thousands of passengers stranded. Many people lost their luggage. They said on the news that it hadn't snowed in April since 1963.'

'My father talks about that winter,' I said. 'The River Thames froze over. He was a small boy living in Oxford at the time. He and his parents went ice-skating on the river near where they lived.'

'Global warming means cold, snowy English winters will soon be a thing of the past,' said Priam.

'Imagine!' exclaimed Tim. 'I've heard that in Victorian times they used to have fairs actually *on* the River Thames itself, in the middle of London.'

Priam shook his head. 'And world governments are very slow in agreeing on a concerted effort to slow down carbon emissions. The recent Bali Conference almost ended in disas-

ter. Had it not been for the German Chancellor, the Americans would have refused to concede anything.'

'Typical,' said Sonia. 'And they are the ones who throw out more carbon dioxide than anyone. Did you know that the US consumes twenty-five percent of the World's oil? Now the rest of the world has to suffer the consequences.'

'Maybe if Hillary Clinton or Obama get into the White House, things will change for the better,' said Ben. 'At least they may be more concerned about the world outside.'

'Hermann has ideas about combating global warming,' said Priam.

'That's cool!' Ben said brightly. 'How?'

'Global warming cool? That's cool!' laughed Tim.

'No idea,' said Priam, 'but you know Hermann: it's hard to understand him.'

'And what about the magic shoebox?' I asked.

'So far, the tests are going well. Ivan is having the time of his life.'

'Tell us more,' I said.

'Ha! We nearly started a Third World War last week,' Priam admitted. 'They were looking for suitable objects to test the Magnobile on; objects in nearby space, that is. It's not easy to find something that doesn't mean something to someone.' Priam chuckled. 'By mistake the Magnobile latched onto a high-flying aircraft, and only in the nick of time did they realise and released it. The plane was drawn a long way from its intended path and it was a miracle it didn't crash.'

We all hung on Priam's words.

'Well, the plane happened to be a US military aircraft on a reconnaissance mission over Afghanistan. Immediately, the Americans accused the Russians of being behind it. Of course President Putin had to deny any knowledge of the incident.'

'Wow!' exclaimed Sonia.

Sofu, Anamaru and Diana were visibly amused.

'So the shoebox does work then,' I said.

'Yes, on American planes at least,' laughed Priam.

'And on asteroids?' I asked.

'They haven't found one near enough yet,' said Priam, 'but the Russian Space Watch Agency says that in a few days

a small asteroid will come within twenty million kilometres of the Earth and they are geared up to try out the magnobile on it.'

'How big is small, Priam?' asked Ben.

'About five hundred metres wide, I think,' said Priam, 'nothing like the seventy-five kilometre Attila.'

'But it's not going to hit the Earth, right?'

'You mean the five hundred metre one? Not on its present path.'

'Any information on the Hun and when and where it's likely to strike?' I asked.

'The latest we have is that it may come down in the Himalayas from the North-West at an angle of forty-five degrees. The latest estimated time is the 25<sup>th</sup> of April at 5.30 am, GMT,' said Priam. 'That's five seconds earlier than previously thought.'

'Hey!' cried Tim, 'five seconds cut off our lives, just like that!'

Everyone stared at Tim.

'Tim,' I complained, 'no-one's going to die, remember? Hermann's Magnobile is going to save the Earth from being blown to bits.'

'Of course,' said Tim apologetically. 'I was only joking.'

The circle fell silent for a few moments. Each mind was suddenly confronted with the reality facing our planet. I pictured the Earth as I had seen it on my first morning in space: blue, green and brown, swathed with curls of white cloud. I saw in my mind's eye the beautiful globe bursting open, sending mountains, oceans and deserts; entire continents, hurtling off into outer space, together with its six billion helpless human beings, umpteen billion animals, birds, fishes, insects; the totality of life that had inhabited that wonderful world for millions of years. Was it really going to disintegrate on the 25th of April? I could not imagine it was possible.

Michu brought us back to the present and turned our minds away from thoughts of disaster. 'My father went to visit your families, didn't you, Priam?'

'Yes,' said Priam. 'Bill, your father was off work for a week with back trouble, but he's better now. Your mother was glad to have news of you, but she has given up enquiring

about your activities, so there was no point in worrying her unnecessarily.'

'Thanks,' I said.

'Ben and Tim, your parents are also fine. And Sonia, I did meet your father for a few minutes. He was off to interview the Mayor on some scandal that had hit the town.'

Sonia looked at me and smiled. Albert Smith was back to reporting on mundane local issues.

'He says he's dying to have you back,' added Priam.

Sonia looked like she would shed tears. 'Thanks,' was all she was able to say.

'Priam?'

'Yes Bill?'

'Have there been any reports in the papers about Attila?'

'No, nothing at all. Even if the Western space agencies have discovered Attila, they are going to keep it very quiet. It's not the sort of news to release to the world.'

'Dead right!' said Ben.

'But I do not believe anyone, other than the Russians, have an inkling of its existence,' continued Priam. 'It's not surprising really. Attila is not easy to find: it is as dark in colour as its motives. Let it stay hidden from all eyes. No-one except Hermann has any idea of how to deal with it anyway. Better the world is kept in ignorance. What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over, is the expression, I believe.'

I laughed. 'Ivan would say, 'the heart doesn't worry itself about something the eyes don't see', or something similar.'

We all had a good laugh at Ivan's command of English proverbs.

'But seriously,' said Priam, 'it's sure to be sighted by some powerful telescopes as it approaches the Earth. There is bound to be panic in the final hours, but by then we hope and pray that Hermann's little wonder will have put Attila off course.'

'But, Priam, what are we doing about the Zoggs?' I asked. 'Have you seen Zeris?'

'Oh yes, of course I have. The first thing I did when I arrived was to discuss the Zogg threat with Zeris.'

'And?'

'My discussion with him is confidential, naturally,' said

## Operation Stargazer

Priam, 'but frankly, no-one knows what to do about the Zoggs. How can you plan for an attack from beings you have never seen; beings you don't even know what they look like; beings armed with weapons you have no idea about and cannot possibly match and that come towards you faster than the speed of light?'

'So we have no plan?' said Sofu flatly.

'That's right,' said Priam. 'There is no plan.'

Almighty God, I said to myself, we are relying on the invention of one man, one crazy, loony scientist, to save Earth and Mars from sure obliteration. No! We cannot rely on a human being. You, Almighty God, have got to intervene.

Chris Hawley

**PART THREE**

**FROM THE DEPTHS OF BEYOND**

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### THE BIG TEST

Ivan pushed back his chair and rose to meet us, extending his hand and smiling. ‘*Zditvrojtee*,’ he said jovially. ‘Welcome to Russia again.’

The two scientists, Professor Emilia Resichenko and Dr George Kaznikov came forward to greet us. Dr George pulled across two white plastic chairs and Alexei, who had been leaning on the wall in his favourite position, right foot crossed over the left, supplied the other three. Priam, Ben, Tim, Sonia and I sat in a semicircle in front of Ivan’s desk. The two scientists sat on either side of him in upholstered high-backed chairs, as befitted their importance.

‘Well friends,’ said Ivan, after settling himself behind his desk, ‘I suppose you had a good journey from Mars.’

‘Excellent!’ I said.

‘Brilliant!’ said Ben.

‘Awesome!’ said Tim.

‘Wonderful!’ said Sonia.

‘Good! Now you want to know why you have been called here. I heard you have been having some excitement over there.’ He waved an arm vaguely in the direction in which he believed Mars was gliding majestically across the heavens.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘We were only told we were taking a trip to Earth. The reason was a big secret. That’s what we were told. What is it all about?’

‘Priam, you tell them what we have decided.’

Priam cleared his throat. ‘It is Hermann’s doing,’ he said. ‘Hermann is entirely to blame.’ Priam fidgeted in his chair. ‘You see ... how shall I put it? Well... Hermann was adamant: he was not going to let anyone fly the Magnobile... except... except you four. That’s why Ivan asked me to bring you here, to give you the news personally.’

I looked at Ben, then at Tim and then at Sonia. They all looked from one to the other in turn. Not one of us spoke, but our minds were crowded with conflicting emotions. A feeling

of tremendous pride swept over me, rapidly followed by an equally tremendous bout of intense dread at the thought of operating the controls of the shoebox, let alone flying the thing.

It was Sonia who broke the silence. ‘But...’ she began, turning a pale shade of white, which made the red of her hair more of a contrast than normal.

‘Of course, naturally, Hermann would come along with you,’ explained Priam, in an attempt to soften the blow.

‘And training?’ I managed to say. A lump in my throat wanted to get in the way.

‘I assure you, it is not complex, Bill,’ said Priam, dismissively.

‘But...today is AZ Day minus six. There is so little time!’

‘Yes, today is the 19th of April, or the 31st day of the 7th *Surama*,’ said Priam by way of confirmation.

‘And you have no astronauts in Russia who could fly the thing?’ asked Tim.

‘Of course!’ said Ivan indignantly. ‘We Russians have the greatest cosmonauts in the World. But... Hermann has refused all others: he wants only you.’

Priam took up the story. ‘Hermann went on strike last week, you see. He absolutely refused to carry on with the tests unless we agreed to have you four as his crew on the Attila mission. There was no budging him. We had to give in.’

‘But none of us has had any experience of flying!’ I cried.

‘We are aware of that, Bill,’ said Priam. ‘But it is likely that the Magnobile will not need to leave the ground, if we succeed in deflecting Attila from the solid base.’

‘What about Ivan, or Dr George, or the Professor here?’ I persisted. ‘Surely they would love to have a go.’

Ivan looked very uncomfortable. He glanced at the two scientists, who both shook their heads violently.

‘*Njet!*’ said both scientists together. ‘*Njet, njet, njet!*’

‘One trip to Mars was enough,’ said Ivan. ‘It was wonderful of course... and the people of Mars could not have been more welcoming but...’

But no vodka, I thought to myself.

‘So where *is* Hermann?’ asked Ben.

‘Sleeping,’ replied Ivan. After a few moments silence, he

said, 'so it is settled then. Bill, Ben, Tim and Mademoiselle Sonia are hereby officially appointed crew of the Cosmobile.'

Two relieved Russians greeted this decision with smiles and nodding of heads.

'*Da!*' said Dr George.

Ivan slid back his chair and dived into a drawer, pulling out a bottle of vodka and several small glasses. Sonia grimaced, no doubt remembering the last time she was forced to submit to that form of Russian torture. Ben and Tim's merriment at her discomfort would have been more passionate if the fearful subject of flying the Magnobile had not been so fresh in their minds.

'To the glory of Russia!' cried Ivan, as soon as he had filled the seven glasses. Only Priam was spared, since Ivan knew it was culturally unacceptable for the Martian to consume alcohol. Apparently no Earth being had any right whatsoever to refuse to join the toast.

The two scientists raised their glasses and uttered some Russian words. The Professor suddenly remembered her dictum and glanced at her watch, almost spilling the fiery spirit in the process. Then, shrugging her shoulders, she raised the glass again and downed the contents in one gulp. Ivan had already drained his glass and was filling it again. Sonia sniffed the clear, innocuous looking liquid and sipped it gingerly, screwing up her face. Ben, Tim and I, like the valiant men we were, tried hard to keep any signs of discomfort from our faces, with not much success. The ritual over with, the discussion turned to the matter of final trials for the Magnobile.

'Tomorrow is the day we are told to expect the asteroid, which we have named after the inventor of the Cosmobile,' said Ivan. 'Tomorrow the asteroid will come close enough to Earth to test Hermann's shoebox. You will all be present at this important ceremony,' he said grandly. 'Then we will know if it will work or not.'

I heard in my head the words Hermann would have uttered had he been there. 'It vill vork!'

The meeting ended and we went to rest for a while before lunch. After we had eaten, the four of us went for a walk through the trees, where Sonia and I had made our plans to

drug Svetlana, in order for me to steal access to the computer room. Ben and Tim wanted to see the computer room from where I had sent that e-mail to Ben. I told them there was no way I was venturing in there again. The blow Alexei had given me was still too fresh in my mind. The rest of the day was spent inside, the weather being exceptionally cold for the time of year.

The following day at the crack of dawn, we assembled in the dining room for early breakfast, before setting off in bubbles for the launch site of the Magnobile. Hermann was in high spirits and chattered away like a horde of housewives, going on about his Magnobile and how it would zoom here and zoom there, repel this side and attract that. All objections about being roped in as pilots were swept aside like so many dry leaves. I must admit that Hermann's enthusiasm was infectious and we all soon found ourselves warming to the thrill of blasting off into space with Hermann for company.

It was clear and cold as we sped westward in two bubbles across the open plains of the Russian steppe. The sun was rising above the horizon behind us off to our right. An ocean of grey-green grass stretched away in all directions, as far as the eye could see, dotted with little islands of habitation and occasional flocks of sheep and herds of cows, as well as the remains of snowdrifts, a reminder of recent heavy and unseasonal snowstorms. If only Mars was as well endowed, instead of the barren red dust that covers the whole surface of the planet. It must have been a monumental catastrophe, the day that Mars was struck by, not one but three enormous asteroids, to cause Mars to lose its water and atmosphere, and obliterate whatever life had managed to gain a foothold.

The cosmodrome came into sight, and our bubble, in which we four newly appointed space pilots were travelling, dropped down and came to rest on a paved area within a large compound bounded by high walls, along the top of which razor wire was strung in loops. Metal poles carrying large electric lights were spaced along the walls, giving the impression of a heavily guarded prison camp. Armed and uniformed guards wearing helmets patrolled the perimeter walls with guard dogs pulling at their chains. The other bubble landed nearby, spilling its cargo of scientific humanity onto the asphalt. Both bubbles vanished.

After a rigorous inspection by heavily armed security personnel, we were shown into a spacious office, where a big man with a big head sat at a big desk. Everything about the man and his office was big, even his voice. Ivan introduced him as the Director of the Cosmodrome and told us that many Russian cosmonauts had blasted off into space from there. The big man proudly pointed to a very large photograph of the first man in space and hero of the nation, Yuri Gagarin that hung on the wall behind his desk.

The test of the Magnobile was to take place at 12.15, in about two hours. The asteroid Hermann would then be at its nearest point to Earth, approximately twenty million kilometres away. The asteroid was being tracked from that very station by the most powerful radio telescope in Russia. After the test was over, a computer would spend several hours churning data, after which the analysts would decide if the Magnobile had deflected it from its previous course. If it had, there would be rejoicing in the camp, and if not, four recently employed astronauts would be out of work again.

The party that was led across to the launch site by the Director consisted of three Russians, four young and totally inexperienced pilots, a dapper little Martian gentleman in a striped suit and a crazy German professor, whose brainwave had brought us all together on this crisp, sunny morning in the heart of Russia. The man himself skipped along like a five year old on a Sunday outing. He had none of the doubts that I had.

There sat the Magnobile, fixed to its swivel base, gleaming silver in the spring sunshine. It was about eight metres long and four metres wide, with a flat bottom and rounded top made of a clear material that looked like glass. Its sides were very slightly rounded but the ends, as Ivan had said, were flat, giving the whole craft a shoebox look. We walked right round the base. There was no obvious difference between one end of the Magnobile and the other, and I wondered how they knew which end was which.

A technician unlocked a cover and pressed a red button on a control panel on the base and the transparent top of the Magnobile slid back silently. At the same time, a set of steps appeared from the gantry and opened up to provide an easy access to the open top. One by one we climbed in. Only the

Director remained outside. Once inside, Ivan showed us the interior. It was amazingly simple, as he had said it was. There were hardly any controls to be seen, apart from what looked like two rectangular radar screens, two joysticks similar to those used by the pilots of a conventional small aircraft, and two levers close to the floor, one to the left of the left-hand screen and one to the right of the right-hand screen. But the technician pressed another button and a simple set of controls was revealed just below the right-hand screen. Hermann pushed forward and stood to the right of the screen with his hand resting on the joystick. He turned to us and grinned, so that his lips almost disappeared into his bushy moustache.

‘No engine, no fuel,’ he said with pride. ‘Magnetism, pure and simple! At ze moment ze level is set at level zero. Ven you vant to increase magnetism, you pull zis lever.’ He indicated the lever close to the floor. ‘You see, it has markings; it is graded up to tventy to ze power of ten. I am vorking to increase ze magnetism to tventy. At ze moment ve only have ten to ze power ten. Zere vas not time.’ He seemed agitated. Then he shook his head. ‘Never get in front of ze panels ven ze power is more zan zero, ozervise you vill be sucked into vone end or zrone away from ze ozer end.’

‘And ze ... I mean the screen?’ asked Tim.

‘Zis screen, young man, vill tell you if you are aligning ze front panel in ze right direction. See ze grid lines on ze screen? Vell, ze target vill appear green on ze screen. Zen you increase magnetic power to eizer attract or repel ze object.’ Hermann pointed his finger at the left-hand screen. ‘Ze ozer screen and controls are for ze rear panel. *Verstehen Sie?*’

At this point Hermann began to get very excited, and went off into some very technical explanation that I expected nobody, except perhaps Dr George and the Professor, understood.

‘Let me explain more,’ said Ivan, interrupting Hermann. ‘The swivel mechanism can maneuver the shoebox into any position. It is very important to align the panel correctly before engaging the magnetic power.’

‘And how do you maneuver it into the position you want?’ I asked.

Ivan bent down and indicated the set of controls on the right side of the stick.

‘Switch on, Bill,’ he instructed.

‘Where?’

‘That one there; the red one.’ Ivan showed me and I switched on. Immediately a humming sound was heard. Ivan fiddled with the direction controls and the front of the Mag-nobile lifted up sharply, sending us all sliding to the back of the cabin.

‘Sorry,’ said Ivan with embarrassment, ‘too much at once. I should have used the fine tuning control, not the main one.’ He brought us back to the horizontal and we regained our balance.

‘Hang on!’ said Ben. ‘There are no seats! Are we going to slide about like this when we’re zooming into space?’

‘Ah!’ exclaimed Priam. ‘I wondered when you were going to realise that one. You are right: there are no seats. But you will not slide because...’ He paused and smiled mischievously, ‘because each one of you will be comfortable within your own bubble. I must say it took a very long time to perfect this totally new bubble, the first of its kind. You can expand or contract it and it will fit the available space. Inside you will not feel the affects of movement, gravity or lack of it, even if you are upside down, as you might be up there in space.’ Priam beamed with pride.

‘I thought there was no upside down in space,’ Sonia interjected cleverly.

‘Ha! You are qvite right, young lady,’ said Hermann. ‘Ven you zink you are upside down, you are really ze right vay up, and ven you zink you are ze right vay up...’

‘...you are neither up nor down,’ interrupted Ben, singing the last line of the well known nursery rhyme.

‘What about the controls?’ I asked, thinking it was just too simple to be real. ‘How will I reach the controls if I am inside the bubble?’

‘The bubble will take in the controls... if that is what you want,’ said Priam with glee.

I was puzzled. ‘If *I* want?’

‘Yes, if *you* want. It is for *you* to decide. The bubble will obey without you having to do anything.’

I had begun to accept the miracle of the bubble, but Hell! A bubble that obeys your command, even if you haven’t commanded anything! It’s something out of ‘Ali Baba and

the Forty Thieves. No! Far more magical than that!

As the time for the test drew near, excitement in the Magnobile increased. Hermann was hopping about like a newborn lamb in springtime. Dr George fingered his pipe, putting it to his mouth and then removing it. Ivan scratched his face nervously. Sonia's face was flushed, almost matching her hair in intensity of colour. Ben and Tim, aware of the tremendous responsibility that rested on their broad shoulders, concentrated hard on what was being demonstrated.

At this point Priam gave the remaining five of us an invisible bubble pack and immediately left the Magnobile, together with the Director, wishing us well. The bubbles inflated automatically, filling the entire interior of the Magnobile. Hermann sat down in front of the right-hand screen, though what he was sitting on I couldn't say: he appeared to be suspended in mid air. His right hand was resting on the throttle and his left hand on the direction controls. I sat down before the left-hand screen in my own bubble, as Hermann had done. It was like lounging in a padded sofa; incredible! The other three inflated their own bubbles in the rear of the Magnobile.

Hermann switched on the front panel screen, which glowed silver-grey. At the lower end of the screen, figures flashed and ran, some red and some black.

'Ve are connected to ze computer in ze control room. It vill automatically point us at ze target. I move ze controls so zat zis counter here is at zero. Hermann, zat is ze asteroid, not me you understand, vill show green in ze middle of ze screen. Ze front panel, in repulsion mode, vill soon be aimed at ze target.'

The digital clock in the corner of the screen indicated 12.10 and the counter beside it was counting down to zero, 4.52, 4.51, 4.50, 4.49...

Tension rose dramatically. Everyone was silent. Hermann gave instructions to the control room and at once the front of the Magnobile rose slowly into the air, and at the same time swivelled to the left. A small green spot appeared near the centre of the screen.

The counter continued, 4.02, 4.01, 4.00, 3.59, 3.58...

By now the Magnobile was lying at about seventy degrees from the horizontal. I was pushed back in my invisible seat

but the bubble remained firm. I looked round at the others. There was intense concentration on all faces.

I watched the digital display counting relentlessly towards zero, 3.14, 3.13, 3.12, 3.11...

Hermann was keeping the large counter on the left-hand side of his screen as close to zero as possible, moving the fine tuning control lever ever so slightly backward and forwards. The Magnobile seemed hardly to move now, but I knew that it must be moving imperceptibly. The tiny green spot in the middle of the screen was exactly on the crossing of the grid.

...1.52, 1.51, 1.50, 1.49...

The sky above us was clear blue. I knew that up there, twenty million kilometres away, a huge lump of rock was hurtling through space at a speed in excess of sixty thousand kilometres per hour. It was passing across the heavens, still edging nearer but soon to be drawing away from us on its way round the Sun, not to return to this part of the solar system for another eighty years. It had been on this path for thousands of years, but each time it came near on its highly elliptical orbit, it was getting gradually nearer the Sun, so that, in another few hundred thousand years, it was destined to end its life by being melted by the incredible heat of the Sun, and finally vapourised.

...0.42, 0.41, 0.40, 0.39...

‘Prepare to increase magnetism!’ cried Hermann excitedly. He began to move the throttle and the humming noise became louder. The Magnobile began to vibrate.

‘Ten to ze power four,’ Hermann was saying, ‘ten to ze power five...’

The Magnobile was now vibrating violently. I put my hands on the sides of the bubble to steady myself but it was an unnecessary move. My heart was beating hard.

... 0.03, 0.02, 0.01, 0.00...

‘Ten to ze power six, ten to ze power seven, ten to ze power eight!’ cried Hermann, holding onto the shaking throttle with the left hand and the direction control with the right.

Hermann maintained ten to the power eight magnetism for ten minutes, operating the direction lever so as to keep the green dot in the centre and the direction counter as close to zero as he could. All this time the Magnobile shook. How

much longer was this to go on? At last, Hermann pushed back the throttle and the vibration and humming reduced in intensity.

...-10.28, -10.29, -10.30, -10.31...

'We are back to idling magnetism,' said Hermann, turning round in his almost invisible seat. His eyes were narrowed in a contented smile that creased his face, so that his mouth disappeared into his moustache. He was flushed with pride.

We would not know for a few hours whether the test had been successful or not. So the rest of the day was spent in and around the Magnobile and in the office of the Director. Hermann, meanwhile, was closeted with the computer analysts.

Had the asteroid been deflected from its course? The future existence of the Earth depended on the success of the test. The afternoon dragged on painfully slowly. No-one was able to concentrate on anything. At any moment, I expected the Director to make an announcement. We waited and waited. I imagined him entering the room, beaming, with the good news we all hoped for. At other times, I imagined him announcing gloomily that the test had been a failure. Which was it to be? There was nothing for it but to wait and see.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

### TWO PROFESSORS

At about 9 o'clock that evening we were all assembled in the Director's office, having been told that we could expect the results of the test soon. We waited for the Director to return from the control room, which was out of bounds to all visitors.

Suddenly, the door opened and in walked the Director. He held a sheet of paper in his big hand and his big, square face held a serious expression. It was not possible to tell whether the news was good or bad. He crossed to his big chair and sat down heavily, placing the sheet of paper on the big desk in front of him. He laid his big elbows on the desk and his forearms together, holding his upper arms with his big hands. He looked briefly at the sheet of paper and then surveyed the expectant faces in front of him. I wished he would put us all out of our agony and say something.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he began, 'the result of the test is...'. His face remained serious.

Is what? I said to myself. Why doesn't he get on with it.

He suddenly broke into a wide grin and tapped the sheet of paper with his thick index finger. 'Ladies and gentlemen, the asteroid, Hermann has been deflected by two degrees from its normal course. The test, I am pleased to say, was successful.'

A huge wave of joy and relief swept round the room. Ivan got up from his chair and hugged the lady Professor, who blushed with pleasure, or surprise, or embarrassment, or perhaps a mixture of the three. Then he gave the same treatment to Dr George.

'I told you it would vork!' cried Hermann, doing a jig in the middle of the floor, his little old legs creaking noisily.

'I never doubted it,' said Priam calmly.

My eyes met Sonia's and we smiled at each other. Ben and Tim got up with the aim of joining Hermann's dance, but at that moment Hermann's legs gave way and he toppled

over. Tim was just in time to catch him as he headed for the hard concrete floor.

The Director had a bottle of vodka on the table by the time I next looked, and shortly after this a tray of glasses joined it, ably assisted by the jovial Ivan. The usual ritual was performed amid the sound of clinking glasses and roars from Russian throats. When it was done, the Director called for attention.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, we have cleared the first hurdle, but the most critical part remains. Today is the 20th of April and by the morning it will be AZ Day minus four. Our computer wizards are analysing the results of the Hermann test, to see exactly for how long we should engage Attila and the likely effect on its course. Remember, Attila is much bigger than Hermann, and will need more magnetic power to dislodge it.’

At the mention of his name Hermann sat up, rubbed his eyes and blinked.

The Director continued. ‘And Attila will be heading almost straight for us, so that will mean even more power will be needed to dislodge it sufficiently. The results of these calculations will be out by mid-day tomorrow. Then we will know for sure.’

We filed out of the Director’s office to our sleeping quarters. The excitement and anxiety of the day kept my mind churning in my head and my body turning in my bed, but finally the effects of the vodka permitted entry into the land of dreams. I slept soundly until early morning, when a vivid dream ended my peaceful slumber. I dreamed that a party of Zoggs had landed in our back garden and my mother had invited them in for tea, much to my father’s annoyance. He brought the newspaper to the kitchen where tea was being enjoyed by the party from Zogg, and showed us an announcement by the Town Council, which said that anyone found hiding extraterrestrials would be arrested. Just then the doorbell rang, and a party of policemen entered the house. I was terrified that we were going to be taken away, but instead my mother invited them in, and we all had tea together. Sonia’s aunt from Canada was also there and she was telling us to be sure to take our holidays on the island of St’ Helena; that the beach was perfect. But then Sonia’s father walked in

with a revolver and started shooting. That was when I woke up. The amazing thing was that I couldn't have described the Zoggs: they were somehow human but not human at the same time, if you can understand what I mean.

In the early hours, I sat up in bed and concentrated on Michu's face, hoping to get some news of events on Mars. After a while, I heard her voice, indistinct at first and then clearer. She was telling me that her father had said the test had been successful. She then told me that nothing had been heard of the Zoggs, and everyone was anxiously waiting for something to happen. No-one knew where Zigismo was hiding and whether or not he was in contact with the Zoggs. She wished us well and said the Almighty was guiding us.

Then her voice faded away. For a while I sent my thoughts to her and I was quite sure she was hearing me. Then I slept again. It was Tim who woke me.

'It's ten o'clock, you lazy dog!' he shouted, and shook me by the shoulder.

'The Zoggs haven't landed on Mars yet,' I told him sleepily, as soon as I had orientated myself. 'Michu told me.'

'In a dream, I suppose,' he suggested with derision.

'No, I talked to her this morning.'

Tim understood. 'Of course, you are learning to be a Martian.'

'But I *did* have a very peculiar dream.' I told him as much as I could remember.

'Come on, Bill! My stomach tells me it's past breakfast time.'

When we reached the dining room, Ben and Sonia had already eaten.

'Where are the rest?' I asked.

'Hermann is sitting in the Magnobile with the Russians,' said Ben, making a place for us at the table. 'He's crazy with excitement. By the way, there's a training session this afternoon at two, after the latest report has come in.'

After breakfast, we found a table tennis table and the four of us played for an hour. We were amazed how well Sonia played; ping-ponging the little white ball over the net, zapping it into all the corners, smashing it whenever one of us hit the ball too high off the table. I could never have guessed that slip of a thing could be such a demon player.

Then it was time for the report on the Magnobile test. We trooped into the Director's office to find all the others already seated, except Priam. We were told he had gone to London in the early morning, but was due back presently.

A computer technician brought the report at exactly 12 noon. It was laid ceremoniously on the big desk. A minute later Priam walked into the room in his striped suit. He removed his bowler hat and greeted us all. He looked as fresh as a daisy. No-one would have imagined he'd been to London and back in the morning.

The Director cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I will read out the test data first and then interpret it for the laymen present.'

The Director spent a few minutes reading the computer print out, which extended over three pages. His face was serious. I studied the faces of Hermann and the Russians, trying to figure out whether the news was good or bad. Hermann's eyes were sunk deep into his face and he puckered up his mouth, so that his grey moustache protruded comically. Dr George's head was resting on his big chest, which gently rose and fell in time with his breathing, so that he appeared to be sleeping. The Professor sat motionless and expressionless. At last the Director replaced the sheet of paper on the desk, removed his glasses, wiped his eyes with a handkerchief and spoke.

'The results of the test are as follows,' he began, refitting his glasses and taking up the papers once more. 'Taking into account the relative sizes of asteroids Hermann and Attila, the distance the Magnobile was from Hermann at the time of the test, and the angle at which Hermann was repelled, the computer tells us it will take six times the amount of magnetic power than the Magnobile is capable of, to deflect Attila sufficiently for it to safely miss the Earth. That is, if the operation is carried out thirty-six hours before expected time of arrival.' He removed his glasses and surveyed the gathering.

The faces showed the disappointment that each one of us must have felt. Nobody spoke. The Director continued.

'Let us remember that the asteroid Hermann is only five hundred metres across and can easily be turned away, compared to the seventy-five kilometre Attila. And Attila will be coming towards us at a very narrow angle. Asteroid Hermann

was crossing at an angle of almost ninety degrees. These factors make it impossible for the Magnobile to influence the trajectory of Attila sufficiently to send it clear of the Earth, even if it were possible to maintain maximum magnetic power for several hours and even if we had power twenty, which we don't yet have. I am afraid there is only one alternative.'

'And what is that?' asked Ivan nervously.

I had been about to ask the same question and the same must have been on the lips of all those present.

'The only alternative is...' the Director began solemnly.

He stopped, because at this point Hermann got to his feet and opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. He continued to stand before his chair, rocking backwards and forwards, as if he had been at the vodka bottle all morning.

The Director continued. 'I see the only alternative is to launch the Magnobile into space and attack Attila from there. Professor Winke, do you agree with that?'

I looked at Tim and he looked at Ben. Both boys lost the colour they had gained during the table tennis session. I glanced at Sonia and she smiled weakly.

'Of course,' answered Hermann, 'it is ze only vay. Vizout ze Earz' atmosphere, ze Magnobile can exert many times greater influence on ze asteroid.' Hermann continued excitedly. 'And ve can be at an angle vere ve can deflect it more easily.'

'Repelling or attracting?' I asked Hermann nervously.

'Repelling, of course,' he retorted.

'Won't Attila push the Magnobile away from it?' was my next question.

'Of course it vill,' Hermann replied. 'It is natural. Attila is a heavy body and ze Magnobile is light. Ve would be pushed by Attila... if ve vas in space.'

I was confused. I couldn't see how we were going to change the direction of Attila. Our little shoebox would be thrown out into space. But he says it can only succeed if we are in space!

'Ah! You have not understood!' cried Hermann excitedly.

Everyone in the room, except the Director, stared at Hermann.

'I don't understand at all,' said Ivan. 'I fear we are all

doomed.'

Hermann chuckled to himself and did another jig in the middle of the floor.

'I've got it!' yelled the Professor, leaping to her feet.

Attention was now on the large, plump figure in a tweed skirt and round spectacles. I was just as confused, and judging by the expressions on the other faces, they were as mystified as I was.

'I know what Hermann is thinking,' cried the lady. 'You will land on Mars and repel Attila from there.' She and Hermann were now holding centre stage.

'Land on Mars?' was the ragged chorus that greeted the solution.

'You are almost right, Professor.' Hermann chuckled. 'But not quite. Not *land* on Mars! We could not hold ze Mag-nobile on ze surface.'

'Yes, you are right, Professor Winke,' smiled the lady. 'But if we repel Mars and Attila at the same time...'

The two conspirators joined hands and twirled round gaily, until Hermann became dizzy and had to retreat to his chair.

'I understand very well,' said the Director, when calm had been restored. 'If the rear panel is put in repulsion mode, the Cosmobile can be held above the surface of Mars, while the front panel is directed to Attila.' He replaced his glasses.

'Cool!' exclaimed Ben and Tim together.

'Ingenious!' I said.

But we four soon realised that we were the ones who would be performing the balancing trick between the Red Planet and the seventy-five kilometre asteroid. On us rested the huge responsibility of saving our planet Earth from destruction. We looked from one to the other. How was it possible that, while the whole scientific and military might of the World's great powers sat and drank coffee, or vodka in the case of the Russians, four teenagers, accompanied by a potty, short-sighted scientist, were entrusted with the future existence of our planet?

'If you are to be in position to intercept Attila, there is no time to waste,' said the Director, turning in my direction. 'Professor Winke, we must get some more data on Attila's position. But in the meantime we should launch the Cosmo-

bile without delay. Let us see, we are now about ninety hours from estimated time of impact.' He removed his glasses and leaned back in his big chair. Then he said slowly, 'it is my view that you and your crew must prepare straight away for lift-off.'

A sudden shiver ran from the bottom of my spine to the top and crept over my head. My mouth went dry and I felt heavy stones forming in my stomach.

Hermann nodded. 'Ve must leave straight away!' he cried. 'I estimate zat Attila is at zis moment less zan five and a half million kilometres from ze Earz, and coming straight for us at sixty zousand kilometres per hour. Ve must be in position by zis time tomorrow.'

'Good!' said the Director. 'I will arrange for a week's rations to be stowed in the Cosmobile. I think that is all, ladies and gentlemen. It only remains for me to wish the crew of the Cosmobile good luck in their assignment.' With that he stood up, collected a sheaf of papers from his big desk and prepared to leave.

The Director's good wishes were endorsed by all those whose good fortune it was *not* to be part of the crew.

I stood up with difficulty, due to sudden weakness in my knees, and said with a hoarse voice, 'thank you all for your good luck wishes. I am sure we are going to need them!'

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

### MAGNOBILE IN ACTION AGAIN

A tense and silent group of figures could be seen walking across the tarmac to the launch site at 2 am the next morning. Wisps of vapour escaped from their mouths into the stinging night air as the eight men and two women neared the gantry on which the Magnobile glistened in the glare of the security lights. In the blackness above, few stars could be seen, despite the absence of cloud. Over to the west, the brilliant orange Arcturus was setting, with nothing like its normal brilliance. Up above, the beautiful blue Vega was already high in the sky and I could just make out two bright stars in the constellation of Cygnus. Mars had already set. But up there somewhere was the dark and forbidding Attila, the formidable giant, sailing silently towards the Earth on a mission of destruction, just as its namesake, at the head of his hordes of horsemen, had swept across the plains of Asia all those centuries ago, to rape and to plunder the people of Europe.

Five of those figures climbed into the Magnobile while the other five stood together, wrapped in heavy coats and hats. One was smaller and thinner than the others. He came forward and called up softly.

‘May the Almighty bring you safely back, and pass greetings to all.’

I leaned over and thanked him.

‘I will try to do both things.’

A wave of emotion passed through me as I held his gaze. Priam had been such a good friend. Would we ever meet again? I lifted my hand in farewell.

The cover slid forward quietly and clicked shut. Bubbles inflated around each of us and we settled down ready for lift-off. At the rear of the Magnobile, the rations and other paraphernalia were stored in yet another bubble. The entire space was taken up with those versatile vehicles, inside which one felt neither hot nor cold, and breathing was no different, whether one was on the ground or in deepest space.

‘Switch on,’ said Hermann.

I did so and the familiar humming sound was heard. The two screens flickered and then glowed silver-grey.

‘Front panel in attraction mode,’ said Hermann. ‘Bill, set ze rear panel in repulsion mode.’

‘Rear panel in repulsion mode,’ I confirmed.

The voice of the controller came through the speaker. ‘Good! Now prepare for alignment. Lifting 72 degrees 22.56 minutes.’

The front of the Magnobile rose slowly. When a counter on the screen indicated 72.22.56, the Magnobile came to rest, pointing into the blackness.

‘Turning to 4 degrees 44.33 minutes north of west,’ the speaker crackled.

A faint whirring sound accompanied the slow movement of the Magnobile to the right, until it came to rest. Another digital display confirmed its final position.

‘Final alignment complete,’ Hermann confirmed.

Sure enough, there in the centre of the screen, sat a little green spot. I breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Is that Attila?’ Sonia asked over my shoulder.

‘Ze Hun,’ said Hermann in a theatrical voice.

Tim laughed. ‘A miserable green crumb like that!’

‘If only Attila was that harmless,’ I said, ‘we wouldn’t be here, would we?’

‘Now,’ said Hermann in a serious tone, ‘Vatever ve do ve must make sure ve keep ze green dot in ze middle during lift-off. If ve lose Attila it vill be so hard to find it again ven ve are up in ze space. And ze control room vill not be zere to help.’

‘Right,’ I said, turning to the bubbles behind me. ‘Are you ready for lift-off, guys?’ My voice was unsteady.

‘Sure.’ But the voices from inside the bubbles sounded far from sure.

At Hermann’s command I moved the rear panel throttle gently. The Magnobile began to vibrate. Nervously, I increased to ten to the power one, then two...

The Magnobile rose into the air, slowly at first and then gathered speed. My whole body was rigid with tension.

Meanwhile, Hermann was pulling on the lever to increase the magnetic power in the front panel, to attract Attila and

give us additional speed. At the same time, he was concentrating on keeping Attila in the centre of the screen and the counter as close to zero as possible.

‘Ten to the power three... four... five...’ I called across to Hermann, a little more confidently.

I looked behind to see the Earth quickly receding. Patches of twinkling lights identified the towns of Russia. Far in the east, dawn was already breaking over Eastern Siberia. Almost immediately, the north polar ice-cap came into view, dazzling in the morning sunlight. We were already outside the Earth’s atmosphere and were gathering speed. As I watched, the Earth, now in the form of a crescent, was becoming smaller. I looked for the Moon, but was unable to see it. The Sun showed itself as a small disk to the right and behind the Earth. But there, behind me was the tiny red ball.

‘I see it, Guys! Mars!’

Heads turned and hushed voices marvelled once more at the sight of our second home, but it was our incredible planet Earth that captured our greatest interest and respect. There could surely be no more wonderful sight than our world from outer space.

After some time, Hermann reduced power in the front panel to ten to the power two and told me to prepare to switch the rear panel to attraction mode and align it to Mars. He kept Attila firmly in the centre of the grid.

‘Prepare to engage attraction mode in the rear panel,’ I said.

‘Go ahead,’ replied Hermann. He smiled without taking his eyes off the screen.

I pressed the button on the control panel that would swing the rear magnetic panel into attraction mode. There was a low humming sound and the light on the left hand screen confirmed the change had been made. I looked in the rearview mirror to see Mars, which glowed dull red against the blackness of space. I adjusted the left hand direction control until the diminutive green ball appeared on the screen. Fine tuning brought Mars into the centre, indicating that we had hooked onto it. Immediately, I could feel the pull of the planet, drawing us backwards towards it. Hermann had Attila faithfully locked onto the front panel.

I began to relax. So far so good!

Sonia was watching the red ball that was slowly but surely increasing in size. I fixed my eyes on it and thought of Michu, and wondered what she was doing at that moment. I knew she would intercept my thoughts. At that instant, her voice entered my head. 'Still no news of the Zoggs, but important news from Earth: the telescope at Pasadena in the USA has picked up the giant asteroid and an emergency meeting has been called at the White House to brief the President on the looming disaster. The entire staff of the observatory has been sworn to secrecy, until the Government has decided on what action, if any, should be taken.' I wondered how she knew this, unless the news had leaked out. I guessed there must be a Martian 'observer' inside somewhere. Michu's voice assured me that we were in her prayers. I decided to say nothing to the others yet. Let us deal with the task in hand first.

Two or three hours went by. Ben came to take over from me at the controls and Tim was given the difficult task of keeping Attila's green shape in the centre of the right-hand screen. I rummaged in the storage bubble and served up a snack of sandwiches and warm tea. If ever NASA managed to get hold of the bubble technology, God forbid! I could see future astronauts munching on whopping hamburgers and guzzling Coke through a straw. Suitably refreshed, we continued monitoring the screens, maximizing the pull of Mars and keeping our target in view.

I looked over Ben's shoulder at the screen. We were six hours forty-two minutes into the mission. The Earth had receded to a ball about four times the size of the planet we were heading for. Its colours: blue, green, brown, yellow and white, could be seen faintly on the illuminated edge. Another ten hours and we would be within the thin atmosphere of Mars.

I settled down to relax. We had a long mission ahead. In front, Ben and Tim sat together, deep in concentration. Hermann sat just behind Tim, with his eyes glued to the right hand screen. Sonia sat on my right hand side, head back, staring into the star-studded Heavens. I closed my eyes. I could hear Hermann whispering in Tim's ear, explaining some technicality to him. I dozed off.

When I awoke, I wondered if the dreaded news of Attila's

imminent rendezvous with Earth had become common knowledge. Maybe other observers had already sighted the gigantic asteroid and, if so, it was certain that the news had swept the world, bringing panic to the billions within reach of the media. I pictured my parents, listening dumb-founded to the radio or watching with disbelief the newscaster giving full details of the emergency. But no-one had any way of avoiding the disaster. Only we five small beings, zooming through space at nearly two thousand kilometres per second, had a plan that was in any way likely to succeed. There was no point in telling them. Who would believe it? And the Russians were not about to give away the secret, not just yet anyway.

The Red Planet loomed large behind us. I must have slept for several hours. I could see one end of the Valles Marineris, its deep scar clearly visible. The north polar ice-cap could also be seen. Ben's voice interrupted my study of the geographical features that I had come to know so well.

'Prepare to reduce rear panel magnetic power!' he said.

'Go ahead!' said Hermann.

'Ten to the power five... four... three...'

'Hold it zhere!' said Hermann. 'Okay, reduce to two.'

'Reduced to two,' confirmed Ben.

The surface of Mars came to meet us slowly. A few minutes passed.

'Reduce to zero!' Hermann commanded.

'One... zero, confirmed.'

'Change rear panel to repulsion mode.' There was a note of anxiety in Hermann's voice.

'Prepare to put rear panel in repulsion mode,' Ben answered.

'Do it quickly!' shouted Hermann, 'otherwise we crash into Mars! Ben!'

Ben slammed his fist onto the button and the rear panel switched to repulsion mode.

'Confirmed!' he cried.

I glanced behind me at the rapidly looming surface of Mars. Had Ben acted too late? There was an anxious few moments when I saw us diving into the Martian dust at several hundred kilometres per hour. But then we slowed down as the repelling power in the rear panel took effect. We all

breathed a huge sigh of relief. But panic gripped the crew again on hearing Tim's next words. The colour suddenly drained from his face.

'I've lost Attila,' he said quietly.

Hermann came alive. 'You have done what?'

'I'm... sorry, Attila is not on my screen anymore.'

'Zhat is very careless of you!' yelled the Professor, going red in the face.

'Yeh, I know. It was the scare of crashing: I couldn't help it.'

Tim put his face close to the screen and moved the joystick around, muttering under his breath all the while. Everyone else sat quietly. I prayed intensely that Tim would soon find the dark monster. They had warned us that once Attila was lost from the screen, it would be hard to find it again. Oh God!

An hour passed and still there was no sign of the fearful Attila. I was beginning to think that the terrifying giant had slipped away from us for good, and would continue unchecked on its fixed path and final collision with our planet Earth. We five humans, except for the inhabitants of Mars, and the odd astronaut orbiting the Earth, would be the only remaining human beings, with no other choice but to live out the rest of our lives on the Red Planet. But for how long? If the Zoggs did not wipe us out, would one or more of the fragments of the disintegrated Earth be trapped by the magnetic force of Mars and destroy us all. The mood in the Mag-nobile was depressed. No-one spoke.

'I've got it! I've got it!' Tim bounced up and down in his bubble. 'It's there, look!' Sure enough, there on the left hand side of his screen was a green blob.

'I hope it is ze right one,' said Hermann cautiously.

'It is, for sure!' cried Tim excitedly.

'Put ze green blob in ze centre of ze screen, Tim, and don't lose it again.'

'Don't worry, Prof,' Tim said with a smile. 'No way!'

But the relaxed atmosphere was not to return to the Mag-nobile.

The hours passed. Tim still had Attila dead centre. Now it was a question of balancing the repulsion in the front and rear panels to maintain our height above the Martian surface

and at the same time increasing the power directed at the asteroid. It was a tricky maneuver and we all knew it.

‘Sonia, come and take over from Ben,’ said Hermann

‘I’m okay, really,’ said the blond-haired pilot. ‘I’m not tired yet.’

He doesn’t trust a girl to fly the Magnobile, was my interpretation. I looked sideways at her. She had not taken offence.

So Ben remained in command of the rear panel, while Tim still controlled the front panel. It was Hermann’s and my job to constantly monitor our position above the surface of Mars, keeping the Magnobile approximately a thousand kilometres away.

‘Prepare to increase ze front panel magnetic repulsion,’ said Hermann to Tim.

‘Right,’ Tim replied in his best pilot voice.

‘Prepare to increase ze rear panel magnetic repulsion,’ he said to Ben.

Ben edged the lever back towards him and simultaneously Tim pulled his lever back towards him. The Magnobile began to vibrate.

Tim read his screen. ‘Ten to the power three... four... five... six...’

Ben was counting too. ‘Ten to the power two... three...’

‘Steady. Hold it just zere!’ commanded Hermann. ‘Now increase to four, Ben.’

‘Four it is.’ Ben confirmed.

‘Increase to five!’ cried Hermann excitedly.

‘Five it is.’

‘Ben, zat is perfect!’ Hermann roared.

‘Tim, increase slowly to maximum power.’ Hermann was beside himself with happiness.

‘Seven... eight... nine. What’s happening?’

The Magnobile was shaking now. I feared it would break up. But Hermann seemed not to notice.

‘Tim, maximum power!’ bellowed the scientist.

‘Nine... ten. Maximum power confirmed.’

The Magnobile continued to tremble violently. Still Hermann remained unmoved. ‘Ben, hold ze rear panel repulsion at four,’ he commanded.

‘Four confirmed.’

‘I zink ve need to direct maximum power at ze asteroid for at least zree hours,’ was Hermann’s estimation. ‘Zen ve ask ze control room for update on ze parz of Attila.’

We sat and shook for the next three hours. Fortunately, inside the bubbles the effect was not too noticeable. Sonia took from the storage bubble some cold drinks, which we all enjoyed, engrossed in our tasks. Sonia and I slept for a while and then it was our turn to sit at the controls, while Ben and Tim rested. Hermann seemed not to need sleep. He sat with his tiny eyes glued to the screens, occasionally suggesting an adjustment to the rear panel power. Full power in the front panel remained centred on Attila.

After the agreed three hours, we needed to send a message to the control room at the Cosmodrome for an update on Attila’s course. I concentrated hard on Priam, in the hope of reaching him by telepathic means. Instead, I heard Michu’s voice, loud and clear. She was telling me that she was in constant communication with her father at the launch site and would give us news as it came through. I told the others what I had heard.

‘Ve continue on full power,’ said Hermann. ‘Ve have ze rear and ze front panels balanced. Ve must keep zem zat vay, razer zan have to find ze balance all over again.’

I nodded in agreement with Hermann. It was better to give Attila more power than to risk giving too little. After all, we didn’t know for sure how much we were pushing it off its normal trajectory.

An hour passed and no news came from Russia. Then, finally, Michu’s words reached my head. ‘Congratulations! Attila has been deflected by two degrees from its path. But you need another two degrees at least to be sure it will avoid the Earth.’

‘Guys!’ I yelled.

Tim, who had been sleeping, jumped into the air.

‘Listen! Wake up! Michu has told me that Attila has moved two degrees.’

There was cheering from four throats.

‘But listen,’ I told them, ‘the control room people say we need another two degrees; that means another four hours.’

‘Or more!’ cried Hermann. ‘Ze closer Attila gets to Earz, ze more power it vill need to move it.’ I knew what he said

was logical, but surely that factor had already been taken into account by the computer.

Everyone was now awake and concentrating fully. The Magnobile vibrated, but by now we were used to it. Hermann took over the right hand screen from Sonia. She smiled and lay back in her bubble. She had proved she could hold Attila steady. I continued at the rear panel screen. Another two hours passed uneventfully. Hermann had decided to continue bombarding Attila with maximum magnetic power for an extra hour on top of the four hours, just to make sure.

Ben was now keeping watch on the Red Planet, while Hermann was continually fine tuning the front panel controls. I was looking out of the clear top of the Magnobile, letting my mind wander. I was sitting with my parents in front of the television.

Suddenly, something made me start. Something had flashed in front of my eyes. I blinked, thinking perhaps a speck of dust had crossed my eyeball. I looked again. There was nothing there. But no! There it was again. This time I knew it was no speck of dust. Something had indeed flown over the top of the Magnobile. I searched the blackness for the object. Whatever it was it was travelling very fast.

‘Hermann,’ I called across to him in a shaky voice. ‘Hermann, we are not alone. There is something flying around here.’

At that moment it appeared just to the left of us. My heart almost leapt into my mouth and the blood in my veins turned to ice. I stared at the object that was floating in space not far away from us.

‘Zoggs, my God!’ I breathed. ‘The Zoggs have found us!’

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### THE VISITORS

Once I had overcome the initial shock of seeing another spacecraft, when I had got used to the idea that we were the only living beings, save for the inhabitants of Mars, within a hundred million kilometres, I became clear-headed enough to examine the impressive visitor that was parked next to the Magnobile. It was shaped like a flattened spinning top, not unlike the flying saucers that people had spotted back on Earth from time to time. It was dull silvery-grey in colour but around the central rim it glowed golden yellow. It was hard to determine its size and distance from us, because we had nothing against which to measure it, but I guessed it was perhaps thirty metres away. As I watched, spellbound by its beauty, it seemed to spin slowly and silently. I wondered if there were windows in the sides, through which we were being watched.

‘It’s beautiful!’ breathed Sonia, her voice trembling.

‘Ben’s eyes opened wide and his mouth gaped. ‘Awesome!’ he said.

‘Christ!’ whispered Tim, ‘that’s one hell of a spaceship!’

I glanced at Hermann, expecting a similar exclamation from him. His face reflected the golden glow from the enormous saucer. His eyes, wider than I had ever seen them, were fixed on our new next-door neighbour. He spoke slowly. ‘I have a book at home; zere is vone picture vich is ze same, exactly ze same as zat vone.’

‘So they have visited Earth.’ I was intrigued.

‘Many times, I am sure,’ said Hermann quietly. ‘But ve must reduce magnetic power immediately. If ve don’t, and zat zing gets in ze vay of ze panels, ve or zem will be...’ He couldn’t find the words he needed.

We spent the next few minutes reducing power in the panels to almost zero. As we did so, the Magnobile moved backwards and forwards, but the Zogg spaceship kept alongside. Our influence on Attila was now minimal, and we had

not deflected it enough for it to pass by the Earth. Why did the Zoggs have to turn up now, just when we were hours away from success? If we lost Attila again, there would be little hope of finding it a second time.

We had now moved away from Mars to a position about ten thousand kilometres above the surface. Still our neighbour kept us company.

‘What do you think they are going to do now?’ asked Tim feebly.

‘We have to wait and see,’ I suggested weakly. ‘At the moment, they don’t seem in a hurry to do anything.’

Indeed, the saucer-shaped spaceship remained at the same distance from us, slowly rotating and shedding its golden light into the cabin of the Magnobile, where we sat, overawed by its splendour.

‘What do you think Zoggs look like?’ asked Tim, unable to draw his eyes from the marvel of spaceship design.

‘I have often tried to imagine,’ I said.

‘As far as we know, no-one has ever seen them,’ said Hermann.

‘Except Zigismo,’ I said. ‘He is supposed to have met them.’

‘Except for him,’ said Ben, ‘we must be the first humans ever to meet them.’

‘I’d rather someone else got there first,’ I said with a nervous laugh.

‘Me too!’ agreed Tim.

‘Whatever we do, we must be polite to them,’ was Sonia’s wise advice.

Tim and Ben stifled a laugh.

‘What’s wrong with that?’ Sonia reacted with a glint of anger in her eyes.

‘Nothing,’ said Tim. ‘It just sounded funny, being polite to little green extraterrestrials.’

‘I bet they’re not green,’ said Sonia, offended by Tim’s tone.

‘I bet you they are,’ countered Tim.

‘Five quid says they’re not green,’ offered Ben.

‘You’re on,’ said his brother without hesitation.

‘This is no time for betting, guys!’ I complained. ‘This is a time for praying.’

So we did just that; a quietly spoken prayer for deliverance from the extraterrestrials that we had all decided we would rather not meet.

‘Hermann, why don’t we get out of here?’ I asked.

He hesitated. ‘Zey travel faster zan ze speed of light. Better ve vait to see.’

We sat for another hour, while the Zogg spaceship hovered silently beside us. Then suddenly it moved.

‘It’s coming nearer!’ I cried.

Sure enough, it was approaching slowly.

‘It’s huge!’ whispered Ben.

‘Much bigger than I thought,’ I said.

As the spaceship came nearer, I realised that it must have been further away than I had at first thought. It made our shoebox feel more like a matchbox, or like a fly next to the saucer that held our morning cup of tea. In fact it was so big I was unable to see the whole of it. As it came to rest next to us, the inside of the Magnobile was flooded with golden light from its rim, which alone was over two metres thick. My heart thudded away in my chest and my hands shook. The three faces behind me were pale and wide-eyed. No-one could speak.

The giant spaceship was still edging closer. The glowing rim was now underneath us so that the upper section sloped up beside us and the Magnobile was resting directly on its surface.

‘Reduce power to zero,’ said Hermann.

‘Power in rear panel now zero,’ I confirmed.

Hermann pushed back the front panel throttle and the humming sound that we had endured for the past twenty-seven hours ceased, and silence reigned in the Magnobile.

Suddenly, a large square panel on the giant saucer slid silently across, revealing an opening, which came to meet us. In a moment we were inside. There was nothing we could do. The panel closed and we were in complete darkness. But not for long; on my side, another panel opened and a dim light flooded our cabin.

For what seemed like an age, we sat there in our bubbles, waiting anxiously for something to happen. We looked at one another, hoping there might be strength in togetherness. I prayed silently to myself. I thought of Michu and wondered

if the Zoggs had landed on Mars and, if so, what had happened to Similaria. Michu's voice entered my head at that moment. 'Bill, Zogg spaceships have been sighted but, as far as we know, not one has landed.' I told her the situation we were in. She said she was with us and all would be well. I should have gathered strength from Michu's words, but I could not help but visualise the asteroid Attila zooming ever closer to Earth. Every hour that passed reduced our chances of succeeding in the mission that we had felt so confident about only a few hours earlier. Once again I felt helpless in the face of imminent disaster.

Still we waited for the appearance of the Zoggs. Perhaps they are invisible, I thought. Or maybe the spaceship is unmanned and we are going to be shipped off to the planet Zogg, to spend the rest of our days imprisoned on a distant world. But if they are not invisible, what can these beings look like?

We were soon to find out.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

### FACE TO FACE

‘Open the top!’ The voice came out of nowhere.

I turned to Hermann. ‘Did you hear a voice?’

‘Yes, I heard a voice in ze head,’ he said.

I swivelled round. ‘Did you hear that?’ I asked the three tense figures in the back.

‘Yes,’ said Sonia.

Ben and Tim nodded.

‘Open the top!’ the mysterious voice repeated. Still there was no sign of the speaker.

Hermann pressed a button and the roof slid back slowly and silently.

‘Exit the cabin!’

We all looked at one another. Hermann’s face was screwed up so that his moustache protruded and his mouth and eyes disappeared into the folds of his skin.

‘Do we go in our bubbles, or do we leave them behind?’ I asked, confused.

Hermann pondered the question. He could not make up his mind.

‘Exit the cabin!’

‘We go in bubbles,’ I decided. ‘We don’t know what the air is like in that thing.’

‘Exactly,’ agreed Sonia.

I climbed out first, since I was the one nearest the doorway into the corridor of the spaceship. As I did so, my bubble expanded to fill the space around me. The others climbed out one by one. Hermann was first, straining as he lifted his little legs over the side. Their bubbles filled the available space, forcing mine to contract again. I stepped forward gingerly, taking my bubble along with me.

‘Move forward!’ the voice commanded.

We were together now, five tired souls, filled with trepidation. We did exactly as the mystery voice told us.

‘Move forward!’

We took a few more steps, finding ourselves in a large room, one side of which was long and curved, the longer side following the outer shape of the spaceship. The ceiling sloped up in the direction of the centre. The walls and the floor were of the same dull silvery metal as the exterior. The room was entirely empty. From some round windows in the outer curved side a dim orange light leaked into the room. Our bubbles, without the restriction of the little cabin, spread outwards. I feared that they would either take up the entire space of the room or that they would become weak and burst, but neither fear was realised, for they settled into a form not more than three metres across.

‘Stay!’ The same voice came to my head, from which direction it was impossible to say. But it was clear that all of us were getting the same message.

‘Zey speak German,’ Hermann whispered to me. He had come up beside me, his head just reaching my shoulder, surprise showing in his eyes.

‘What!’ I was nonplussed. ‘Are they speaking German to you?’

Hermann nodded.

‘Well, to me it is English,’ I said in amazement.

I turned to the others.

‘English,’ said Ben.

How strange! The message comes to Hermann in German and to us in English. It follows that Martians would hear it in Kisoro.

‘That’s cool!’ exclaimed Ben.

We waited for another command from the disembodied voice, but no further words were heard. Just then, a small section of the left hand inner wall slid back without a sound and in the doorway stood a figure. At last we had come face to face with a Zogg.

Science fiction has given us a stereotype extraterrestrial, typically small and green, with a bulbous head topped with antenna, and a hollow voice like that produced by a synthesizer. Well, in reality, those beings from the planet Zogg were quite different. Certainly Zoggs were small, no more than a metre tall and their heads were quite out of proportion to the rest of the body, compared to body shapes we were used to. Apart from that, Zoggs didn’t fit the pattern we are

persuaded to accept. Their bodies were not green and no antennae protruded from the tops of their heads. The rest of the body was well proportioned, though hardly athletic. The skin was pale and translucent and completely hairless. The facial features were not unlike those of human beings, except that they had no ears. Their two large eyes were spaced a bit further apart than ours and the nose was tiny, little more than two holes above a slit of a mouth.

‘Greetings!’ The voice reached my ears without any movement of the Zogg’s mouth. In fact he made no movement at all. I say ‘he’ but there was no evidence that the figure before us was either male or female, since, although it was completely naked, it had no obvious organs by which we humans differentiate men from women.

‘Greetings!’ It repeated, after not one of us moved a muscle. We were far too busy taking in our first ever sight of an alien to think of returning the greeting. But now we had to respond out of politeness. Sonia had advised us to be polite and for sure we didn’t want to upset the Zoggs. I bowed and one by one the others did the same.

‘Greetings,’ I said.

‘*Wei gehts es dir?*’ said Hermann. I understood that Hermann had heard the Zogg greeting in German. How did it know Hermann was originally from Germany? How did it know we were English, come to that?

The Zogg came forward with tiny steps. As it did so, I noticed that it had only three toes on each foot. The hands too, only three fingers, two small ones and a big one for gripping. My heart was thudding away against my ribs. What was the Zogg going to do? Its face was expressionless. The voice was certainly polite enough, but what was going on in that large cranium it was impossible to know. It must know we are from Earth because it speaks to us in Earth languages. What else does it know about us?

Just then, two more Zoggs appeared behind the first one. They were all identical.

‘Do you submit to your new master?’ I could not tell which one of them had spoken: the three mouths remained shut. When the Zogg received no reply, the question was repeated. ‘Do you submit to your new master?’

We looked around at one another, seeking leadership.

Who was the master we were being asked to submit to?

Ben shrugged his shoulders. Tim and Sonia merely looked at each other.

‘*Nein*,’ said Hermann.

‘Can we know who we are submitting to?’ I asked nervously.

‘Zogg,’ was the reply.

I was puzzled. ‘So, which one of you is Zogg?’

‘We are all Zogg: Zogg is One.’

I was intrigued. ‘Which one of you is speaking?’ I asked with more confidence.

‘Zogg.’

‘Zogg is your leader then,’ I offered.

‘We are all Zogg: Zogg is One.’

I was becoming confused. We had been told the leader of the Zoggs was called Kogoguogok.

‘Not Kogog... Kogoguogok?’ I asked.

‘Kogoguogok is Zogg and Zogg is Kogoguogok.’

That didn’t make anything any clearer. ‘If none of you is speaking, who is?’

‘Zogg is speaking.’

Could they be like cells in a body and they don’t see themselves as individuals? I wanted to know more. ‘So where is Zogg speaking from?’

‘From Zogg.’

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. These creatures are a bit like the ants, acting as a single unit, which they call Zogg. It is a kind of central Zogg that is communicating with us. Incredible!

‘What does Zogg want to do on Mars?’ I asked, with more courage now.

‘Zogg will become master of Mars,’ the voice continued evenly.

‘And then?’

‘After Zogg becomes master of Mars, Zogg will become master of Earth.’

I glanced at Sonia, whose face was expressing surprise. Then she turned red and I could see anger rising in her.

‘Sonia, cool it!’ I warned her. ‘Remember, you said we should be polite to the Zoggs.’

‘I can’t take their arrogance.’ She was fuming inside now.

‘Suppress your anger, Sonia, for all our sakes.’

‘Okay!’ she said. ‘But...’

I turned to the three Zoggs again. I was curious to understand them. ‘How many of you are there in this spaceship?’

‘Zogg does not understand the question.’

I laughed and said, ‘before me I see three Zoggs.’

The voice replied, ‘Zogg is only One.’

I was right. They see themselves as one single entity. How odd!

Ben now found his voice. ‘How many spaceships like this came from Zogg?’

‘Ten came from Zogg,’ said the monotonous voice.

I thought, ten only? They must have some powerful weapon to conquer Mars and Earth with ten spaceships. I decided to ask again about the number of Zoggs.

‘Zogg does not understand the question. Do not ask the question again.’

They really don’t understand the concept of separation.

‘Do you submit to your new master?’ The same question again.

I guessed we really had no alternative but to agree. I sought agreement from the others. Sonia was sullen and silent. Ben and Tim both shrugged, while Hermann’s face showed no emotion.

‘We submit,’ I said without enthusiasm.

‘You are now part of Zogg,’ the voice declared flatly.

I laughed again. I couldn’t have felt less a part of Zogg; less like one of those antlike creatures. But if we were to survive, we had to go along with them, at least for now. I was sure that if we had refused to submit, we would be annihilated.

‘Follow!’ was the next command.

The three Zoggs turned and we trailed off behind them, each inside our own individual bubble. As we passed through the doorway into the next room, which was smaller than the one we had just left, but similarly shaped, I was surprised to see hundreds of Zoggs arranged in neat rows, packed together, all sitting with their knees up to their chins and their arms wrapped around their shins; hundreds of identical creatures, all sitting in the same position. I knew that they were grossly inferior to us in physical strength, but whatever other powers

they had, we could only wait and see. If they were to conquer Earth they must have immense power of some kind, I was sure about that.

I was so engrossed in the sight of that mass of pale creatures, that I had not noticed another shape way back in the room. Now my eyes darted to the figure that stepped forward from its position against the wall. I recognised him instantly. He was dressed in a green tunic, over which he wore a black cloak. His yellow hair and beard was unmistakable. Zigismo!

The cloaked figure strode along the back wall and round the outside of the seated mass towards us. His gold and white teeth glinted in the orange glow as his lips drew back in a grin that sent shivers down my spine. As he neared, I was surprised to see how short and thin he actually was. But he packed a lot of intensity in his small frame. His fiery eyes bore into me as he spoke.

‘Well now! So you have joined the Zoggs, I see!’

I considered his words. ‘What... what makes you say that?’ I asked.

‘You would not be here in this room otherwise,’ he said with an evil chuckle. ‘Zoggs don’t mess about: you would have been ejected, to join all the other bodies orbiting the sun. Ha!’

At that moment I was glad that I had said ‘yes’ to the invitation to submit to Zogg, something that Zigismo had wisely done. But now what? I turned to my companions. Sonia gave me a smile of encouragement. She had overcome her anger. Ben and Tim were studying Zigismo’s face with something between amazement and loathing. Hermann was staring at the lines of Zoggs in front of him, pursing his lips and screwing up his eyes.

‘The Zoggs are fascinated by your technology,’ continued Zigismo, another vile grin splitting his face. ‘That nice little craft you came in might be *very* useful to us in our future plans.’

And when they have learnt the secret, we will be of no further use to them, was my suspicion. So how can we use this secret to our advantage? We need to be alone, to work out a plan. But for now, we must string them along. We need to know their strengths and weaknesses and wait for the opportunity.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

### SONIA'S PLAN

We learnt from Zigismo that he had his own sleeping quarters. As for the Zoggs, they had no special arrangements, but slept wherever they could in some bizarre shift system that I could not comprehend. Zigismo said they slept no more than a few moments at a time, on the wing so to speak. Knowing that our needs were different, but not having dormitories, they commanded us to sleep in the Magnobile, which suited us well as it gave us the opportunity of being alone together. It was fortunate that we still had a day's supply of rations inside.

'Sleep and you will be woken by Zogg at the right time,' Zogg had ordered.

Once we had closed the top of the Magnobile we sat in our bubbles facing one another. We agreed to speak in faint whispers, in the hope that the Zoggs would not hear.

'What do you make of these Zoggs?' I asked in a barely audible voice.

The looks on their faces told me the answer before anyone spoke.

'Creepy,' murmured Sonia.

'Cool,' said Ben softly. 'By the way, Tim, you owe me five quid.'

'Cold more like it,' Tim said, as if he had not heard Tim's reminder.

'They're not *green*,' Ben prompted. Tim nodded but said nothing.

'They're just like ants,' Sonia mouthed, and she shivered.

'Exactly,' I said, 'and they're sexless too.' I dropped my voice further: it was not something I would have wanted the Zoggs to hear. 'They're like the worker bees, you know, receiving instructions from the Queen, spending their lives doing nothing but working for Zogg.'

'But they are weak, I mean physically,' whispered Ben.

'Hey! We could knock 'em all over the place with one

hand,' said Tim, with actions to accompany the words. Tim had to be reminded to speak in whispers.

Hermann looked up from his daydreams. 'Don't try, young man,' he muttered, shaking his head. 'Zere is somezing ve don't know about zese Zoggs.'

'You mean weapons?' I asked.

'Exactly,' said Hermann. 'It is somezing ve vill need to find out.'

'And Zigismo won't tell us, that's for sure,' I added.

'Ve vill challenge ze Zoggs and see if zey show zeir veapons.'

At this suggestion we all looked at Hermann in surprise.

'And suppose they use them on us?' offered Ben with a frown.

'It is a risk ve must take in ze interest of science.' Hermann said in a faint voice.

I stifled a laugh. Must we *die* in the interest of science? 'Okay, I agree,' I said finally, after a moment's consideration. 'I am ready to die in the interest of science.'

Tim shook his head vigorously. 'Why don't we.....' He was searching for the right words. 'Why don't we just zap 'em with the Magnobile?'

'Tim, there are nine other saucers like this one,' said Sonia wisely. 'If we do that, the other nine will come for our blood. And keep your voice down.'

'So what would you do, clever?' Tim raised his voice in annoyance.

Sonia flushed. 'Shush! You're like a bull at a gate, Tim,' she threw at him.

'Come on then, if you're so brilliant, tell us what you would do!' Tim showed his anger in the softest of whispers.

'Okay,' said Sonia, regaining her composure. All eyes were on her, except for Tim's, which were looking down at his hands. 'Okay, I would do this,' she began quietly, with her hand half covering her mouth. 'I would try to persuade the Zoggs to forget about Mars, which is nothing to them, and attack Earth, now.' She went on to explain her plan in detail. The more she spoke, the more I admired her. The plan was perhaps not foolproof, and there were aspects that needed fine tuning, but it was the basis of a good plan. When she had finished speaking, Tim looked up at her and smiled.

‘Sorry, Sonia,’ he said softly. ‘It’s a pretty cool idea and I think it could work.’

‘Hey, let’s get some sleep,’ I said.

As much as we needed the rest, none of us could sleep. It was not that the bubbles were uncomfortable: on the contrary, I could have slept for a week in normal times. But these were not normal times. We were captives of a strange race of creatures from billions of kilometres away in outer space, imprisoned in a giant flying saucer hovering above the surface of Mars. We had done our best to divert a killer asteroid that was due to strike the Earth in two days time and we had no way of knowing if our efforts had succeeded. What if we had failed? Perhaps Michu would know. I concentrated on her with all my strength, calling her name and picturing her pale face and dark eyes. Then I heard her voice deep inside my head. ‘Bill, I have been trying to contact you, but you have not been thinking of me.’

It was true: I had not thought of Michu since we were swallowed by the Zogg spaceship.

‘Bill, are you all safe?’ continued Michu’s voice.

I sent the reply by thought wave, assuring her we were all well.

‘Bill, a lot has happened. I need to tell you.’ Her voice showed signs of fear. ‘There is panic on Earth. All the radio telescopes are trained on Attila. The newspapers and radio and television have nothing but the story of the asteroid. They are saying that Attila’s course has changed since the Pasadena observatory first discovered it but they cannot understand how it has happened. But they fear its course may still bring it close enough to the Earth for it to be trapped by the gravitational pull of the planet. One report says it will hit the Earth on Friday the 25<sup>th</sup>. The whole world is in chaos. The churches, mosques and temples are crammed with people, all praying to God, or Jesus or Allah or whoever they believe can deliver them from this impending disaster. God suddenly has an incredible number of new devotees. Some others; atheists and non-believers are frantically digging underground shelters. Business is paralysed, the stock markets have completely collapsed and there is even some looting in the cities. Religious leaders are saying it is God’s revenge for the sins of mankind.’

I felt the pain of the world in the pit of my stomach.

Michu went on, 'Bill, you *have* to keep on deflecting Attila. What you have done so far is great, but it is not enough.'

I told her we were prisoners in the Zogg spaceship. I also told her Sonia's plan.

'That's good,' her voice continued. 'I will do as you ask. Action your plan now, Bill. Your beautiful planet is in grave danger and the people of Earth need you, *now!*'

I asked her what was happening on Mars.

Her voice came back, more faintly now. 'Nothing. We see big saucers zooming around, but not one has landed yet...' Her voice faded. Michu was gone.

Had Zogg changed its mind about conquering Mars? I wondered. I turned to Hermann. He had his eyes closed, but I suspected he was not asleep.

'Hermann,' I called softly.

He looked round at me. The others were awake too. I told them what Michu had communicated to me. They were all overcome with the same horror I was feeling.

At that moment, the voice of Zogg was heard.

'Open the top and exit the cabin.'

We climbed out and stood waiting for the inner door to open.

'Move forward,' was the next command, as soon as the door had slid aside.

We were met by three Zoggs. Were they the same ones as before? There was no way of telling. I feared they had heard our conversation, and Sonia's plan too.

I stepped forward, as the agreed spokesman, and put my question as politely as I could. 'If Zogg would permit, I would like to make a request.'

'Make your request: Zogg will consider.' All three Zoggs remained still.

'The spaceship we came in,' I said, 'is called the Magno-bile. It will help Zogg to conquer Mars.'

'Zogg will be master of Earth,' it said.

'And Mars?' I asked.

'Zogg has changed the plan. Zigismo has no power now. Zogg will not help Zigismo. Zogg will conquer Earth.'

I smiled to myself. That's a relief. The first part of our plan has already been achieved, with no effort on our part.

We can now forget Zigismo. The Zoggs are not interested in ruling Mars, and Zigismo can no longer do it on his own.

‘When will Zogg attack Earth?’ I asked.

‘Zogg will attack when the time is right,’ it said.

I guessed they would have to wait for more spaceships to come from Zogg. With only ten, it would be suicide to attack Earth. And another thing, the way Zogg was talking, was it possible they had no idea that Attila was about to collide with the Earth?

‘Honourable Zogg,’ I said as smoothly as possible, ‘you have to believe what I am going to tell you. The Earth is about to be destroyed. A giant asteroid is about to strike in two Earth days. If you don’t listen to me, you will have no planet to conquer.’

‘Zogg knows. Zogg already got information about asteroid.’

I reeled in shock. ‘When did you, I mean Zogg, get this information?’

‘Zogg got information before Earth got information.’

I was flabbergasted. ‘And what is Zogg intending to do?’ I asked, raising my voice. I couldn’t understand the coldness of these creatures.

‘Zogg will disintegrate the asteroid,’ it said matter-of-factly.

‘But what if the pieces still hit the Earth?’ I cried.

‘Earth will not explode,’ said Zogg calmly.

I was astounded. ‘But the pieces will do tremendous damage, probably wiping out most of life on Earth!’ Then the penny dropped. I was beginning to understand.

‘Exactly,’ said the voice. ‘That is the intention of Zogg. Zogg will wait for the dust to settle. Then Zogg will come.’

So that was their game, the clever creatures! They use the asteroid to wipe out life on Earth and then they occupy the planet with no opposition. Brilliant!

Zogg spoke again. ‘You will show Zogg how Magnobile works.’

‘We are very happy to show Zogg,’ I assured it. In fact this was part of Sonia’s plan. ‘But Honourable Zogg,’ I continued, ‘what technology do you have? Magnobile can do exactly what you say you want to do. We can show Zogg the power of the Magnobile, *and* disintegrate the asteroid at the

same time.’

Of course, there was never any intention of disintegrating Attila and there never would be. But would Zogg believe our loyalty? It was strange that Zogg had accepted our submission to ‘our new master’ as something perfectly natural.

‘But ve must leave now!’ Hermann cut in. ‘Ve have no time to vaste.’

‘Zogg will go with you. We will leave now.’

Throughout the conversation, the three Zoggs had remained motionless, except for their large eyes, whose pupils moved mechanically from side to side. Now the three little bald, naked beings turned as one, and disappeared.

‘Enter the cabin,’ the voice of Zogg continued.

I turned to my friends, whose faces were lined with anxiety.

‘Are you ready, guys?’

No-one had time to answer. There was a shout and a black-cloaked figure burst through the doorway through which the Zoggs had just passed. His face was livid and his eyes burned like coals. He began to yell, displaying his white and gold teeth, and shaking his fist angrily. As he came towards us, we backed away, temporarily unnerved by his sudden, violent entry.

‘Get inside!’ he thundered.

Hermann activated the top of the Magnobile. As it slid back, we moved to its side and Sonia began to climb in. At that moment, a group of Zoggs came running towards us. Zigismo turned to face them. They didn’t slacken their pace but rushed at him. Zigismo let fly with a sweeping right hand and several Zoggs were lifted off their feet, flooring several of those coming up behind. But there were more of the little pale creatures and they kept coming.

He turned to us again and bellowed, ‘get inside! We are leaving!’

Thirty or more Zoggs were now within the corridor in which the Magnobile was standing. The door into the interior of the giant saucer closed silently and we were closed in, we five large humans, a violent Zigismo and a group of tiny ant-like Zoggs, slowly advancing on the cloaked Martian menacingly.

Suddenly, the outer door of the spaceship slid back, re-

vealing the black nothingness of space in all its nightmarish reality. I felt sick as I backed away from the dark hole, within my bubble, and flattened myself against the side of the Magnobile.

‘Watch out!’ I yelled to Hermann, who was dangerously near the doorway. He seemed to be in a daze. I leapt to his side and pulled him by the arm, to where I had been standing.

‘Get in! Get in!’ Zigismo was shouting, his yellow hair dancing on his black shoulders. It was then I noticed for the first time that he was inside a bubble.

All of a sudden, the Zoggs rushed at Zigismo, who had one foot on the step of the Magnobile and was attempting to climb in. Turning suddenly, he was caught off balance. He stumbled and fell slowly backwards, attempting in vain to regain his balance. I stared, horrified, as he teetered on the edge, his thin arms reaching out hopelessly for a handhold. Then, with a scream that had no sound, he floated out into the blackness. There he was, inside his bubble, suspended in space, weightless, his black robe and yellow hair lifting and drifting, as they would if he were under water. I will never forget the pleading in his eyes, as he stretched out his hand, in the forlorn hope that I might reach out and save him from death and from a vast, silent, airless grave. But I just stared as he floated away. Suddenly, the bubble burst, there was a flash and the evil dictator vanished into the emptiness of nothingness. Zigismo had gone. There was utter silence. No-one moved.

‘Enter the cabin,’ said Zogg, as if nothing had happened.

‘Are you ready, guys?’ I asked shakily.

‘Sure,’ said Ben, shaking himself free of the scene he had just witnessed.

‘Sooner the better,’ said Tim in a trembling voice.

Sonia was already inside. I gave a hand to Hermann, who was having difficulty with his legs. Four Zoggs clambered in with no effort and I was the last.

‘Now, my friends,’ said Hermann solemnly, ‘ze biggest test ve have ever had to face.’ His little eyes surveyed the ashen faces of his weary crew.

I had to agree with him. This was the beginning of our greatest challenge. And I had no idea how it would turn out.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

### EXPLOSION IN SPACE

‘Check rear panel is in repulsion mode,’ Hermann commanded.

‘Done,’ said Tim, who was sitting at the left hand controls. The two screens flickered and the displays confirmed that the rear panel was set to repel and the front panel to attract.

The atmosphere was tense. Each nerve in my body was taut, like the string of a bow about to release an arrow. Visions of Zigismo’s last moments kept flashing across my mind and at each flash my heart gave a leap. As much as I loathed the fallen tyrant, I could not help the feeling of horror at the manner of his death. The Zoggs, on the other hand, showed no emotion.

‘Increase rear panel repulsion to ten to ze power vone,’ Hermann commanded.

Tim pulled gently on the lever and the Magnobile began to vibrate slightly.

‘Rear panel set at power one.’ Tim’s face was rigid with concentration.

The Magnobile started to move forward as the panel’s magnetic power repelled the closed inner door of the huge saucer and our craft slid out smoothly into the darkness.

‘Increase to ten to ze power zree, *very* slowly,’ was the next command.

‘Two...’

The Magnobile shot away from the Zogg spaceship so fast it took us by surprise.

‘Rear panel on power three,’ Tim confirmed, on recovering his composure.

Tim kept the Zogg saucer showing as a green shape in the centre of the screen. At a distance of about five kilometres, when the silver dish was just a tiny speck against the overwhelmingly beautiful red planet, more than three quarters of which was illuminated by the Sun, Tim allowed the green

shape to drift to the side of the screen, so that the magnetic power was directed at Mars itself.

‘Now increase ze rear panel repulsion to ten to ze power seven,’ said Hermann, excitement gripping him.

Tim pulled on the lever slowly. ‘Ten to the power five... six... seven...’

I sat in my bubble, spellbound by the magnificence of Mars, as we gradually drew away from it. On the edge of the visible portion, where night was giving way to day, the bulk of Olympus Mons was silhouetted against the darkness. I thought then what an immense and incredible Universe I was fortunate enough to be part of. The enormity of it could hardly be believed. For billions of years the Universe has been expanding, the matter in its outer regions moving away from us faster than the speed of light, so that we may never see it, the light from it never quite able to reach us. Our own solar system, so huge to us, is in fact infinitesimal in relation to the galaxy of which it is a part, and that galaxy is probably only one of millions of other galaxies. How many of those galaxies contain solar systems with planets like ours, on which creatures live out their lives, ignorant of, or perhaps aware of us? I had already caught a glimpse of life on Sonam via the Uninet and we had met the Zoggs from Altair. Michu had said they knew of others. It would indeed be strange if many other inhabited planets did not exist in the far reaches of the Universe. Maybe one day we would see others.

Hermann was speaking again. ‘Increase ze rear panel to ten to ze power ten.’

‘Ten to the power eight...’ Tim’s voice shuddered along with the Magnobile. ‘Nine...’ The Shaking increased in intensity ‘...Ten.’

Mars was receding appreciably now. I leaned across to Hermann on Tim’s right. ‘Hermann, how are we going to pick up Attila?’

‘Zat is ze problem,’ replied the inventor, turning his little eyes in my direction. ‘Ve have to contact control at ze cosmodrome.’

‘I will try to communicate with Priam,’ I offered, ‘to see if he can guide us.’

At that moment, Ben called out. ‘The Zoggs are behind us!’

I swivelled round and saw a fleet of Zogg saucers racing up behind, about thirty degrees to the left. There were five of them, and I reckoned they were two kilometres away, although it was hard to say.

‘If zey come in direct line viz ze rear panel zey will be zrown off course,’ cried Hermann, ‘and ve also...’

He had no time to finish the sentence. The leading Zogg spaceship crossed behind us. The violent shock of ten to the power ten repulsion sent it spinning backwards into the one behind. There was a mighty explosion as the two spaceships disintegrated into pieces. Simultaneously, we were thrown away like an empty cigarette packet, somersaulting several times. A little naked shape tumbled over my bubble and lodged itself next to the wall of the Magnobile. Thank God for the bubbles that kept us safe from harm! They protected us for as long as it took for us to reset the Magnobile on its proper course. As soon as I had recovered from the spinning motion, I looked back. The Zogg spaceships, travelling as they had been in close formation, were now a mass of spinning, splitting, disintegrating pieces. Not one of them had been spared the violent impact of the first spacecraft. All that remained of the five magnificent saucer-shaped spaceships were jagged pieces, tumbling and gliding hopelessly through space, spreading out in the weightlessness, propelled by the initial impact. Soon they had disappeared into the distance.

‘Are you guys okay?’ I enquired, trying to shake off the nausea and the horrific sight of such magnificent creations suddenly and sadly reduced to smithereens.

‘Hey, that was some firework display!’ exclaimed Tim.

‘Awesome!’ said Ben.

Sonia was pale. ‘How many Zoggs must have died in that,’ she said softly.

I looked round for the other three Zoggs that had come along with us to learn the secrets of the Magnobile. They were all lying about, in various contorted poses, one beneath Ben’s bubble, the other two in the rear of the Magnobile. They appeared to be dead. I realised of course that they did not have the protection of bubbles and that the violent tumbling of the Magnobile had crushed them against the sides. How physically weak they are! How did they imagine they could conquer Earth? There was something very strange

about those creatures that puzzled me.

But now, more important things were before us. Fate had, in the space of one hour, removed the vile presence of Zigismo and half the Zogg invasion force, without us having to lift a finger. The Almighty had indeed been generous!

‘Earth coming into view,’ Tim informed us.

Sure enough, ahead of us, a thin crescent had appeared, and behind it, off to the right, the round fiery ball that enabled life on Earth to thrive.

‘Prepare to activate ze front panel in attraction mode,’ said Hermann. He pulled on the lever on his right. ‘Ten to ze power vone... two... zree...’ The Magnobile began to vibrate softly. ‘Four... five... six...’

Now we were repelling Mars and attracting Earth. Our speed increased.

‘Seven... eight... nine...ten.’

Now for Priam! I concentrated hard. It took a few minutes but finally I could hear Priam’s voice in my head.

‘Bill!’ He was clearly happy to hear from us. ‘You naughty boy! You have not been in contact. Michu told me you two have been in communication. You know already the state of things on Earth; complete chaos and pandemonium.’

I asked Priam for the latest news on the path of Attila.

‘Well, there are conflicting reports. The Russian Space Watch says that Attila will pass so close that it will certainly be drawn by the Earth’s gravity and either break up or settle into an unstable orbit, before eventually entering the atmosphere and... well... you know very well what. There are many other predictions. Many say it will be a direct hit and, as you can imagine, most people are prepared to believe the worst.’

I told Priam we were heading for Earth, but we needed to know where to find Attila. And another thing; we had lost track of time. Attila had been expected to impact at 5.30 am on 25<sup>th</sup> April. How many hours remained?

‘Bill, it is now 17.30 GMT on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April. That means we are only thirty-six hours from expected time of impact. Attila is heading this way at sixty thousand kilometres per hour and is just over two million kilometres away. I am sorry but you must locate your target urgently. Unfortunately, searching for a seventy-five kilometre object in the

heavens at two million kilometres distance is like looking for a needle in a haystack. We will get you as precise a bearing as possible; then it will be up to you to find Attila. I am sorry, Bill, there is not much more we can do to help.'

Priam faded away. I shared the news with the others. The mood was depressed. Sonia tried to cheer us up, but she also felt the weight of odds against our success.

'Look, guys!' she said, putting a brave face on it. 'Zigismo has gone, the Zoggs have given up their attack on Mars and half the Zogg fleet has been destroyed, all in one day. That must be good news. Surely you're not going to give up?'

'What about the other five spaceships?' said Ben, 'won't they be along soon?'

'Yes,' I added, 'and they'll not be in the best of moods. For sure they'll not make the same mistake as the others.'

'We'll zap 'em,' said Sonia, 'like Tim said we should.' She glanced at Tim.

'Yeah!' he said, although he didn't sound totally convinced.

'But see how much has gone our way.' Sonia was not giving up. 'Our winning streak will last, you'll see.'

'Sonia, you're right,' I said. 'Things looked much blacker a few hours ago.'

Hermann, who had been concentrating on keeping Earth in the middle of the front panel screen, suddenly looked up and said, 've vill vin! It vill vork, you vill see!'

I laughed. From the other side of the cabin, Ben looked over at me and a smile gradually crept over his face. Then he laughed and Tim, turning round, laughed too.

'Vat did I say zat vas so funny?' said Hermann innocently.

'Nothing, Professor,' I said with as straight a face as possible.

By this time we were all laughing. The mood had suddenly changed. A new feeling of optimism filled the cabin of the Magnobile.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### CRESCENT WITHIN A CRESCENT

Swiftly and hummingly, the Magnobile sped on towards home. Before us the silver crescent hung suspended against the inky blackness, the Sun just over to the right, so that the two points of the crescent pointed left. Within its arms, the bulk of the planet shone with a silvery glow and the curls of cloud were quite visible. It was the size of a large football. Between us and Earth, about four hundred thousand kilometres from its master, the Moon was hiding, its dark side facing us. It was the Sun's rays, reflected off the far side of the Moon that gave Earth's unlit part its ghostly glow. The inhabitants of our planet were enjoying full moon. But perhaps 'enjoying' was the wrong word. Would they be in the mood to enjoy anything, with the destruction of their world painfully near?

Behind us, the Red Planet, its right hand edge shaved, lay in its loneliness, making its solitary journey around the Sun, as it had done for billions of years. Once, it had been blessed with seas and rivers and life-giving rain, and simple life existed. Now it was a dry and cold, rusty desert, scored by mighty chasms and dead volcanoes. But we few lucky ones guarded a priceless secret, that deep below the surface lived and thrived a hundred thousand humans. And then I thought: what is just as astounding is the knowledge that Mars is home to beings who no longer need the material body, but exist in metaphysical form, that is, formless; beings who know they are One with the Almighty presence. As yet the human inhabitants have not advanced sufficiently to be able to communicate with their spirit neighbours, although they know such enlightened, disembodied beings exist. But, if it survived the impending cataclysm, our world was soon to undergo a dramatic change, perhaps in my own lifetime; a change that would see humans take a gigantic leap in spiritual awareness.

'Look!' cried Sonia. 'There! What's that?'

I was shocked out of my reverie. My eyes followed the point of her finger.

‘It’s the Moon!’ said Ben excitedly.

‘Where?’ I said. ‘Oh! I see it now. Wow! That’s amazing!’

We were all staring at the Earth now. In front of the pale silvery ball, a large, dark, almost round shape had appeared. It must have been there all along but it was only now, as Earth drew near, that sharp-eyed Sonia spotted it. From our position it could only be seen in silhouette. But now I could see that its right-hand edge was illuminated; a wafer-thin crescent, in front of and within a larger crescent. It was one of the most incredible sights I had ever seen. We stared in wonder at the spectacle for some time.

I suddenly thought of Priam and immediately his voice entered my head. ‘Where are you? How long before you reach Earth?’

I told him I thought about three to four hours, but I would confirm with Hermann.

‘Have you found Attila yet?’

Hermann had been trying for hours to home in on the giant asteroid, but without success. There was nothing for it but to head back in the direction of Earth and hope against hope that the Hun would be found. That thought winged its way to Priam.

‘Bill, if you are here in the next four hours, the control room can help you locate Attila.’ Priam’s voice was full of anxiety. ‘You know, your first attempt was enough to avoid a first-time collision with the Earth. What I mean is, Attila won’t strike us head on but will be drawn into the gravitational pull of the Earth, make a loop and then collide with us on its second orbit. If you make it here in four hours, we may succeed in finding it. If not, it will be too late; Attila will have gone below the horizon. Do you understand?’

I told him I understood that the Earth’s rotation would put Attila out of sight from the cosmodrome, but suggested we could repel Attila from another position above the surface of the Earth, outside the atmosphere.

‘But from the base, the computer can easily help to point you in the direction of Attila. If you are anywhere else you will have to locate Attila yourselves. I doubt if you’ll be able

to do it.'

I knew there was only a slim chance. So what should we do? I put it to Hermann.

'I zink it vill be hard to make ze cosmodrome in four hours,' he said gloomily. 'And if ve cannot find Attila ourselves ve can do nozing to shift it.'

'Let's try for the base,' was my suggestion. 'If we are too late we can still fly out again and look for it.'

'Ve have so little time, Bill,' declared Hermann. 'Ze time on Earz is around twenty-zerty GMT. Zat means ve have only zirty-zree hours left.'

'Can't we get a bit more speed out of this old tin can?' said Tim disrespectfully.

'Ve are already at maximum,' said Hermann, ignoring the slight to his pride and joy. 'Max repulsion in ze rear panel and max attraction in ze front.'

'Then I vote we go for the base, as Bill suggests,' said Ben.

'Me too,' said Sonia. 'Guys, the Almighty has already shown He is with us. We are going to succeed.'

'Thanks, Sonia,' I said. 'Now is the time to pray.'

We sped silently on. Mars was now a small red disk and the Earth was rapidly looming large. It was still too soon to make out the oceans and continents, and when we were close enough for that, the colours would not stand out, because we were approaching from the dark side. Only on the crescent itself the colours would be clearly distinguishable.

It was time for me to take over the rear panel from Tim. As I moved forward in my bubble, the Zogg that had been wedged between me and the side of the Magnobile floated out of its position and hung suspended, as if it were on invisible puppet strings. I glanced at its thin, hairless body in a detached way. I knew that God was responsible for the Creation, and that all life in the Universe, Zoggs included, were creations of the Almighty, just as we were, but it was hard to raise any feelings for the little creature that had died when the Zogg saucer got in the way of the rear panel. But it reminded me that the remaining five spaceships had not made an appearance and I wondered then what they were doing. Could they have given up, or were they already preparing to blow Attila to pieces as they had planned? There was nothing we

could do: Zogg spaceships were capable of speeds way faster than light, which meant a journey from Mars to Earth would be made in minutes. At any moment, I expected them to appear suddenly.

I still kept the green spot that was Mars in the centre of the screen. Hermann was quietly doing the same with the front panel, keeping Earth in the middle of his screen. And so the minutes ticked by, and minute by minute Earth loomed larger, while Mars became a tiny red ball. The Moon also grew in size until it appeared bigger than the Earth. Only the crescent was visible but it presented a beautiful sight: the craters and plains stood out in sharp relief. We passed the Moon on our left and as we did so, we could see more of it. Finally it stood behind us, almost spherical, silver brilliant.

‘Transfer rear panel repulsion from Mars to Moon,’ Hermann ordered.

I did so. The move would give us more speed, which was vital if we were to reach base in time to pick up Attila before it dipped below the horizon.

‘Ve should be wizin range of homing device soon,’ said Hermann.

Sure enough, a faint light was flashing on his screen, signifying that we were within range and we would be guided down.

‘It is vone in ze morning now,’ Hermann informed us.

‘The 24<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup>?’ asked Ben.

‘Ze 24<sup>th</sup>,’ said Hermann. ‘Just twenty-eight hours to go.’

Ben laughed. ‘Phew! I thought it was AZ Day.’

‘Ze cosmodrome is four hours ahead of GMT, so it is now four in ze morning. It will be getting light zere soon.’

We were heading for the grey line between night and day, and in a quarter of an hour we would be down on the ground. We were lucky not to have to circumnavigate the globe: Russia lay immediately below us. Would we make it in time to catch Attila?

Earth came to meet us. Is there anything more beautiful than our own planet from outer space? I doubted it then.

‘Hermann, when do we reduce magnetism?’ I asked.

‘At ze last minute,’ he replied, not looking up from his screen.

‘But... but not too late, Hermann,’ I suggested, ‘other-

wise, we'll hit the Earth at speed. And if we.....'

Hermann cut me short. 'Ve must not miss Attila!' he said with determination.

'Yes, but the speed we are doing, it will take ages to slow down. If we hit the atmosphere too fast, won't we burn up... like a packet of crisps?'

'Of course,' said Hermann, 'but ve have a natural brake.'

'Repulsion?'

'Qvite right, young man,' said Hermann, and he turned and gave me a knowing smile. 'I know vat I am doing,' he added.

I kept quiet then, trying to keep my composure. My heart beat against my ribs and my mouth was as dry and as rough as sandpaper. No-one else spoke but I knew their nerves must also be at breaking point.

I could now see the atmosphere, like a halo encircling the globe. But still we hurtled towards the Asian continent.

'Reducing attraction in ze front panel!' cried Hermann suddenly, pushing the throttle back to zero. This caused the magnobile to shake violently. 'Reduce repulsion in ze rear panel to zree! Qvickly!'

'Rear panel repulsion reducing... nine....eight... seven... six...' The shaking lessened. 'Five... four... three. Three it is,' I confirmed.

The Magnobile went suddenly quiet, and it was hard to keep the Moon in the centre of the screen. The green dot wavered about alarmingly.

'I can't keep it steady!' I yelled.

'Don't panic, Bill,' Hermann's voice reassured me. 'Reduce to zero, now!'

I did as he commanded.

'Switching to repulsion in front panel,' he said, activating the switch on the instrument panel in front of him. 'Increasing repulsion in ze front panel, vone... two... zree... four... five...'

The Magnobile began to shake violently again and the next moment the Earth was right above my head.

'What's happening?' called a frightened voice from the back.

'Nozing, nozing,' Hermann said calmly. 'Ve are okay.'

The Magnobile steadied and in a moment it was back on

course, and slowing down as the repulsion came into effect.

The next five minutes saw us inside the atmosphere and we were naturally slowed down. I felt the heat and was concerned in case we burned up. But Hermann knew his onions, as we say. He reduced repulsion power in the front panel to ten to the power three and allowed the Earth's gravitational pull to drive us forward. Earth rose gently to meet us. It was getting light on the Russian plains, which stretched away in all directions, grey and bare. The homing device was guiding the Magnobile to its destination. Shortly I could see the lights of the cosmodrome and then the buildings rose out of the mist. Another twenty seconds and we were softly settling onto the base.

'Congratulations, Hermann!' I cried. I was shaking like a leaf.

Ben and Tim cheered and clapped madly. 'Perfect landing!' cried Tim.

Hermann blushed red and his face creased into a shy grin, sending his little eyes into the fold of skin, while Sonia sat with tears of relief streaming down her cheeks.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

### SURROUNDED

The Cosmodrome Director led a little welcome group across the tarmac in the grey light of dawn. The diminutive figure of Priam was recognisable beside the four bulky Russians. They all wore heavy coats, just as they had done the morning we had left on our journey to Mars. It seemed like another age, so much had happened in the intervening... forty-eight hours. Forty-eight hours only? It hardly seemed possible!

The lid of the Magnobile slid back and we got to our feet. As we did so, our bubbles deflated and folded up and we were left standing in the cold morning air. I shivered. As if by magic, a tray of steaming tea was borne from a nearby building and five tired travellers warmed their hands on hot mugs.

‘Welcome back!’ called the Director. ‘And well done!’

‘Wonderful work!’ cheered Ivan.

‘Yes, you have done well,’ said Professor Resichenko.

‘Indeed you have,’ said the pipe-puffing Dr George.

‘But you still have work to do,’ warned the Director, frowning. ‘And there is no time to waste. The computer tells us Attila will hit Earth at 6.10 am tomorrow. It will make one orbit and then it will dive into the Bay of Bengal.’

Hell! I thought. Why is it that Bangladesh always gets the worst of it? But then I saw in my mind’s eye a seventy-five kilometre wide lump of rock plunging into the sea, and I realised that, whether it struck the Bay of Bengal or the Bay of Biscay, it would make little difference to the fate of life on Earth.

‘You are too late to give it the push from here,’ the Director advised, ‘but we can point you in the right direction.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Attila will set in less than twenty minutes. You must activate your screens immediately so that the computer can adjust your position. Hurry! There is not a second to lose.’

There was barely time to drink the hot, refreshing tea before cups were whisked away. A box of rations was exchanged for four tiny Zogg bodies, which were handed over to an incredulous director. But there was no time for explanations. That would have to come later... if there was to be a later!

The lid of the Magnobile closed over our heads. Hermann handed over the front panel controls to Ben and went to sit in the back. Our bubbles inflated around us and we settled down nervously for the final attack on Attila. Before long, the front of the Magnobile began to rise as the computer fed the information into the lifting gear. Then the shoebox slowly swivelled round until, there on the screen, appeared a green spot.

'You are now facing the target.' The voice from the control room crackled through the speaker. 'It is very low down in the sky.'

'I have it!' cried Ben excitedly.

'Are you ready for lift-off?' asked the controller.

'Ready,' confirmed Ben. 'Hey! This is better than boring old Maths lessons.'

Ben and I went through the procedures, as had been done two days earlier, assisted by Hermann from behind. Soon, the Magnobile was humming, and then vibrating gently, as repulsion in the rear panel took effect.

Suddenly, the Magnobile lifted off and we shot away, skimming the tall trees that skirted the cosmodrome. As we soared higher, Attila, still a million and a half kilometres away from us, was well clear of the Earth from our position. We headed westwards over Eastern Europe, climbing all the time. Soon we were outside the Earth's atmosphere. The British Isles were below us now, peeping out from swathes of cloud, which shone white in the bright moonlight. Still we climbed. The Atlantic Ocean could be seen now, deep blue-black. Still the green image of Attila sat in the centre of Ben's screen.

'Attila is now at sixty degrees,' Ben announced.

'This is it, guys!' I said.

'Rear panel to maximum repulsion, Bill,' Ben ordered.

'Ten to the power four... five... six... seven... eight... nine... ten, confirmed.'

'Time to activate front panel,' said Hermann.

‘Good! Front panel in repulsion mode. Increase front panel power, ten to the power... one... two ... three... four...’

The Magnobile began to vibrate.

‘... five... six... seven... eight... nine... ten... maximum power in front panel.’

‘Hold maximum power in boz ze panels,’ Hermann advised.

With the rear panel set against Earth and the front panel pushing Attila, the Magnobile was working at almost its full potential.

Suddenly, Sonia let out a cry, which almost made me jump out of my skin. ‘Look! There! Ahead!’

We all craned forward, looks of horror settling on our faces as we realised what it was Sonia was showing us. Ben almost lost Attila on the screen. There ahead of us, but off to the left and away from the Earth, were five Zogg saucers, exactly the same as the ones that had followed us from Mars. They were flying in close formation and they were cruising sedately in our direction. A magnificent sight they presented, spinning slowly and emitting an orange glow against the blackness of space. In a moment, they had surrounded the Magnobile, two in the rear, two in front and one immediately above us.

‘Maintain full power!’ shouted Hermann, apparently unruffled at the sudden arrival of the Zoggs. ‘Ve have to give Attila as much as ve can for as long as ve can.’

At that moment the voice of Zogg was heard in our heads. ‘Stay where you are,’ it said mechanically.

‘What is Zogg going to do?’ I asked out loud.

‘Zogg will disintegrate the asteroid when it is within strong gravitational pull of Earth. Many pieces will strike. All life will be extinguished.’

We looked at one another, our faces showing the fear we all felt.

Attila was still 800,000 kilometres away. The Zoggs would wait until maybe fifteen minutes away from expected time of impact. We had a long wait in store.

‘Zogg will keep you here until asteroid is blown to pieces. Zogg will watch while Earth burns. Then Zogg will go home.’

‘Go home? And what about us?’ I asked nervously.

‘You are part of Zogg. You will go with Zogg.’ It was a statement of fact.

I knew they wanted the secret of the Magnobile... and the bubble too. They were not interested in us, were they? Odd, I thought. They have said nothing about the destruction of the other spaceships. Perhaps they really believe we have submitted to Zogg and that the fate of their sister ships was accidental. It was hard to believe. But then, I was prepared to believe anything.

There was nothing to do now but wait. Incredibly, they seemed not to know that the Magnobile was dislodging Attila from its Earth-bound path, or if they did, they didn’t give it importance. They had faith that their power outshone anything we could conjure up. For sure, there was a lot about the Zoggs I failed to understand. They seemed so weak physically and they appeared not to carry any kind of sophisticated weapons. Where did their strength lie? Did they have a secret weapon that they were reluctant to use unless it was absolutely necessary? Was there a bigger and more powerful craft on the way from Zogg? If so, did it carry weapons of mass destruction so deadly as to make the world’s entire atomic arsenal look like a harmless sparkler in the hand of a little child on Bonfire Night? They must have such a weapon, otherwise how could they blow up a seventy-five kilometre wide lump of rock? And this Zogg that talks to us through naked antlike creatures with big heads: what was he or she or it like? Was it the feared Kogoguoqok, the leader who was supposed to have made a deal with Zigismo? Or was she like a queen bee, laying thousands of eggs a day, to hatch into little Zoggs and to be raised by workers just to do the royal bidding? I would love to know the answers to those questions. But frankly, I would rather learn about the Zoggs from a library book than by spending a holiday on the planet Zogg!

With Attila heading to Earth, the Zoggs had been presented with the opportunity to silence any possible opposition on our planet, without any effort on their part. They had known about Attila long before leaving home. Was it a plan they had made years ago? Even more incredible was the possibility that the Zoggs were responsible for the present course of Attila on its fatal journey to Earth. I believed then that Attila, and possibly other asteroids, *was the* secret weapon, con-

trolled by some incredible power beyond the imagination of the most imaginative minds on Earth.

So we waited. We did not want to discuss what we were doing to Attila. We knew that Zogg picked up our voices. Could they also pick up our thoughts?

After two hours of repelling the giant asteroid, I made contact with Priam, to find out if its course had changed. His familiar voice was soon resounding in my head.

‘Give us another three hours and we should be able to tell you,’ he said.

I told him we were surrounded by Zogg saucers, but we had full power on Attila and would keep bombarding it as long as possible. And could he not make it less than three hours: it was pretty uncomfortable surrounded by threatening aliens!

There was nothing to do but wait. The hours passed and the destructive monster drew ever closer to its meeting with our planet. I attempted to contact Priam again as he had asked me to. Silence! Was I losing my power of telepathy or was there something wrong? I looked over my shoulder at the Earth, half expecting to see it burning up. There it was, about ten thousand kilometres away, turning gently on its axis, its left edge now reflecting the Sun’s rays and the rest of it in shadow, presenting to us a broad crescent. I could easily identify the island of Newfoundland and the East coast of the United States running south-west. In New York the United Nations would be preparing to discuss for the umpteenth day running the impending apocalypse.

On the other side, the North Polar ice cap was shining brilliantly. Spring had come at last after a dark, bitter winter and the polar bears would have emerged from hibernation to enjoy the brief summer. With global warming melting the ice earlier each year and breaking up the pack ice on which they depended for their hunting, how long would those truly impressive animals survive? Would my children see them only on film, or view them, faded and stuffed, in the museum, the living bundles of white fur having joined the many other species doomed to extinction? But suppose we fail... not only polar bears but all life... no museums... nothing at all... Zoggs controlling an otherwise lifeless planet. At that moment I could not imagine such a possibility.

Priam continued to elude my thoughts. I was growing more anxious as the time passed, while the five Zogg saucers hovered silently and patiently around the Magnobile, careful to avoid the power of the magnetic panels. Another cause for alarm was the vibration of our little shoebox. It had begun to rattle, something it had never done before. I could see that Hermann was worried too. He sat behind Ben with a strained expression.

‘Should we reduce repulsion in the front?’ I dared to ask.

‘No!’ shrieked Hermann emphatically. ‘Ve continue: it is our duty!’

Both Sonia and Tim woke up at the sound of Hermann’s raised voice..

‘What’s going on?’ asked Tim with alarm. ‘And why the rattling?’

‘Nothing, Tim: go back to sleep,’ I said with a forced smile.

I said no more about the rattling. As Hermann had said, it was our duty to save our planet, even if we died in the process. Four lives sacrificed to save six billion.

Suddenly, Priam came into my head loud and clear. It took me by surprise.

‘Bill!’ The excited voice said, ‘the computer has confirmed that Attila’s course has been deflected a further five degrees. Well done! If it continues on the same path, Attila will pass the Earth. We are saved!’

I raised my arms and punched the air, intending to give a shout of joy, but lowered them slowly, faking a stretch. I feared that Zogg would intercept the sound. Four faces turned to me in bewilderment.

I mouthed the words. ‘Hey! Priam says we’ve done it.’

‘You mean...’ began Tim.

‘Shush.’ A finger shot to my lips and I breathed, ‘yes, Attila is not going to destroy Earth!’

‘Wey!’ Sonia burst into a broad smile. She would have hugged Tim if the bubbles had not been in the way.

Hermann was grinning. ‘Reduce power in ze rear and ze front panels slowly to ten to ze power vone.’

This was done. We were now sure that Attila, of no further threat to Earth, was free to make its way to an eventual rendezvous with the Sun.

## Operation Stargazer

‘Maintain...’

Hermann got no further, because the voice of Zogg came through in full force.

‘Stay where you are! Don’t move!’

Our jubilation turned to silence at the harsh command of Zogg.

‘Asteroid has changed course. Zogg must move to intercept it.’

They had found out. We looked at one another in alarm. Now what?

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

### DRY LEAVES IN A GALE

‘Can someone take over from me?’ asked Ben. ‘I’m finished.’

‘Let me take over, Hermann,’ Sonia said eagerly.

All eyes were on the sole female in the crew. Tim looked doubtful.

‘Why not?’ I suggested. ‘Sonia is as capable as any of us.’

She gave me a thankful smile and her blue eyes lit up.

‘Go ahead,’ agreed Hermann. ‘Take ze controls from Ben.’

They swapped places. I kept my position at the rear panel controls.

Zogg spoke again. ‘Prepare to be taken aboard Zogg spaceship.’

I froze. ‘Not again! We must do something!’

‘Leave it to me, boys,’ said Sonia through clenched teeth. Her jaw was set firm and her eyes narrowed in determined concentration.

‘Increasing repulsion in front panel,’ she said, directing the Magnobile at the nearest spacecraft. ‘Bill, reduce power in rear panel to zero.’

I looked at her, wondering what she was up to. Her look told me she was in command and I was to do as she said. Sonia was showing her true power.

‘Rear panel power at zero,’ I confirmed uneasily.

The Magnobile started to move away from and lower than the leading edge of the saucer closest to us. Did Sonia know what she was doing? We had to trust her. I glanced at the three in the back. Ben and Tim were watching the new commander with a mixture of surprise and respect. From Hermann, silence, but a faint smile lit his face.

‘Increasing front panel to ten to the power one.’ Sonia had the Zogg target in the middle of the screen.

She leaned across to me and whispered, ‘slowly increase rear panel repulsion.’

I nodded. 'One... two... three...'

'Hold it there.' Her voice was barely audible. 'Increasing front panel to power two.'

The nearest saucer edged nearer, despite the push it was getting from the Magnobile. Then it rose out of range of the front panel and disappeared from the screen, but not from our sight. The Magnobile shot forward, but the saucer kept the same distance, ahead and above us. I looked at Sonia, wondering when she would act.

'Sonia, it's closing in!' I said, louder than I meant to.

She ignored my alarm and concentrated on her controls. Then, suddenly, she lifted the front of the shoebox and pulled on the front panel throttle. At the same time she yelled at me. 'Bill! Full power in rear panel!' This time there was full power in her voice.

I yanked the lever back sharply and the Magnobile began to vibrate. Then it started to shake and the more it shook the louder it rattled. But Sonia was undeterred.

'Full power in front and back!'

The sudden force directed at the nearest Zogg spaceship caused it to flip backwards. The giant saucer tumbled over several times and smashed into the one behind, causing both of them to explode. Pieces of silvery-grey metal shot past us as the debris was hurled out by the force of the blast. Fortunately, none of the pieces hit us: had they done so, our mission would have ended then and there. We watched in awe as the remains of the two spaceships sailed away in all directions. The other three saucers had escaped the collision and were undamaged. They sped away from us at an incredible speed. In a matter of seconds they were mere specks. Meanwhile Sonia had reduced the repulsion power in the front panel to thrust us forward. But now she directed her attention to the three saucers, putting them as near to dead centre on her screen as possible.

'Keep full power in rear panel,' Sonia directed urgently but confidently.

'Aye aye Cap'n!' I laughed.

Then she pulled on her throttle and sent another burst of power directly at them, causing the Magnobile to rock violently. I instinctively threw out my arms to steady myself. There were cries of alarm from behind me. But ahead of us

the scene was heartening. I let out a whoop of joy as I saw all three spaceships blown away like dry leaves in a gale. Ben and Tim sat dumbfounded for seconds and then exploded into a chorus of congratulations.

‘Sonia, you’re a genius!’ That was Tim, who had not been too happy to see Sonia take the controls.

‘Well, Sonia, I’m impressed,’ said Ben, shaking his blond head. ‘I never thought you had it in you.’

‘Vell done, young lady,’ said Hermann, who was grinning from ear to ear. ‘I knew it would work!’

But Sonia was weeping. Her hands were still on the controls but tears streamed down her face unchecked and dripped onto her tunic. Her lips quivered and she sniffed loudly.

‘What is it, Sonia?’ I asked her cautiously.

For a while she had no voice. Then she said between sobs, ‘I’ve just been... responsible for the deaths of... of hundreds of God’s creatures... that’s what.’

‘It’s all in the course of duty, Sonia. Don’t take it to heart.’ But I knew she was compassionate as well as being brave.

Tim spoke. ‘We must thank our dear Professor. Without the shoebox... er... Magnobile, we...’

‘Yes, Hermann, we owe you such a debt of gratitude.’ I agreed.

‘Three cheers for Hermann!’ we all yelled.

‘But beware: zey might come back!’ he cautioned.

But they did not return. Whether they recovered from the blast and headed off home to Zogg or whether they were damaged and immobilised, we were not to find out. But later, it was discovered that the asteroid Attila had somehow mysteriously broken up into pieces. But by then it was sailing off out of harm’s way. But I knew in my heart that it was one of the remaining Zogg spaceships that had been responsible for Attila’s destruction. That they had not managed to blow it to pieces while it was heading for the Earth, a scenario that would have made it impossible for us to deflect it, was a stroke of luck for us and for the world. Rather, let me say it was the intervention of the Almighty, who didn’t want our beautiful world destroyed. Humans would have another chance to come to grips with the multitude of pressing problems facing them. It was my destiny to work towards a better

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world for all, and I was fully aware of it.

Chris Hawley

## **PART FOUR**

### **HOME ONCE MORE**

## CHAPTER FORTY

### BETROTHALS

Mum and I were sitting at the kitchen table, empty tea cups in front of us. It was a cosy domestic scene, in which motherly tears, shed for the return of a prodigal son, mingled with teenage sorrow for a suffering mother, aged by worry, and for the feeling of guilt for attending to affairs of the Universe rather than those of home. The weeping done with, the bond was restored. Mother and son sat in communion, content in their reunification.

Just then the doorbell rang, shattering the intimacy.

‘I’ll get it,’ I offered with a sigh, and started off down the hall. It was Sonia. I gave her a kiss and a hug. ‘I’ve missed you,’ I admitted.

‘We were together three hours ago.’ She laughed. ‘You *are* getting attached.’

I gave her another kiss. Her eyes lit up and her face shone. I thought she looked particularly pretty at that moment. She stood on tiptoe and returned the kiss.

‘Sonia, will you marry me?’ Hey! Where had that voice come from? Was that me saying that? I was confused: I had no intention of saying anything of the sort. How did it just come out like that?

Sonia looked very surprised. ‘Well, it’s a bit of a shock. I’ll have to think about it *very, very* carefully.’ With her right index finger between her teeth, she put on a heavy frown, for just ten seconds. Then she looked up into my face and smiled an impish smile. ‘Okay!’ she said brightly. ‘I’ve thought about it: the answer is... yes.’

Panic swept over me. I stammered. ‘Of c-course we’ll have to wait for a b-bit.’

‘Cold feet already?’ she teased.

‘No, of course not, it’s just that...’

‘I know, darling. It’s fine. We can wait for another two or three years.’

Relieve!

Sonia set off down the hall, her red pigtails dancing behind her, leaving me with the front door, and my mouth, wide open.

‘Hello, Mrs Steadman,’ she said, as she breezed through the door into the kitchen. I followed at a safe distance.

‘Hello, Sonia my dear. You haven’t been here for ages.’

‘I’ve been away too.’ She hesitated. ‘Actually, Bill and I have been together.’

Mum looked up, a questioning expression on her thin, drawn face, but she said nothing. Sonia turned to look at me as if to say: should I tell her the news now.

I shook my head and mouthed the answer. ‘When Dad comes home.’

Sonia understood.

Then I asked her. ‘Did you go to the library?’

‘I did and...’

‘And what? Did you see Mrs Rogers?’

She nodded, and that same smile stole across her face once again. ‘Dawn was there... *and* my father.’

‘Your father was there too?’

‘Yes! And they’re on their way here.’

‘And me looking like a scarecrow!’ cried my mother, heading for the stairs.

There was a ring at the front door. From the kitchen I could see two dark shapes through the frosted glass.

‘That must be them now,’ said Sonia, and she skipped down the hall to let in the visitors. She ushered them into the sitting room, where I had taken up a position in front of the fireplace.

‘Hello, Bill,’ said a big man I hardly recognised. He was casually but well dressed, his hair neatly combed over his bald patch and his face clean shaven. He had lost most of the paunch he had displayed the last time I had seen him. Above all he looked happy. He shook hands with me and gave Sonia a kiss on each cheek. Was this the same man who had locked me in the cupboard under the stairs? Was he the one who had threatened me and who had violently abducted us both?

He addressed Sonia and me. ‘No hard feelings, right?’

‘From my side, none,’ I said with a shrug. And I meant it: I am not a vindictive person.

I greeted Mrs Rogers and she insisted on giving me a hug.

The doorbell sounded again. Sonia bounced out of the sitting room.

Drawing back from the hug, the librarian held me at arms length and surveyed me carefully. 'You're looking thin, Bill.'

I wondered why it had taken Mrs Rogers so long to come to that conclusion. 'Thin? Must be all the excitement,' I said, just for something to say.

Sonia came back into the room with Ben and Tim, who shook hands all round.

Mrs Rogers and Albert were looking at me askew.

'Excitement!' exclaimed Albert; 'hardly excitement we want to see *too* often.' He lowered his large form into a chair provided by Sonia. 'Worse than any World War, I know! For days we thought it was curtains for all of us. Then, suddenly, the end of the world was postponed.' He laughed and then shook his head. 'We will never know why that asteroid suddenly decided to change direction. Nobody has yet come up with a satisfactory explanation. Imagine, the entire scientific world scratching its head and not one scientist with a clue as to how it happened.'

The four conspirators shared conspiratorial smiles and said nothing.

We were all seated now.

'But there was a claim by some Russians,' went on Albert Smith. 'Utterly absurd! I saw it reported in one of the national dailies. The article said the Russians had altered the course of that asteroid with one of their new inventions.' He laughed. 'Of course, no-one will ever believe such a ridiculous story. The cheek of it!'

Again the conspirators shared glances and behind-hand sniggers.

'Maybe it was some extraterrestrials,' quipped Ben.

'Little naked creatures with big heads,' suggested Tim. Then he remembered the bet. He held up his left hand and rubbed thumb and forefinger together. 'Tim, they were not green, remember?'

'What was not green?' Mrs Rogers asked with a frown.

'Oh! Nothing! Just a bet Tim and I had.'

To get off the subject of little green extraterrestrials, I asked Albert, 'did they say what kind of invention they used; those Russians?'

‘Just said it was top secret. How they have the nerve!’

Mrs Rogers was trying to attract Albert’s attention. ‘Bert, the news.’

‘Oh yes!’ exclaimed Albert Smith, after a moment’s hesitation. ‘I have an announcement to make.’ He took the hand of his companion. ‘Mrs Rogers, Dawn that is, has agreed to change her name to Smith.’

No-one spoke. Mrs Rogers looked at Sonia to gauge her reaction. It was hard to know what was going through Sonia’s head.

‘Do you mind, Sonia?’ she asked, afraid that Sonia would take exception to the match.

‘Mind?’ exclaimed Sonia, ‘I’m delighted; thrilled!’ Her face lit up and she dashed across to Mrs Rogers and her father and hugged them both. That set off the round of congratulations.

At that moment in walked Mum, newly powdered, painted and combed. When she heard the news, she announced that she would make tea for us all and, did we like chocolate digestive biscuits? I had to laugh at that. If Ivan were here...

Ivan didn’t come but Priam arrived a bit later. He carried news for us, but it had to wait until our visitors had gone home.

When Ben, Tim, Sonia and I were alone with Priam, he announced that we had been invited to Mars. Zeris wanted to hold a special ceremony to celebrate the liberation of Mars and the defeat of the Zoggs.

‘But the problem is,’ said Tim awkwardly, ‘our father is insisting we start school on Monday. There’s no way we can be back in time.’ He bit his lip in disappointment.

Priam smiled and said, ‘back in time? That is a small matter. We can soon sort that one out, can’t we, Bill?’ He winked at me.

I understood his meaning. The Time Bubble!

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

### PRAISE FOR THE A-Z TEAM

I picked up the Sunday Post for the 27<sup>th</sup> of April from the kitchen table and scanned the front page. Dad had just returned from his regular walk before breakfast and had brought with him the local paper. There was a column headed: 'MYSTERY AS GIANT ASTEROID EXPLODES' In smaller letters: 'Scientists baffled.' I was about to read on when Dad plonked a pile of newspapers on the table beside me.

'Here, I kept all the papers for you. I knew you would be interested to read about it.' He sat down opposite me, laid his elbows on the table and looked at me. I felt his gaze and looked up into those blue-grey eyes.

He continued. 'I don't know how much you've followed the news since they first announced that asteroid was heading straight for us. Y'know, it was damn scary, bloody chaos in fact. Nobody knew what to do, y'see. Nothing much you can do at times like that.....except say sorry to those you've wronged; put things straight, you know. Mum an' I, well, we haven't always seen eye to eye, but we forgave each other for whatever we'd done to hurt each other. Then we just waited for the end. We've never been church people and it didn't seem right to turn to God at the last minute and hope He'd save us. In the end He did... or someone did at any rate.'

I was unable to read on. I had never heard my father talk this way; in this sentimental tone. He had always been tough, speaking his mind, often without a thought for the feelings of others.

'And y'know, the worst thing of all?' he continued, searching my eyes. 'The worst thing was, not knowing where you were or what you were doing.' I sensed he was about to shed tears. 'Your mum was distraught, thinking the end was coming and her only son off somewhere, God knows where, and no chance to say goodbye.'

Poor Dad, I thought. 'But Dad, in the end nothing hap-

pened, so let's forget it.' As if I could! Mum and Dad will never know that their son was partly responsible for saving the world. Better that way. They'd never believe me, even if I told them. I'd probably take the secret with me to the grave. But forget it? Never in a million years.

I went back over the events of the last two days: the elation we had felt when the news came through that Attila had been shoved off its Earth-bound course and was safely on its way to the Sun; the joyous landing at the cosmodrome, feted by the Russians; a celebratory feast to end all feasts. Ivan had been particularly warm in his praise of the 'AZ team,' as he called us.

Prime Minister Putin had hosted a private party in his own house, away from the eyes of the press, and even his Government. The Russian leader himself, in full ceremonial dress, had pinned solid gold medals on five heaving and emotional chests, with the words, 'The Russian people and the entire world will never forget your heroic deeds. You will always be welcome here.' But then he had added a stern warning that nothing of the past months should ever be disclosed, and recent media reports should be ignored. He said that Russia would make the necessary announcement when the time was right. The warning was superfluous. The five of us had already made a solemn vow not to mention a word of our exploits to a soul, and we were serious about our pledge.

Hermann had been uncomfortable being the subject of such high and mighty attention. He smiled shyly and coloured as Russia's highest honour was bestowed upon him. The small group that was privy to the secret of the Mars Programme clapped and cheered, sending Hermann into even deeper embarrassment. I found it difficult to hold back the tears: it was such an emotional moment. Hermann had indeed been the brains behind the little shoebox that he himself had named the Magnobile.

Earlier, we had had a long meeting with Ivan, Dr George, the Professor and a small group of scientists: a paleontologist, a zoologist, two biologists, a neurologist and a geneticist. This was held following a brief examination of the four little Zogg bodies that had been hurriedly offloaded from the Magnobile the day before. There had been no time then to explain our experiences with the Zoggs and the scientists

needed to know everything we could tell them.

‘You say they don’t communicate as individuals?’ The paleontologist had asked.

‘That’s right.’ I replied. ‘The voice comes from Zogg, whatever Zogg is.’

‘Incredible!’ he said. ‘You talked of Zogg as being a planet, and the Zoggs as the inhabitants of that planet, is that right?’

‘That’s correct. But these creatures don’t have separate minds or voices, if you know what I mean. The words come from a central source, and they call it Zogg. They themselves never speak.’

One of the biologists spoke. ‘Yes, we have dissected the throats and find no vocal cords, and there is no tongue. It would be impossible for them to speak.’

Hermann looked up and said, ‘Anozer interesting zing is ze English hear ze vords in English but I hear zem in German.’

‘And we would hear the words in Russian, I suppose,’ said the zoologist.

‘I zink zat is correct,’ answered Hermann.

‘Amazing!’ Heads nodded and heads shook, all in disbelief.

‘Gentlemen,’ said Ivan pompously, ‘have you examined the brain?’

‘Oh yes!’ insisted the neurologist. ‘These creatures have brains twice the size of ours, but they are structured differently.’ He went on to describe the structure of the Zogg brain, using long and complicated words, some in Russian, which went completely over my head. ‘We need more than one day to properly study these creatures, two to three months in fact.’

‘We have started to build up a genetic map,’ the geneticist had said. ‘Of course, it will take time. Initial results show the creatures have a lot of genes in common with us.’

‘Who would think so?’ laughed Sonia.

‘Indeed,’ agreed Ivan.

‘Now, we want you to try to remember everything that this central Zogg voice told you,’ said one of the biologists.

Copious notes were taken as we all chipped in with our versions of the dialogue between us and the Zoggs.

‘You say they could hear and understand your voices?’ asked the other biologist.

‘Yes, but not our thoughts... apparently,’ I said.

The scientists were flabbergasted. ‘Why do you say that?’ asked one.

‘Well, when we spoke, they replied, or should I say, the central Zogg did,’ I explained. ‘But we could stay quiet and think, and they didn’t seem to pick up our thoughts.’ I laughed. ‘That was a blessing for us; otherwise they would have known our plans in advance.’

‘And they didn’t, right?’ said Professor Resichenko.

Ben shook his blond head and said to the Professor, ‘It was only when we saw the Zogg spaceships for the first time that we heard the voice.’

‘And what did it sound like?’ asked the zoologist.

‘For me it was a common English accent, clear and correct,’ I answered.

Ben said, ‘for me, it was just as my father speaks.’

‘For me too,’ offered Tim.

‘For me, vell, it was like someone from Norzern Germany, vere I come from.’ Hermann added a few words of German, trying to imitate the Zogg, as he had heard it.

‘Interesting!’ said the paleontologist into his long beard.

The scientists continued to question us for the next four hours, until we were all tired. Ivan wound up the meeting with the traditional toast to the glory of Russia and the scientists went back to their work, promising to call us when a final report was ready.

Before we left, Ivan had dropped a hint that he would be continuing with tests on the Magnobile and that Russia intended to use it to beat the Americans to a manned landing on Mars. It had made me sad. I could visualise Russian boots disturbing the red dust and the peaceful existence of the people of Mars. I could not let that happen. I would tell Priam: maybe he would know what to do. I had a pretty good idea. I hadn’t forgotten the night we had chased the taxi over the Swiss Alps, and Priam had thrown a bubble over it and brought it to a halt. He will do the same with the Magnobile and whisk it away somewhere. And the plans and papers, and Hermann too; he would find a way of getting them away from the Russians. I was one hundred percent sure Priam

could do it.

After the Presidential party that evening, for which we had all managed to salvage our last reserves of energy, we had slept in the plushest hotel in Moscow, all paid for by the Russian Government. We had been collected by Priam the next morning. I had told him what Ivan had said at the party and asked him to find a solution. Then we had bubbled home to an emotional welcome from our families.

Dad was still looking at me over the kitchen table. ‘So where *did* you go, Son?’ he asked pleadingly.

I had often anticipated the question and I had the answer prepared. ‘It was an important course, Dad,’ I said, ‘to do with the environment. I was chosen because of my interest in the subject.’ The explanation that had an element of truth and had sounded plausible then, now seemed inadequate. He looked at me and teardrops stood in his eyes.

‘Such an important course that you couldn’t call your parents even once?’

‘Well, conference really,’ I said lamely. ‘And Priam *did* come to say I was okay.’

‘He did,’ Dad said flatly. ‘But it was not *you!*’ He raised his voice. He was hurt. Then he added, ‘in normal times I would chuck you out, but these ain’t normal times.’

‘Sorry, Dad,’ I said.

‘It was your Mum who suffered most.’

My mother had looked ten years older when she had opened the front door to me the day before. Her face had been pale and thin, her body bent over and white hairs hung over her wrinkled forehead. She had stood there for a moment, unbelieving. Then, she had come forward, putting her arms around my neck. The tears had flowed; more water than the Amazon River ever emptied into the Atlantic Ocean. She sobbed and held me tightly to her, not being able to speak a word. Finally, we had entered the house and I had led her to the kitchen. Eventually, soundlessly, she had put on the kettle for the inevitable cup of tea; the panacea for all pains and traumatic occasions.

‘Sorry, Mum.’ I had said to her back. ‘I can’t explain. It was impossible for me to ring you.’ She had continued to prepare the tea cups without turning. Her shoulders had heaved every so often. ‘If I could, you know I would have

done. I was on an important mission, Mum; vital for the future of the Earth.'

At that, she had turned and a weak smile had crossed her face. 'Never mind, she had said, 'you're home now and that's all that matters.'

I knew she had no idea of what my last words had meant and she did not want to know either. It was my turn for the waterworks. I put my head on my arms and let the tears flow.

'Drink your tea, dear,' she had said after a time, 'it'll get cold.'

Dear Mum, such a Trojan.

'Your Dad will have something to say when he gets home. He's out late tonight, but I hope you'll wait up for him. If not, well the morning. Tomorrow's Sunday and you'll have all day.'

'Let him say what he has to,' I had said, shrugging my shoulders.

'Bill, did you know what we've been through? I mean, what the world has gone through. We thought it was the end.' She had paused and looked at me intently. 'Did you know, Bill?'

'Well,' I had said. 'Well, yes, I knew but we were kind of cut off, you see.'

'So you knew about that asteroid.'

'A little. Was it all over the papers?'

'Nothing but,' she had said. 'For a whole week: nothing but asteroid, asteroid, the end of the world, television, radio, newspapers. It was awful.'

I had smiled. 'I suppose the people who were best off are the jungle dwellers; the Borneo people; the pygmies of the Congo. They would not have known anything.'

'Sometimes ignorance is bliss.' Mum had joined me in that smile.

Now Dad fingered the pile of newspapers on the kitchen table and said softly, 'Well, you're back home, wherever you've been and whatever you've been doing. School starts tomorrow and you'll have a lot of catching up to do. I hope you'll get your head down.' He straightened up and placed his hand on his lower back, wincing: a recurrence of his back problem. 'I must go out, Son. You've got hours of reading there. I'll leave you to it,' He tapped the pile of newspapers.

## Operation Stargazer

Then he rose from the stool and went out of the kitchen door into the hallway, without a backward glance.

School! After two terms away I'd be far behind. Still, I'll make it. Some extra reading, that'll do it. And I wouldn't have missed the adventure for all the gold in the world. But what a lot of questions I'd be asked! What will I say to the science teacher? But I had Sonia, my jewel. To think, I had actually proposed to her yesterday. She's so happy! Her Dad has changed and it is that wonderful woman who has worked magic. Just imagine, they're going to be married! A double wedding? No, we are going to wait some years: *they* won't want to waste a moment.

I took a newspaper from the top of the pile and started to read. It was *The Guardian* of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April and the headline read, 'DOOMSDAY LOOMS.' I read on, chuckling to myself. If only they knew!

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

### SIMILARIA REVISITED

‘Do you remember that day you and I sat here, and I broke the news that you had to leave Mars?’ Michu looked at me and smiled.

‘Of course I remember,’ I said. ‘It was a blow.’

‘And you’re leaving again early tomorrow, Bill. How do you feel this time?’

Our eyes met; those deep, dark, flashing eyes. They still held an intense fascination for me. ‘To be honest, I’ll be sad to go and leave you, but this time it’s different. I have learnt how to communicate with you telepathically, and I know that we are going to meet from time to time. You’ll come to Earth.’ It was a statement, not a question.

Michu laughed her tinkling laugh. ‘If there is a job for me there, Bill: you know we don’t go sightseeing for the excitement of it.’

‘I know that. But you *will* come.’

‘Yes...’ she paused. ‘But for now, I’ll have my hands full.’

‘Doing what?’ I asked.

‘I’m going to have a child.’

I straightened up and stared at her. ‘Really?’

She nodded. ‘The father is Zoro, from Zeronera.’

‘Mind if I’m a touch jealous?’

Michu laughed. ‘Why should you be? You are going to marry Sonia.’

‘How did you know that?’ I said sharply.

‘You forget; I pick up your thoughts. You must have been thinking of me and Sonia at the same time. Anyway, Zoro happens to be the great-grandson of Zeris.’

‘The Chief of the Elders?’

‘Right! Zeris’ daughter, Carina, whose mother is Shula from Sumaria, had a child by a man from another clan. The child’s name is Drago, who fathered a son with Adris from Zeronera. Adris’ son is Zoro. Got it?’

‘Hang on... Oh, forget it. I’m no good at working out relationships.’

‘So you see, Bill, it could not have worked for us, could it?’

‘Why?’

‘The parents of our children never live together: they come from different clans. The mother is the one who brings up the child. I’ve explained it to you before.’

‘You have, and I understand. It’s what works best for you.’

‘Our duty in life is to contribute our energies and skills for the good of the clan. Love relationships would get in the way: jealousies, separation, selfish interests. You understand?’ Another killing smile and a flash of eyes.

‘I do. It’s a very good system,’ I said. ‘Anyway, I shall miss you.’

‘Me too. And now the purpose of your visit has been fulfilled.’

I nodded. ‘Yes, the meeting was overwhelming. Zeris spoke some wonderful words.’ I thought about what he had said to Tim, Ben, Sonia and I in front of the whole clan, and a lump came into my throat.

‘Young heroes,’ he had said, ‘we owe you a debt of gratitude that we shall never be able to pay, not in our lifetime and not in the lifetimes of our children or our grandchildren. Your self-sacrifice, tenacity and fearlessness are an example to our own children. But your contribution to the wellbeing of the Universe has barely begun. You will all, in your own way, have a part to play in the future of your planet, your unique and beautiful world, which is threatened by the gross negligence of human beings. Do not succumb to the frivolous extravagance that grips your society by the throat. Take the task before you by the horns and persevere. We are with you; we shall support you; your fight is our fight. We shall fight on together!’

Zeris had gone on to offer Ben and Tim a contract to help form Tae-kwon-do units within the clans of Mars. He had gone on to clarify that the contract didn’t involve money; of that they had no use. The boys would never have accepted payment anyway, I knew that. The honour was sufficient payment. The long summer holidays would give them ample

time, and in any case, there was always the time bubble.

‘Michu, will you come to my wedding?’

‘I would like to. It depends on whether there is work for me there.’

‘And Sofu, Anamaru, Diana, Manu?’

‘Manu has shown great leadership skills. It is likely he will be an elder one day.’

My mind conjured up a picture of Manu, elderly but straight, striding into the council meeting and holding the audience spellbound. Yes, I could see it. I had sat with Manu that morning and he had given me some of his ideas.

‘We need to be more organised, Bill,’ he had said. ‘The Zoggs gave up their idea of conquering Mars... for now. Zigismo has gone and his exit put the Zoggs off... but I believe they will come back. We must be ready if they do.’

‘Not with weapons though.’

‘No! There’s no place here for arms. But there are subtler methods of defence.’

‘Like what, Manu?’

‘Let us just say that you would not see them, just as you cannot see the advanced souls who live amongst us on Mars.’

I knew Manu couldn’t explain it to me, so I left it at that.

‘I’ll miss the games,’ I said. We had played Sombrillo the day before, all of us, including Sonia. And what a wonderful game it was! I said to Manu, ‘I still intend to try it at school. Will you be the school coach?’ We had both laughed.

Michu broke into my thought. ‘Zoro may also be a Zeroneran elder one day. He has been given important duties by Atik.’

‘Atik has done amazing things in such a short time,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ agreed Michu. ‘It is not easy to put right the disasters of the Zigismo era.’

I thought of Atik with admiration. A few days before, we had visited Zeronera. Atik had personally showed us the measures he had taken to put Zeronera in order again.

‘Of course, my first action was to disband the army,’ he had said. ‘There’s no place here for militias. I had some problems with certain elements in Zigismo’s top brass. In the end we managed.’

Atik had showed us the new fungus farm and a fruit farm

that they were trying to get going. 'It will take time,' he had said.

'And what about the poison?' I had asked.

'The *zofold* will stay locked away.' Atik grimaced. 'We cannot let it enter the water supply. We estimate that it will take a hundred years to lose its potency.'

'Wow! A hundred years!'

'Yes, a hundred Martian years.'

I had said to Atik, 'we pray another Zigismo doesn't come along before then.'

'By the way,' Atik had said, 'you remember Kazak?'

'How could I possibly forget him?'

'Well, he's a reformed character. He may even be given back his Council seat: he's a brilliant organiser, you know.'

'Really? That's great news. And if another Zigismo *does* come?'

'That's why we need close cooperation with *all and every* clan.' Atik had uttered the words in a loud whisper. 'We must all work together.'

With leaders like Atik, I had no doubt they would succeed.

I was brought back to the present by Michu's next words. 'Well, Bill, I must be going. I have things to do before sleeping.'

We stood up and embraced warmly. I held on for several minutes, not wanting to break the spell. Eventually she pulled away, and I let my arms drop.

'I'll come to see you off in the morning,' she said.

Her dark eyes were moist. She turned away and left the library quickly, without looking back. I stood for some minutes with my eyes on the entrance, as if I expected her to reappear. But I knew she wouldn't. The walls swam behind the film of tears, which I wiped away with my bare arm. Then I made my way down the gallery towards the dining area, where I expected to meet Sonia, Ben and Tim.

Tomorrow we would be going to school. Zeris had promised to put us through the time bubble. Having been six days on Mars, we would be arriving home only half an hour after leaving. Mum and Dad would not even know we had been away.

Sonia was applying to train as a nurse. She would be at-

tending interviews in the coming week. We had joked about the form she had filled in. Under: 'Relevant Experience' we had been tempted to put: 'working in a Martian hospital, treating war wounded.' In the end, we decided it would not be appreciated by the Hospital Board.

I imagined the Science teacher's comments when I appeared in class after two terms' absence.

'Did you have a good trip to Mars, boy? It took you longer than you thought, didn't it? Ha! Ha!'

'Yes Sir!' I would say to him. 'You see, Sir, the Martians were expecting an invasion by extraterrestrials from the planet Zogg, and these extraterrestrials wanted to conquer Mars, and then Earth, so we had to help these Martians, and we also defeated an evil dictator, who wanted to take over the whole planet, but we trained these Martians in Tae-kwon-do, and that way we crushed the enemy, and then there was this asteroid, Sir, you know, the one that was going to destroy Earth, and well, Sir, we zoomed into space and blasted it off course with a marvellous invention that uses magnetism, and at the same time we destroyed the extraterrestrials' fleet of giant spaceships, and then we came home and the whole thing was called 'Operation Stargazer,' and... well, it was really, really exciting, Sir...!'

## EPILOGUE

### ZERIS HAS AN ASSIGNMENT FOR BILL THAT IS TOO EXCITING TO REFUSE

Bill and his companions are back home, after playing their part in the defeat of the Martian tyrant, Zigismo, and after successfully deflecting Attila, the giant asteroid that very nearly ended life on Earth... but not for long.

Zeris, the Chief Elder of Similaria, has an assignment of great importance that involves a journey back in time for Bill and his friends. No Martian would dare to undertake the task that Zeris has set for them. It is a mission fraught with peril, for no person has ever stepped back into prehistory and lived to tell the tale. But Bill has a respect for Zeris that compels him to accept the challenge, whatever the risks involved, and his appetite for the fruits of high adventure have been whetted.

In this journey into the dim distant past, Bill learns valuable lessons that will serve him in his life mission, that of helping to save the world from environmental destruction.

And, unknown to the inhabitants of Earth, the Zoggs are waiting behind the curtain for their next opportunity to conquer our world, which sinks deeper into chaos as the year 2012 approaches.

*Exile to the Red Planet* is the sequel to *Operation Stargazer*, and the third book in *The Mars Series*. But beware! There is more to come. Join Bill, as he fights the greed and corruption that is slowly ripping apart the fabric of society and laying our world open to invasion from outer space.