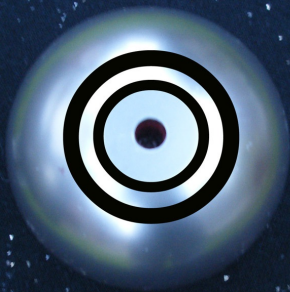


ROBERT PAISLEY



GALACTIC PINBALL



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Standing knee deep in the hole he'd dug in his garden, George Meaking looked up at the sound of his wife tapping on the kitchen window. She waved to him and held up a cup. He nodded, stuck his spade into the earth and climbed out of the hole, shaking the mud from his boots. One lump stubbornly refused to shift. He hopped around the garden like a one legged kangaroo, stabbing at the sole of his boot with his trowel until the lump of mud finally fell away. With a flick of his hand, he threw the trowel onto the ground, where it stuck in the grass, vibrating like a knife throwers blade. He walked up the garden rubbing the small of his back and kicking off his boots, he opened the kitchen door. "I thought you could do with a cup of tea," said his wife as he entered the kitchen. "How's the pond coming on?" George took the cup from his wife and drank the contents in one go. "Not bad love," he replied, coming up for air. "Another foot or so and then I can start cutting in the ledges for the marginal plants."

Marjorie looked at him, noticing the sweat covering his bald head. "You're not overdoing it are you," she said, "You're not as young as you used to be. I saw you rubbing your back."

George grinned at her. "Get away with you Marge, fifty six isn't old. There's a bit of life in me yet."

Marjorie raised her eyes to heaven. "Well you just watch it, you don't want to do your back in like last time."

George shook his head. "That was building the garden wall, this is just a little hole. Talking of backs, how's yours?"

Marjorie rubbed the small of her back. "It's coming on. The

exercises really seem to help."

George shook his head. "I dunno, it seems funny to me that karate lessons are good for a bad back, I'd have thought it would be just the opposite."

Marjorie shook her head. "I only go for the exercise, the instructors are very good, they don't let me do any of the violent stuff yet, maybe later when my back improves. You should come along, it would do you a bit of good."

George shook his head. "Not likely, if I'm gonna do any fighting it'll be with a gun in my hand."

"George, you left the army ages ago, I don't think they'd lend you a gun."

George grinned. "Just kidding love. My fighting days are over, I think I'll just stick to digging out a little pond."

Marjorie rested her elbows on the sink and looked out of the window.

"I dunno about little," she mused, "That hole seems to get bigger and bigger every time I look at it."

"You know what the book said," replied George. "Make the pond as big as you can otherwise you'll only be disappointed cos it'll look too small once the water's in."

"Yeah, but I only want to keep a few fish in it, I don't want to swim in it," she replied.

"Now there's something I'd like to see," chuckled George. "That would give the neighbours a shock, especially if you left your swim suit off."

Marjorie faced him with her hands on her hips.

"George Meaking are you saying my bod is not worth looking at?"

George held up his hands. "No, no, just a joke love." He moved up to her and put his arms round her. "In fact you've got quite a good little bod for a fifty three year old."

Marjorie pushed him away with a laugh. "Get off you dirty old man, or I'll chop you down."

George backed away in mock panic, covering his head. "Not the face, don't you try your karate on me."

"You'd love it if I beat you up a bit," replied Marjorie, "You old soldiers never change."

"Been over ten years since I was a soldier," replied George, "I'd have thought my bad soldier habits would have gone by now."

"No chance of that," replied Marjorie, "Right, enough, Sergeant Meaking back into your hole."

George stood to attention and snapped off a salute. "Yes maam," he said and spinning round on his stocking feet, he marched to the kitchen door.

"Remember now," said Marjorie as he went out of the kitchen, "Mind your back."

George nodded and shut the door behind him.

George began carefully leveling the ground round the hole. He laid a long plank of wood across the hole with his spirit level on top of it and scraped away the ground until he was satisfied he had the same level all the way round the hole. This was important he remembered reading, if the ground wasn't level, the water level would look odd with more bank on one side than the other. He then sloped the edges of the hole so if the pond froze over, the ice would ride up the slope rather than cutting into the liner. George was nothing if not meticulous, just good enough was not good enough, his army days had taught him that.

After cutting in the ledges for the marginal plants, he climbed out of the hole, lit a cigarette, and studied his handiwork from all angles, idly flicking the clip on his lighter with his thumbnail. He'd made the lighter many years ago from an old .30 bullet cartridge, and to stop it rolling away when he put it down, he'd brazed an old fountain pen clip to the side. He'd cut down on his smoking after Marjorie complained the nicotine stains on the ceiling above his usual seat in the lounge resembled the ceiling of an old pub. Nowadays, he either went into the garden, sitting on the seat by the kitchen door for a smoke or if

the weather was really bad, under the kitchen cooker hood with the fan going full blast. This had the double benefit of not only reducing his cigarette intake, but cutting down on the decorating. He clipped the lighter into his shirt pocket and nodded to himself, the pond was looking good. Just a bit more depth in the middle and then he could start installing the liner. He dropped the cigarette stub onto the earth, stamped it out and climbed back into the hole with his pick axe.

He was well past the layer of top soil, into hard packed clay. George was only just above average height but he was solidly built with big shoulders and arms. The power behind those arms drove the pick deep into the clay. After ten minutes hard work, his pick clunked solidly on something hard, the vibrations bouncing up the handle. He'd already had to remove many small lumps of flint, this sounded like a big one. He cursed to himself and started picking at the clay round the flint so he could loosen it. As he cleared the clay the object came into view. Whatever it was, it wasn't a flint. George put down his pick axe and scraped away the top layer of clay with a hand trowel to expose the object. A bright shiny surface came into view. Definitely not flint. George thought for a moment and then climbed out of the hole and headed for the kitchen door. He poked his head round the door and called for his wife.

"Marge, I've found something, bring the video camera."

A few moments later Marjorie came into the kitchen with the camera in her hand.

"What is it, what have you found that needs filming?" she asked.

George shrugged his shoulders. "I dunno, but it doesn't look natural. I thought it might be a good idea to film it as we're digging it up."

Marjorie's eyes lit up. "You think it could be Roman?"

"Could be," replied George. "We're only five miles from St Albans, that was a big Roman town." He smiled. "There's always a chance."

They were both thinking of the various newspaper reports of people finding Roman remains in their gardens, maybe this time it

would be their turn.

"Do you think we should call in the local archeologists then?" asked Marjorie, "If it is Roman we don't want to risk damaging it,"

George shook his head. "Let's find out what we have first, we don't want to make fools of ourselves if it turns out to be some old piece of junk."

She followed him out into the garden, carefully picking her way round the mud and crushed grass round the hole.

"You've made a right old mess of my lawn," she said. "Will this be all right when you've finished."

"When I put the liner in, we can pave the edges or let the grass grow right up to the pond, don't worry, it'll be fine." He paused. "Enough about that" he said nodding at the hole, "This is more important".

Marjorie put the camera to her eye.

"OK, off you go," she said, "I've got you in shot."

George climbed into the hole and as he scraped away more of the clay Marjorie zoomed in on the object.

When he'd cleaned the top of the object he sat back and looked up at his wife. "I don't think it's Roman," he said.

Marjorie took the camera from her eye and peered into the hole. "You don't, why not love?"

George tapped the object with his trowel.

"Look at it, it's shiny. If it had been Roman it'd be corroded."

"Couldn't the Romans have metals that wouldn't corrode," asked Marjorie.

George nodded. "The only one I can think of is gold. Bronze or copper would turn green this long in the ground and metal would almost be rusted away. This thing is shiny, almost like stainless steel. I know the Romans never had that."

"Oh well," sighed Marjorie her dreams of riches evaporating. "Are you going to dig it up anyway."

George turned back to the object, "Might as well now we've got this

far, I'm curious to see what it is."

After some more excavating round the object, George's efforts revealed a square box about three inches across. He pushed the trowel down the side of the box and levered it out of the ground. He climbed out of the hole and walked across the garden to the outside tap. Running water over the box, he cleaned the off the last of the clay. Ignoring the frown of his wife, he rubbed it dry on his jumper and turned the box over in his hands.

"What on earth is it?" questioned Marjorie. She studied it from all angles and came to a conclusion. "It reminds me of an old fashioned jewelry box." She put the camera up to her eye again. "Try and open it, let's see what's inside."

George turned the box over in his hands. "Can't see a lid or a catch," he said, "It seems made in one piece. It can't be solid, it's not heavy enough so it must be hollow. If it's hollow, it stands to reason there must be a way in, otherwise what's the point of making it."

"Give it a whack," said Marjorie, always one to take direct action.

"I don't want to damage it," replied George, "I'll try some gentle taps round the edges."

Gentle taps produced no results so George started hitting harder. The edge of the trowel made no marks or dents on the box so George really put some strength behind his blows and was finally rewarded with one side sliding open a fraction.

"Aha," he cried, "Got it."

He pushed the point of the trowel into the opening and twisted. The opening widened. George pushed the trowel further in and twisted harder enlarging the opening. He dropped the trowel and put his fingers into the opening and pulled the slide completely out of the box.

Inside, nestling in a soft foamy cushion was a round silver ball about the size of a small marble. On the upper surface were two concentric rings with a dark circular spot in the middle.

George and Marjorie looked at each other with puzzled looks on

their faces and then down at the box.

"Urrh," exclaimed Marjorie, "It looks like a silver eyeball"

"What on earth is it," wondered George. He looked up, "Are you getting this on tape."

"Sure am," replied Marjorie, "Whatever it is I've captured it for posterity."

George lifted the ball out of the box and discovered there was a loop of wire attached to the side of the ball opposite the concentric rings. He put his finger through the loop and swung it gently to and fro.

"Well that confirms it, it's definitely not Roman," he said with certainty.

"Perhaps something left over from before the house was built," suggested Marjorie. "We could go on the internet and see if we can find what was here before."

"Good idea," said George, "Though as far as I know it was all farmland. Anyway let's try that now...hey, ouch," he exclaimed as the loop tightened round his finger. He shook his hand trying to shake the loop off but it closed even tighter round his finger.

Alarmed, Marjorie moved closer to George. "Are you all right love?" She peered at his finger now turning a nice shade of blue. "How did you make it do that?"

"I didn't do nothing," protested George, "The loop tightened all by itself." He checked his hand. The loop had slackened somewhat so the colour was returning to his finger. He pulled at the ball. The loop had not slackened enough to slide over his knuckle, it was still firmly attached to his finger.

He headed for the tool shed. "I'm going to cut it off before it decides to amputate my bloody finger," he said.

Rummaging through his tool box he pulled out a set of wire cutters and gingerly slid one of the jaws between his finger and the wire loop. Squeezing down hard, he fully expected the wire to part easily. What happened was the wire cutter jaws clamped uselessly on the wire like a toothless man gumming on a stick of seaside rock. George

examined the wire cutter jaws. Two indents were visible where the wire had distorted the metal.

"Bloody useless," he growled, "I'll have to buy a set with tungsten carbide blades to cut through that wire. God knows what its made of." He held up the cutters, "Here, get a close up of the jaws, otherwise no one will believe me when I tell them about this at the Legion."

Marjorie dutifully raised the camera and pressed the button. After some fiddling with the camera to get the jaws in focus, she nodded. "Done," she said.

George threw the cutters onto his bench in disgust and they walked out of the shed and headed for the kitchen door. "We'll have a cup of tea and then go over the town," he said, "We can buy a new set of cutters."

As he walked he felt the pull of the ball hanging from his finger. Irritated at the pull on his finger, he swung the ball round so it nestled in the palm of his hand. As he absentmindedly rubbed it with his thumb, he was suddenly surrounded by a blue halo of light.

Marjorie, who was still filming, dropped the camera and ran to his side. As she gripped his arm, the blue halo expanded to enveloped her.

"George, what's happening," she shrieked.

George was struggling to pull the ball off his finger. "Help me," he shouted, "Don't mind my finger, help me get it off."

Marjorie gripped the ball and pulled as George gritted his teeth with the pain. They were still in this position when the blue halo vanished taking George and Marjorie with it.

The garden was quiet save the chirp of the occasional bird and the soft whirr of the camera laying where Marjorie had dropped it. After a while that too stopped, as the memory card became full, shutting off the camera.

George and Marjorie stopped struggling with the ball and looked wildly around.

“What happened, where’s the garden gone?” she cried.

George took a deep breath to calm himself. He put his arm round Marjorie and attempted to sooth her.

“I don’t know love, but I’m bloody well going to find out.”

They were standing next to a long two lane highway. On either side of the road, fields stretched as far as the eye could see. It was blisteringly hot and through the heat haze George thought he could see a large white sign in the distance. Over to their right hand side, the faint sound of a train could be heard.

George shook his head and held up his hand. “It must be something to do with this thing,” he stared at the silver ball hanging from his finger. “Definitely not Roman,” he muttered, “Not ancient Briton either. This thing was nearly three feet down in the clay, it could have been in the ground for more time than I’d like to think.”

“You think this is what brought us here, wherever here is,” said Marjorie, her panic subsiding.

“Must be,” replied George slowly, “What else could it be. People don’t normally vanish and re-appear somewhere else. I was rubbing the ball with my fingers before it happened. I must have touched something that started it working.”

“But how could a little thing like that do what it’s done to us?” questioned Marjorie, “It doesn’t make sense.”

“We’ll save questions like that for later,” replied George, “First thing is to find out just where we are.” He pointed down the road. “There’s

what looks like a road sign along there, let's make for that, maybe it'll give us a clue."

There was no pavement at the side of the road, the tarmac just merged into scrubby grass and bushes so they walked on the edge of the road, keeping a wary eye out for vehicles coming up behind them. They set off at a brisk pace which soon slowed down because of the heat. Mirages like puddles of water wavered on the road ahead, only to fade away as they approached them. The sign was further away that it looked and it took them over quarter of an hour before they reached it. Printed on the sign were large blue letters. They looked at the writing in disbelief. The sign was the familiar type they had seen all over Britain, indicating a roundabout was further down the road. Small bushes and grass obscured part of the bottom half of the sign but the main part of the sign was clearly visible. It was the destinations on the sign that took their breath away. Straight ahead the road led to a place called Settat and Marrakech, to the left, the road led to Casablanca.

"Marrakech and Casablanca" whispered George, "We're in bloody Morocco."

Marjorie who's knowledge of geography was a bit weak stared at him. "Are you sure?" she asked faintly.

George gestured at the sign. "Marrakech and Casablanca, where else can it be. It's certainly not Hertfordshire," he paused, "You must remember that old pop song, On the road to Marrakech." He hummed a few bars of the song.

"I remember the song," said Marjorie, "But I didn't realize it was about Morocco."

"Well, take my word for it love, we're in Morocco. If we're heading towards Marrakech, we must be facing south, as far as I can remember Marrakech is south of Casablanca "

"So what are we going to do?" asked Marjorie, getting down to basics.

They sat down at the side of the road next to the sign to try and

work out what to do next. The few cars and lorries that sped past them gave Marjorie an idea.

"We could thumb a lift into the nearest town and go to the police station or a British consulate," she suggested.

George shook his head. "Look at us. All we have are the clothes we're standing up in. There's you in jeans and a jumper and me in my old gardening clothes and muddy boots. No money, no passports, no nothing. We'd end up in prison most likely as illegal aliens or terrorists."

"So what's the alternative then?" asked Marjorie.

George held up his hand holding the ball. "Try and find out how this thing works, maybe it'll take us back home."

"But you don't know what you did to make it work last time," pointed out Marjorie.

George shrugged his shoulders. "I'll try rubbing it like last time. It worked then maybe it'll work again." He paused. "One thing when I'm trying it, make sure you're holding onto my arm. If it works I don't want you left behind." He had another thought, "And if you see that blue glow, grab onto me as quick as you can. We must make sure we're never more than a few feet apart, OK love?"

Marjorie gulped and nodded.

Their conversation was interrupted by a car pulling up next to them. The driver wound down his window and called out.

"You folks all right? you look lost."

George looked up, startled by the sudden appearance of the car. They had been so deep in conversation, neither of them had noticed it arriving.

"You're English?" asked George, hardly believing their luck at finding someone they could understand.

The man grinned and shook his head. "Aussie mate, are you all right?"

George thought fast. He could hardly tell the man the real reason they were sitting at the side of a Moroccan road.

"Er, my wife felt sick on the tour coach so the driver put us off so she could recover. He said he'd send a taxi back for us."

The man's eyes widened in disbelief. "What, are you saying the driver just put you off. With no water or anything?"

George nodded.

"Jeeze" said the man, "Where were you headed?"

George pointed down the road, "The next town."

"Bloody hell that's Settatt, it's at least twenty five kilometers away, It'll take ages for the taxi to get here. Do you want a lift?"

George shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, but we'd better wait for the taxi. If we went with you, we wouldn't know where to go for our hotel, the taxi will take us there."

The man looked doubtful. "You sure?" he said.

George nodded, wondering if he was doing the right thing. "Can you tell us where we are?" he asked, "The driver said we should stay here so the taxi can find us."

The man nodded ahead through his windscreen. "That's the Al Amamcha roundabout, your taxi shouldn't miss it, it's the first one north of Settatt. You sure you don't want a lift?"

"No, we better stay here," replied George.

The man nodded. "OK, if you're sure, I'll be off." He passed a plastic water bottle through the window. "You'd better take that, no telling how long you're going to be waiting." He engaged gears with a crunch. "See ya," he called and sped off down the road.

George clutched the water bottle and watched the car disappear into the distance with mixed feelings. It had been so tempting to accept the man's offer, but he knew he'd been right to refuse, there's no way he could explain their presence in Morocco and in a big town their appearance was bound to attract attention.

He sat down next to Marjorie and hefted the water bottle. It was a two litre size and nearly three quarters full. He unscrewed the cap and passed it to her. She took a long drink and passed the bottle back to him. The water was warm and tasted faintly of chlorine but it

quenched his thirst.

"OK, so we know where we are, but now what," said Marjorie, "I didn't say anything when you refused the lift but now we're going to have to decide what to do next. You still think you can get that ball to work?"

"I think it's our best bet," replied George.

"I wish I knew what the bloody thing is," said Marjorie vehemently.

"I don't think it was made on Earth," said George.

Marjorie's eyes widened. "Are you serious?" she asked.

George nodded. "Like I said, it was about three feet down in the clay, it could have been there for centuries. I don't think anyone on Earth put it there."

"What someone from outer space you mean," said Marjorie.

George nodded. "Do you think any country could make a thing like this. It's beyond anything we could make in the present and it's old, it must be to be that deep in the ground. I'm pretty sure no one on Earth could have made it in the past." George held up his hand with the ball balanced in his palm. "This must be some sort of personal transporter, It could have been as common as a train season ticket to whoever used it." He grinned. "When we get back, I'm going to dig our garden down to Australia, who knows we might find a bloody spaceship under our lawn."

Marjorie flashed a quick smile at him which quickly faded. "If we get back," she said.

"We will," replied George with more confidence in his voice than he privately felt. "Right let's study this and see if we can get it to work. Hold on to my arm and don't let go of the water bottle, OK?"

Marjorie nodded. "OK," she said, "go for it."

George opened his palm and gently rubbed the silver ball. Marjorie's grip on his arm tightened as his finger moved in circles over the surface. At first nothing happened until his finger passed over the dark spot in the centre of the rings. The blue halo suddenly appeared round them.

“Here we go,” he shouted.

They vanished from the side of the road with just their footprints in the sandy soil to show they had ever been there.

It was nearly dark but George could see they were standing in a sandy depression with large sand dunes rising up round them. A light wind lifted the sand grains making a soft swishing sound. Apart from the barely audible sibilance of the moving sand, it was uncannily and completely silent.

"We'll have to climb one of them to get any sort of view," said George. "They look like barchan dunes, I've seen them in Libya, once we get to the top, we should be able to see where we are."

Climbing the side of the dune was a energy sapping affair. As they climbed, their feet kept sliding backwards down the slope so progress was slow. Eventually, they reached the top and looked around. Marjorie clutched George's arm.

"I don't think we're still in Morocco," said Marjorie faintly. She pointed upwards. "In fact I don't think we're even on Earth anymore."

Overhead, shining down between scudding clouds, two moons hung in the sky. Away from the brightness of the moons, a dusting of stars could be seen against the black of the sky. George looked up, "Bloody hell," he breathed.

Marjorie gripped his arm. "Two moons George, we can't be on Earth." She paused, gulping. "George I'm scared, what have we got into, how are we going to get home?"

"Steady love," replied George. "You've held up beautifully up to now, don't let go now."

Marjorie nodded and clung even tighter to his arm. "I'm sorry George, but I'm so scared."

George took a deep breath to suppress his rising panic. "I know

you are love, but we'll make out, you'll see. We'll have to try and think our way out of this. Losing our nerve won't help."

Marjorie tried to hold back her tears. Apart from being scared out of her life, she was also angry.

"We should have stayed in Morocco," she said vehemently. "Even a Moroccan prison would be better than this, at least we'd still be on Earth, what are we going to do?"

George held Marjorie until her shaking stopped.

"OK, love?" he said quietly.

Marjorie nodded, pulled a hanky out of her jeans and wiped her nose. She looked up.

"Yes, I think so," she said faintly.

"That's my girl," said George encouragingly. He looked around. About half a mile away, what looked like a cluster of buildings were visible. Some distance behind the buildings, he could just make out the dark line of a forest of vegetation.

"Let's make for the buildings, maybe we can find something to tell us where we are."

It took them over an hour of toiling up the sides of the dunes and half walking, half sliding down the slopes on the other side before they reached the first building. The dunes had flattened out to hard packed sand, so they sat and emptied the sand from their shoes and rested to catch their breath. After a drink to refresh their mouths, they approached the buildings.

All the buildings seemed to be of the same design, small one story houses, with round windows and a single door. All were made of interlocking stone blocks like a child's jigsaw puzzle. Many were virtually demolished with only part of the walls standing.

George measured the size of a doorway with his eye. "Whoever lived in these was pretty small," he said.

As they passed one house George noticed some bars poking out of the walls. He walked over and grabbed the nearest bar. After some twisting backwards and forwards, he pulled it out. It was made

of shiny metal and about four feet long. Some sort of reinforcing, thought George. He hefted it in his hand.

"Feel better with this," he said, "Just in case."

The houses were not laid out in streets, but scattered haphazardly in all directions. They picked their way past the houses, stopping every now and then to peer into the their interiors. All of the rooms were empty with sand piled up over the floors with no sign of the occupants.

"Look's like they've been empty for some time," said George. He pointed ahead. Sticking up above the houses they could see a round tower.

"That looks shiny like it's made of metal, let's make for that, were not going to learn anything from these houses."

The tower was at the centre of what they had mentally labeled the village and next to it was a large glassy depression. Round the base of the tower they could see some very Earth like pipes. Laying round the depression were..... things.

George and Marjorie stopped dead in their tracks. They were obviously animals of some sort but what? They had the characteristics they were familiar with, namely four legs and a head at the front, but there the similarity ended. Their bodies and stumpy legs were covered in either fur or feathers, George couldn't decide which. Large bat ears stuck up each side of their heads, in contrast to their eyes which were almost hidden by thick rolls of skin. They were the size of a small pig and some of them lifted their heads as the two cautiously approached. An animal the size of a large dog crawled towards them grunting with the effort. If they needed confirmation they were not on Earth, this was it. As it approached they could see it was unlike the other animals, it had a long whip-like tail with what appeared to be a bunch of feathers at the end. The legs were tipped with long claws which it extended out as it gripped the sand to pull itself along. Two black eyes stared at them from a oversized dog-like head, surrounded by a white frill like an

Elizabethan ruff. As it fought its way towards them they could hear its laboured breathing. It collapsed before it had moved a few yards and lay there with its mouth open exposing large spatula like teeth. The claws slowly retracted back into its large pad-like feet. For all its strangeness, Marjorie was moved.

"It's dying," she whispered.

George moved forwards and undoing the top of the water bottle, he poured a drop into the animal's mouth. A blue tongue lapped the water from its muzzle. The animal lifted it's head and opened it's mouth. The request was unmistakable. George poured more water into the mouth and stood back. The animal staggered to it's feet and moved towards them. George gripped the metal bar more tightly and waited. The animal moved right up to them and lent against George's leg with it's mouth open. George gave it a drop more water and capped the bottle.

"Can't give it too much," he said, "We're going to need it ourselves."

Marjorie pointed to the other animals round the depression. "What about them?" she asked, "Can't we do anything for them?"

"Let's see," replied George.

He walked over to the tower and studied it. Water tower? he thought. He studied the pipes at the tower base. One of them, on waist height supports, led straight to the depression. Where the pipe exited the tower was a large lever. Tap, thought George. The animal had followed them and moving forwards, it stood on it's hind legs and lent against the lever. Taking his cue from the animal, George put his hands on the lever and pushed. The lever moved a fraction and then stuck. George gently moved the animal out of the way and used his bar to strike the lever. After a few blows the lever was free. A tremendous gurgle came from the tower and water gushed out of the pipe into the depression. In a few minutes the depression was transformed into a pond. George pulled the lever back to its original position and shut off the water flow before the pond overflowed. The

animals laying around it crawled to the edge and dipped their heads into the water. They lay like that for several minutes, their mouths opening and closing as they gulped at the water. The animal that George had helped with his water headed to the pond. After drinking its fill, it returned and leant against George's leg, coiling its tail round his leg in a very proprietary fashion

"Look's like you've made a friend," said Marjorie. She looked at the animals arranged round the edge of the pond like spokes of a wheel and then at the one leaning against George. "Sheep dog," she said with certainty. She pointed at the pond, "Sheep."

"That's a bit of a jump," said George with a grin, "You could be right though." Somehow both of them felt better at saving what were to them really weird creatures.

"I wonder why they were left to die," wondered Marjorie.

George gestured at the tap. "Someone filled the pond and shut the lever so the pond wouldn't overflow, but it seems no one came back to fill the pond again." He nodded at the animal leaning against his leg. "It knew how to turn the tap on, only it wasn't strong enough. Must be a smart animal."

Marjorie looked around. "What do they eat," she wondered.

"I don't know about the ones round the pond, but I had a good look at this one when it crawled up to us. It's got a big mouth but they're full of teeth like a cow, not sharp ones like a dog. I reckon they eat vegetation." He paused and grinned at Marjorie. "That's why I took the chance and went near it to give it water. I hoped it wouldn't bite me."

"That's all very well," replied Marjorie, "But what are we going to eat. My lunch seems a long time ago and I'm getting hungry."

While they were talking, the animals round the pond rose to their feet and moved slowly between the buildings towards the distant vegetation. George looked around. The land in the direction they had come through the village was sand as far as the eye could see. Ahead, on the edge of the village the vegetation stretched to the

dimly lit horizon.

"I reckon this place was abandoned because the desert was encroaching," he said. "There's vegetation over there, let's make for that, maybe we'll find something we can eat."

After George disentangled himself from the animal's tail, they walked to the edge of the village with the animal following closely beside them.

"It's following us," said Marjorie quietly.

"I'd noticed," said George.

They stopped at the last building and looked across the sand. The vegetation was further away than they had thought. George looked up at the lightening sky. "I think it'll be dawn soon, let's wait here until it's light. I don't fancy going into that forest in the dark."

Marjorie nodded and they sat down with their backs to a wall. The animal lay down between them.

"It looks like it's adopted us. What are we going to call it?" asked Marjorie.

George looked at the strange animal and shrugged. "I dunno, you choose a name."

Marjorie thought for a moment. "Ruff," she said, looking at the frill round the animal's neck.

George laughed. "All right, Ruff it is," he ran his hand along the animal's back, "OK with you, old son?"

Ruff didn't reply but rippled its body under George's hand. Up close, George could see Ruff's coat was neither fur nor feathers, rather long black, sharply pointed bristles, laying flat along his body and extending down the legs. George gently moved his hand onto the frill round Ruff's neck. Because of its white colour, he expected it to feel soft and papery, but was surprised to find it like tough leather. Under the surface, he could feel a network of small veins. When he gently stroked the head, he couldn't find any trace of ears. What a bloody weird animal, he thought.

They were silent for some time each with their own thoughts, then

Marjorie nodded at the ball in George's hand. "I still don't understand how a little thing like that could move us about like it did. I mean, we can't even be in our solar system, we must be on a planet on another star. It must take a tremendous amount of power, how could it store that much power in such a small place."

"I've been thinking about that too," replied George. "I reckon it's more like a remote control. There must be a power source or something buried at each spot it takes us to. Whoever made it must have thought these places were important, like stations on the underground. I can't believe they'd scatter the power sources willy nilly all over the place."

Marjorie looked at him with wide eyes. "You think there's something buried under our garden?"

George nodded. "Could be, it's certainly not on the surface. 'Course there's no telling how deep it is".

"Well that's some relief," replied Marjorie. "If it's as you think and each place is important, we won't end up at the bottom of a sea or something. Assuming you're right of course."

"It's a big assumption, but it's the best theory we've got at the moment," said George.

"So what are we going to do?" asked Marjorie.

George thought for a moment. "Well it got us here, all we can do is try using it again, perhaps it will take us home."

"George, if your theory of stations on the underground is right, how many stations do you think there are. There could be thousands."

George nodded. "Yeah, I'd thought of that too. But, we've got no choice, we either try using the silver ball or stay here."

"But George, it could take us years to find a way home," protested Marjorie. "Perhaps we should have taken our chances in Morocco."

"I think we'd have ended up in a Moroccan prison," replied George.

Marjorie nodded slowly. "Yes, I know we discussed that before, it's just that now we're on another planet and the whole thing is getting a

bit frightening.”

George put his arm round her shoulders. “I know love. When we ended up here, it made me wonder if we did the right thing in Morocco, but we made our choice and we’re going to have to live with it”

They lapsed into silence, as the enormity of the problems facing them sunk in. Then Marjorie sat up.

“I’ve had thought,” she said.

“What another,” grinned George.

Marjorie elbowed him in the ribs.

“Go on,” said George, “Let’s hear it.”

“I think whoever made silver ball thing looks something like us”

“You do, why?” asked George.

“It’s the way that Ruff came over to us for help. He must have recognized us, or thought he did.”

George thought for a moment. “You could be right. On the other hand the people on this planet could look like us, but whoever made the silver ball could look like an octopus or a cauliflower for all we know.” He smiled. “You called Ruff he, you’ve decided he’s a male now?”

Marjorie glanced down at Ruff. “I just didn’t think he looked very feminine, that’s all.”

George laughed, “You may be right, on the other hand I didn’t think he looked like anything.”

“What are we going to do with him?” asked Marjorie.

“Take him into the forest with us if he’ll come,” replied George, “This attachment to us might be a temporary thing, but if he stays with us, we can watch what he eats. Anything he eats may be OK for us too.”

Marjorie shook her head. “No, I meant when we use the silver ball again. Do we leave him here, or take him with us.”

“If he looks like he’s going to stay with us, I think take him when we try the silver ball. Who knows where we might end up. A big animal

like him might be useful if we run into trouble.”

“It’s funny,” said Marjorie reflectively, “I thought about getting another dog after Susie died, the house seemed empty when she was gone.” She looked down at Ruff. “I didn’t think we’d be getting another pet as strange as this one.”

“Strange aint the word for,” said George.

“What about the sheep,” said Marjorie. “When the pond empties, they’ll have no one to fill it up again.”

George touched her arm. “Marjorie, you are a big softy but we can’t look after them, we’ve got to think of ourselves.”

Marjorie nodded slowly. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.” She looked up. “The sky’s brightening, let’s go and see if we can find something to eat.”

George nodded. They rose to their feet and started across the sand to the forest, with Ruff close beside them.

“Ruff, come,” said Marjorie, as the animal walked between them.

“Why did you say that?” queried George. “He’s coming anyway.”

“He’s got to learn his name,” replied Marjorie.

George raised his eyes to heaven. “Yeah right, come on, onward and upwards, let’s head for the trees.”

As they crossed the sand they had to pick their way round small scrubby plants which got progressively larger as they approached the forest. The edge of the forest was almost straight, as if someone had sliced a line across the ground. A blood red sun was starting to appear over the horizon which lifted the darkness of the forest with bright patches of light where it filtered between the plants.

George stopped and looked up.

"I think forest is the wrong word for this, it's more like a giant vegetable patch." He pointed to the nearest plant. "It's more like a giant brussel sprout than a tree. Look up there, it's even got things like sprouts growing up the sides of the trunk."

"It must be what a vegetable patch looks like to an ant," said Marjorie. "Thing is, can we eat them?"

There were no 'sprouts' below head level, so George used his bar to knock some of the higher ones to the ground. Ruff immediately pounced on one and with his claws extended to hold it in place, he wolfed it down.

"Well he likes them all right," said George. "I wonder why there aren't any lower down?"

Marjorie pointed along the ground. "I think those animals came along here, look you can almost see a trail. They've eaten all the lower ones. They're probably further in looking for food they can reach."

George picked a 'sprout' up and weighed it in his hand. It was the size of a small cauliflower with tightly packed leaves round the outside. He peeled off some leaves revealing a soft white pulpy core.

"Well, do we try some?" he asked.

Marjorie sniffed the pulp. "Smells all right, but it could be full of arsenic for all we know."

"We'll just try a small bite then," replied George.

Marjorie shook her head. "Not you, me. If you get sick I can't carry you, but you can carry me."

George reluctantly nodded. He didn't like the idea of Marjorie being the guinea pig, but he could see the sense of her logic.

Marjorie broke a small piece off and tentatively licked it. "It doesn't taste of anything," she said. "Right here goes." She put a piece in her mouth and after chewing for a moment, she swallowed it.

They had been walking for about half an hour looking for different vegetation. They hadn't found any, all the plants seemed the same type. George was anxiously watching Marjorie for any effects from eating the pulp. Suddenly Marjorie stopped, her eyes staring.

"George, I think I'm going to be sick." She had barely finished the sentence when she doubled over and threw up all over her shoes. She dropped to her knees and knelt with her head hanging down.

"Urgh, that was violent," she muttered. She looked up, her eyes wide. "Oh, oh," she cried and rushed behind the trunk of a plant tearing at the zipper on her jeans. She emerged white faced, several minutes later. "Jesus, that was rough," she said. "Luckily there were some big leaves nearby, otherwise I don't know what I'd have done."

"Are you all right now?" asked George. "You gave me an awful fright when you were sick."

Marjorie nodded. "Being sick wasn't the worse part. That stuff cleaned me out from both ends. I've probably got a green bum from using those leaves."

George smiled. "Like the old rhyme," he said.

Marjorie raised her eyebrows.

"You know," said George. "In days of old when knights were bold, and paper wasn't invented, they wiped their arse on a piece of grass and walked away contented."

Marjorie let out a short laugh. "Yeah, that was me all right." She looked around. "Do you think it's worth going any further, it all looks the same and we certainly can't eat anything here."

"No, I suppose not," said George, "Do you think we should try the silver ball now?"

Marjorie shook her head. "I'd rather go back to the water tower and clean up. I've just thought of another reason why we should go back. If your idea is right about the power source buried under ground, if we move too far from where we appeared, the silver ball might not work."

"We walked quite a way in Morocco from where we appeared, and it worked then," replied George.

Marjorie thought for a moment. "That's true, but the power source might have a area where it will work the ball, trouble is, we don't know how big that area is."

George nodded slowly. "Good point, OK, let's go back." He paused and pulled off his jumper. "If we're going back, I'll collect some food for Ruff. Wherever we end up next, chances are there'll be nothing for him to eat." He looked at Marjorie. "I take it you still think it's a good idea to take him with us?"

Marjorie nodded.

George pulled out one of his bootlaces and threaded it through the bottom of the jumper. Knotting the bootlace tight, he closed the end of the jumper. After tying the ends of the arms together to form a loop, he used the bar to knock down some 'sprouts' and stuffed them through the neck hole of his jumper. He removed the lace from his other boot and taking his penknife, which he always carried in his pocket, (you never know when you might need a knife), he cut the lace in half. After re-threading the half laces in the top couple of lace holes, he slung his makeshift haversack over his shoulder, and together, the pair retraced their steps, with Ruff plodding patiently alongside them. As they emerged into the open, Marjorie shook her head. "I wouldn't want to stay in there too long, that red sun shining through the green vegetation was making my eyes turn funny."

George nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean, the colours were all wrong, it was getting to me after a while."

At the water tower, George opened the lever and Marjorie stripped off and washed herself under the water gushing from the pipe. George watched her with undisguised appreciation. Noticing his look, Marjorie wagged a finger at him.

"Now don't you getting ideas, you dirty old sod. There's a time and a place for that and this isn't the time and it certainly aint the place."

"No harm in looking," said George with a grin.

The sun was well up and Marjorie soon dried off with the heat of the day. While she was putting on her clothes, George tasted the water.

"It seems all right, I think I'll take a chance and refill our water bottle," he said. He held the water bottle under the pipe until it was filled. "It could be full of bacteria or parasites we can't see, but we'll have to take the chance, we must have water."

He left the lever open a fraction so a trickle of water ran into the pond.

"That'll keep the pond topped up," he said. "That way your sheep will have something to drink."

"What happens when the water tower runs dry," said Marjorie.

George looked up the tower. "I reckon it's fed by an underground aquifer that keeps the tower topped up."

"You reckon?" asked Marjorie.

George shrugged. "That's how I'd do it," he replied.

"You didn't build it," said Marjorie with a grin.

"Whatever," said George. "We've done our best, we'll leave it at that. Shall we try the ball now?"

Marjorie nodded nervously. They stood close together with Ruff next to them. Marjorie held on to George's arm and laid her other hand on Ruff's back. George opened his hand and rubbed his finger round the circles. As his finger passed over the black spot, the familiar halo appeared. They were off again.

New Chapter

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Peter Meaking parked his car carefully in his parents drive, got out and walked up the path to the front door. From the telephone conversation he'd had that morning, he reckoned his father would be well on the way to digging out his pond and would be ready for a swift half at the Hare and Hounds. He let himself in with his key and called out.

"Hi Mum, Dad, it's me."

Receiving no reply, he walked through the house to the kitchen. Seeing the back door open, he went into the garden fully expecting to find his parents working on their pond. He looked around, rather puzzled at finding the garden deserted. He walked to the shed.

"Mum, Dad?" he called. Still no reply.

Growing increasingly concerned, he looked round the garden and spotted the video camera laying on the grass next to a silver box. He picked up the camera and ran the video back and started it playing. He watched the video in disbelief and ran it again just to confirm to his incredulous mind that what he was seeing was real. Then he called the police.

PC Adams drove slowly down the road searching the house numbers. WPC Alexander pointed from the passenger seat, "There, that's the one," she said.

"I wonder what we'll find," mused Adams, as he locked the car door. "He sounded pretty worried on the phone."

Alexander shrugged, "Probably they've gone for a drink and forgot to lock the back door, they could be home by now."

"I don't think so," replied Adams. He nodded at the path where

Peter Meaking had burst out of the front door and was hurrying towards them.

Adams put on his best official voice. "Well sir, what seems to be the trouble, you said you couldn't find your parents but you didn't make much sense over the phone,."

Peter nodded and turned to the front door. "Come with me," he said abruptly.

Adams and Alexander looked at each other, shrugged and followed the retreating back of Peter up the garden path. Peter took them into the back garden. He pointed to the hole in the ground.

"My dad was digging out a pond and he dug up something weird." He held out the video camera to Adams. "Look at that and tell me I'm not dreaming."

After viewing the video a couple of times, Adams turned off the camera and stared at Peter.

"This is not some fancy video special effect is it sir? Because if it is, you could be charged with wasting police time."

Peter smacked his forehead. "Bloody hell, I call for the police and all I get is a couple of wooden tops. Of course it's bloody real and my parents are missing." He sat down on the grass with his head in his hands.

Alexander laid her hand on Adam's arm. "I think this is real," she said. She nodded at Peter, "Look at him, he's nearly hysterical, I don't think he's having us on."

Adams looked at Alexander. "OK, if you're right," he said slowly, gathering his thoughts. "This is too much for us to handle. I'll call in."

Alexander nodded. "Do it, for what it's worth, I'll back you up."

Adams nodded back at her and reached for his phone.

Detective Inspector Don Spencer put the phone down, called across the office to his sergeant, Gavin Rice, and beckoned him over.

"Get the car Gavin, it seems a middle aged couple have gone missing."

Rice raised his eyebrows, "Seems?"

"A couple of officers answered a three nines," replied Spencer. "It was one of them on the phone now. He said the couple are missing, but there's a lot more to it than that."

Rice frowned, "A lot more than what?"

Spencer shook his head. "Didn't say, if this couple have just gone on holiday without telling anyone, I'll have their guts for garters." He slammed his desk drawers shut and pulled his coat from the back of his chair. "Come on, let's find out what it's all about."

PC Adams was waiting on the doorstep as Spencer pulled up to the kerb. As he and sergeant Rice reached the front door, Adams turned and held the door open.

"Sorry to call you out sir, but this is way over my head. We're all in the kitchen, this way."

WPC Alexander sitting at the kitchen table, stood up as Spencer entered the kitchen and nodded. "Afternoon sir."

Spencer nodded back at her. "Right, what's all the panic about," he stared at Adams. "And why couldn't you give me more info over the phone."

"It would be impossible to explain over the phone, sir," replied Adams. "You'll understand when you hear what Mr. Meaking has to say." He gestured at Peter "This is Peter Meaking, it's his parents that are missing,"

Spencer turned to face Peter and touched the back of a chair. "May I sit?"

Upon receiving a nod from Peter, he sat down and faced him. "Can you tell me what happened sir," he said.

"I wasn't here when it happened," began Peter. He pushed the video camera across the table towards Spencer. "You'd better see that, it explains everything."

Peter Meaking put four coffee cups in front of the police sitting round the kitchen table. It was late in the day and he was getting tired of the repeated questioning. He decided a coffee break was called

for.

Spencer nodded his thanks and took a drink from the cup. He put the cup down and briefly touched the video camera.

"I'll ask you once more, is this tape real. You must realize if it's some sort of hoax, you and your parents could be charged for wasting police time."

Peter tiredly shook his head and nodded at Adams. "That's what he said and I told him the same as I'm telling you. I don't care how many times you ask me the same question. You're going to get the same answer, I believe it is real. If it isn't, where are my parents. They wouldn't leave the house with the back door wide open, I know they wouldn't"

"All right, for the moment we'll take it as fact that you're telling the truth as you see it," replied Spencer. "Have you any idea how this could have come about, or who could have made the video?"

Peter shook his head. "Look, my father was a retired army sergeant, he has a computer but he knows nothing about special effects. My mother also uses the computer, but only to send e-mails and photos to friends and family. Neither of them could do what's on that video. That's why I know what we see on the video really happened, unbelievable as it seems."

"The time clock on the video suggests it all happened at about four o'clock," said Spencer. He briefly looked at his watch, "About four hours ago. We'll leave Sergeant Rice with you tonight and come back in the morning. If your parents haven't turned up by then, we'll take this further." He stared at Peter. "Despite your denials I'm still not convinced. Your parents could have computer skills you know nothing about. You must look at it from my point of view. People just don't disappear and the video is, in your own words, unbelievable. "

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"There's no sign of a struggle, no damage in any of the rooms," continued Spencer. "If they had been abducted, I can't believe there wouldn't be some sign of it."

"It happened in the garden, not the house," retorted Peter. "You saw the video, they were in the garden when it happened."

"I'm still not convinced about the video," replied Spencer.

"There is the silver box," said Alexander. "We saw on the video Mr. Meaking dig it up. From the look of the ground, I don't think he could have planted it, the earth looked undisturbed round it before he took it out of the ground."

"And the funny ball that stuck to his finger," added Adams. "We found the wire cutters in the shed with the damaged blades as well. It all corroborates what's on the video."

"Ah yes the wire cutters," said Spencer. "Where are they?"

"We left them on the bench in the shed," replied Adams. "We thought it best not to move them, especially after seeing the tape."

"You did bring the silver box in here though," said Spencer, indicating the box sitting on the table in front of them.

"No, that was me," said Peter. "When I saw it on the video I brought it in with me so I could have a proper look at it while I was waiting for you lot to turn up. I thought it might help explain what happened to my parents," he shook his head. "It didn't, it's just a box with some padding."

Sergeant Rice picked up the box and turned it in his hands. "It could be important. We saw how Peter's father hit it with the trowel, but there's not a mark on it. It makes me wonder what's it made of."

"Please get your father's wire cutters from the shed and leave them on this table until the morning," said Spencer. "As I said, if by then your parents are still missing, we'll take things further." He rose from the chair and nodded at Rice. "I want you to report in at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. That gives Mr. and Mrs. Meaking some time to return if they're off on a jaunt somewhere. If by then they are still missing, you let us know."

Rice nodded and watched as Spencer walked to the door, followed by Adams and Alexander. Spencer stopped in the doorway and beckoned him over. "Come with me," he said.

On the doorstep he allowed Adams and Alexander to walk ahead. When they were out of earshot he spoke quietly to Rice.

"I don't know what to make of this Gavin. It could be the most astounding thing we've ever seen or a real clever hoax. While you're with Peter Meaking, see if you can get any more information out of him with casual conversation. If this thing is real, you should have no trouble, chances are he'll want to talk about nothing else."

Rice nodded. "And if his parents do turn up?"

"Contact me immediately and I'll throw the bloody book at them, and their son."

"Will you let my wife know why I won't be home tonight?" asked Rice.

"Call her yourself on Meaking's phone, he can stand the price of a phone call."

Rice nodded and waited on the doorstep until both police cars had driven away. He shrugged his shoulders and went into the house, shutting the door behind him.

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DI Don Spencer ground his cigarette under his shoe and put the remains in the small box fixed to the wall. Bloody no smoking rule he thought, now I can't even have a fag at my desk anymore. He sighed and opened the door to the police station and headed for his office. As he sat down at his desk, his phone rang. It was his sergeant,

"Still missing sir," said Gavin Rice.

"Get anything more from Peter Meaking?" asked Spencer.

"No sir, he stuck to his original story, he swears the video is genuine."

"OK, I'll be over in about half an hour," replied Spencer. He put the phone down and sat thinking. He'd need more help with this one, first thing is to get someone to check out the video. He opened his phone directory and after some searching found the number he was looking for. He dialed and after a short conversation put the phone down. He put his note book in his pocket, slung a bag over his shoulder and left the police station. Half an hour later, he arrived at Meaking's bungalow. Gavin Rice was waiting for him on the front step.

"Still no change, sir," said Rice.

Spencer nodded and followed him into the bungalow. Peter Meaking looked like he'd been up all night. He had a heavy growth of beard and his hair was sticking up at all angles. He nodded to Spencer.

"Well, what are you going to do now, I take it you believe me now," he said tiredly.

"I'm still reserving my judgment on that," replied Spencer. "What I

am going to do is have the video examined."

Meaking's eyes widened. "What, you're going to take it away?"

Spencer nodded.

"It's the only proof I've got as to what happened to my parents, You can't have that, I'll make you a copy."

Spencer shook his head. "You can make a copy, but I want the original." He held up his hand as Meaking was about to speak. "My decision is final, I will take the original, a copy is no good to me."

Meaking's shoulders slumped. "OK, OK, take it, anything to find out what happened to my parents." He took the memory card out of the camera walked out of the kitchen to the lounge. Firing up a computer on a corner desk he inserted the card into a slot on the front of the computer. Within minutes he'd downloaded the information on the card onto the computer. He removed the card and put it back into the camera.

Spencer watched this operation with narrowed eyes. "You seem quite an expert with the computer, Mr. Meaking, It raises more doubts in my mind as to the veracity of what is on that card."

Meaking stared at him. "All I did was copy what's on the card, a child could do it. It's a far cry from what's on the card, I've no idea how to do that."

"So you say, sir, but you must see things from my point of view. The scenes shown on the video are most unusual, you must agree to that."

Meaking nodded. "Yeah, I do agree, most unusual, now are you going to do something about it, or just stand there trying to trip me up. I'm telling you for the final time, the video has not been made either by me or my parents, OK?"

Spencer held out his hand, took the camera from Meaking and put it in his bag.

"Right, sir, we'll be off. I hope to have more information for you later today. We'll keep you informed."

Meaking slumped down onto a chair. He waved his hand tiredly.

"I'm not going anywhere, you can reach me here."

Spencer nodded and shepherded Rice to the front door. When they were in Spencer's car he turned to Rice.

"Anything else you'd like to add?" he asked.

Rice shook his head.

Spencer took in his drooping eyes and crumpled clothing. "Get much sleep last night?"

Rice shook his head. "I managed to doze a bit in a chair but Meaking kept waking me up. He was prowling round the rooms last night. He kept picking up pictures of his parents and putting them down. After you'd gone, he spent an hour on the phone to his wife. I think he's genuinely worried about his parents, I don't think he's putting it on." He gestured out of the window. "Where are we going?"

"There's a company that produces CGI for films not far from here. I phoned them this morning and arranged an appointment. They're going to examine the video for us."

The CGI company was in an unassuming house in a quiet road. After making themselves known at the door, they were let through a number of rooms packed with computers. A tall thin man rose to meet them.

"Morning, I'm Charles Footing, are you the policeman I spoke to this morning?"

Spencer nodded. "I am. Mr. Footing....."

"Call me Charlie," interrupted Footing. "Everybody does."

"OK, Charlie, we have a video we'd like you to examine. We need to know if what's on it is clever video manipulation or genuine."

Charlie held out his hand. "That should be no problem, let's have it."

Spencer handed him the camera and Charlie deftly removed the memory card and inserted into the computer on the desk in front of him. After he'd downloaded the card onto his computer he put the card back in the camera and looked up. "Which bit are you interested in?" he asked.

“At about four o’clock on the video it shows a couple of middle aged people disappearing. That’s the bit I want examined,” replied Spencer.

Footing raised his eyebrows. “Disappearing eh, that should be interesting.” He brought the pictures up on his screen and ran them fast forward, watching the time clock numbers spinning round. At ten to four he slowed the video to real time. He lent forwards as the picture tilted sharply as the camera was dropped onto the lawn. Partially obscured by blades of grass, the two figures could be seen pulling at the ring on the man’s finger. As they disappeared within the blue halo, he sat up.

“Wow, that was well done,” he exclaimed. “Now let’s see how they did it.”

He ran the video back and then advanced it frame by frame until the frame with the blue halo was on the screen. Spencer and Rice watched with interest as Footing used his mouse to apply various filters to the picture. After half an hour, Footing sat back tapping his chin.

“I can’t find any layering or evidence of green screen on this,” he said. “On the face of it the video hasn’t been manipulated at all. Now that of course is impossible, people just don’t disappear like that. This is a very clever piece of work, I’d like to meet the person who did it” He looked up. “I need to make some more tests to find out just how it was done. I could have a result sometime this afternoon if that’s all right with you.”

Spencer didn’t really want even a copy of the video out of his sight but if he wanted results he had no choice. He nodded slowly.

“All right Charlie, but I must caution you not to show this to anyone else. This could be evidence in an ongoing investigation so I must emphasise the need for confidentiality. Anything you see from your investigation you must keep to yourself. Unless you can promise me this, I’ll have to insist you delete the copy from your computer. I’ll also want you to delete your copy anyway after you’ve finished your

Investigation"

Footing raised his eyebrows. "That serious eh, OK, I can do the work on my own, no one else will see it."

"What about the rest of the staff here," asked Rice, "won't they be curious and ask questions?"

Footing smiled. "I'm sure they will, but as I'm the boss here, their questions will remain unanswered, I can guarantee only my eyes will see what's on the tape." He paused, "I won't have to go to court will I?"

"I probably won't come to that," replied Spencer. "Would it worry you if it did?"

"Well, I have got a record," replied Footing. "Nothing serious mind you, just possession of a bit of weed."

Spencer grinned. "As long as we can say you were not high when you're examining the video, I think we can forget about that."

"It was over five years ago," said Footing. "I'd almost forgotten about it until I thought about a court appearance."

Spencer shook his head. "Forget about it, it probably won't come to a court appearance and if it did you'd only be questioned about your competence to do the examination. I know you and your company have carried out CGI work on some quite big films, that's why I chose you, so I don't think your competence would be in question."

"You remember there will be a fee for my investigation." said Charlie.

"I've already cleared that." replied Spencer. "Send the invoice to me at the station and I'll pass it on." He took out his note book and scribbled a number. "This is my mobile number, call me when you have a result, OK?"

The call came mid afternoon.

"Charlie here, I've done every test I can think of and I've typed a full report for you. As far as I can see, the video has not been manipulated in any way. Make of that what you will, but as far as I'm

concerned the video is genuine and unaltered.”

Spencer studied Footing's report. He couldn't understand most of the terms used but give him his due, Footing was thorough, the report ran to four tightly packed pages. He read down to the conclusion. There in black and white was Footing's statement that he could find no indication that the video showed evidence of manipulation. He wouldn't commit himself as to what had actually happened to the people in the video and decided to refrain from commenting on the most obvious scenario, it being too wild to even consider. While waiting for Footing's report, he'd double checked the information he had on him. The man had a won many honors in the film industry for his work and was highly thought of, only just missing an Oscar for one of his films. Footing was at the top of his profession and anyone else with his level of expertise was likely to come to the same conclusion about the video. However, thought Spencer, I better get a second opinion, I need a scientist or two. Time to wake up my boss. He typed up his request with a copy of Footing's report and passed his request to his Chief Inspector,

Who passed it on to the Superintendent,
Who passed it on to the Chief Superintendent,
Who passed it on to the Assistant Chief Constable,
Who passed it on to the Deputy Chief Constable,
Who passed it on to the Chief Constable.

Eventually, he received a message to report to the Chief Constable's office ASAP. This arrived at six o'clock in the evening which was quite fast considering how many steps his request had taken to reach the dizzy heights of the top rank.

Chief Constable John Plowman looked at Spencer over the top of his glasses and briefly touched the papers on his desk.

"I don't usually become involved in cases this early in the investigation, but this case is most unusual. It raises all sorts of questions, I suspect for which there are no easy answers," he said.

"That's why I decided I needed help," replied Spencer.

"Is this man Footing to be relied on?" asked Plowman.

Spencer nodded. "I believe so, he's well thought of in the film industry for his expertise, I did a bit of research on him. I think he's one of the best of the bunch."

"And this Peter Meaking, any form on him?"

"No sir, not even a parking ticket. He's the Meaking's only child and has been married to Amy Meaking for seven years. They have a six year old daughter, Christine. He seems a solid family man, I can't think of any reason he'd make up such a story. And his parents are missing," he added.

"What about the Meakings, anything on them?" asked Plowman.

"Same as their son. Just your ordinary law abiding couple. George is a retired Sergeant from the Royal Engineers, currently working as a supervisor in a small engineering firm. His wife Marjorie worked as a nurse until last year when she had to retire with a bad back. Just ordinary folk you wouldn't look twice at."

Plowman consulted the papers on his desk. "You say you want to consult a scientist. What precisely for?"

"I want another check on the video to confirm or deny Footing's report. Then we can really go over the Meaking's garden with a fine tooth comb. If we can prove the video is genuine, and from what Footing says, I believe it is, whatever happened to the Meakings is way out of our scope to investigate. We've had the forensic boys checking over the garden, but they've found nothing. That's why I think we need more help."

Plowman was quiet for a moment, steepling his fingers and tapping his chin. Spencer could almost hear the gears going round in

his head. Finally he said, "You've had time to study this case, what do you think happened to the Meakings."

Spencer shrugged his shoulders. "I've no idea. The only evidence is the video. They could have been whisked off somewhere or they could be dead. We've no way of knowing."

"Have you put this to Peter Meaking?"

Spencer shook his head. "No, as far as he is concerned, we are treating this as a disappearance. We are trying to find out how and why they disappeared, the fate of his parents hasn't come up. I reckon he doesn't want to think about that at this stage."

"You realize if the video is genuine, this will make the whole of the scientific community have to rethink a lot of their basic theories and beliefs," said Plowman. "The case will be yours for the time being, but it may be taken out of our hands once we ask for outside help and the scientific community and the Government gets involved."

Spencer nodded. "I realize that," he said.

"Are you ready for the furore that will erupt if and when this gets out?"

"I'm hoping you will help to keep the lid on this until we come to some sort of conclusion," replied Spencer.

Plowman nodded. "I'll do my best of course. Now who do you want to contact?"

Professor Sir Aubrey Standing put down Footings report and pursed his lips. "Am I to take this seriously?" he asked.

Spencer frowned. This was not the reaction he was hoping for. "Of course sir, we wouldn't ask for your opinion if it wasn't serious."

"But it's preposterous, people just don't disappear in a puff of smoke, the video must be a fake." Before Spencer could answer, Standing lent forwards in his chair, pointing his finger across his desk. "To do what this video purports to show would take technology we haven't even approached. To destroy two people without leaving any trace is just not possible. I've studied the video. There's no scorch marks or the slightest damage to the grass where they were standing." He shook his head. "And the other theory that they have been transported somewhere is even more preposterous. To do that you would have to know the position of every atom in a persons body with all the chemical actions and reactions taking place in real time. I repeat in real time because the human body is not a static item, it is changing from second to second. Every single atom and process would have to be reproduced and rebuilt somewhere else while the original was destroyed. I say destroyed because if it wasn't you'd end up with two people, one at the original point and one at the destination." He slid Footing's report across the desk to Spencer. "I'm sorry, what you have here is a clever fake, I can't help you."

Spencer gathered up the papers and put them into his briefcase. "Well, thank you for your time Sir Aubrey, could you write a brief report outlining what you've just said to me?" he paused noting the frown on Standing's face. "Just for my superiors, sir," he added.

"Yes, I can do that," replied Standing. "I can tell you what it will say now. In my opinion, you have been taken in by some clever computer trickery and I suggest you treat it as such. I'll send it straight to the police station marked for your attention." He rose from his chair. "Can you find your own way out, I'm afraid I can't spend any more time on this."

Spencer nodded and allowed Standing to escort him to the door of his office. As he walked down the corridor he heard Standing's door closing firmly behind him.

Gavin Rice was waiting for him in the university lobby. He stood up as Spencer approached. "Well?" he asked.

Spencer shook his head. "No good, the old fool wouldn't even consider it, I think he's too stuck in his ways. We need someone else."

It took a little while, but finally Spencer found his man. The ink on Mark Freeman's PhD paper was barely dry so his enthusiasm for anything new was undimmed. When Spencer's proposal was put to him, his eyes lit up.

"What you've just described sounds unbelievable," he said. "But then quantum mechanics seemed unbelievable a few years ago. I'm up for it."

"I'll supply you with a copy of the video, my notes, the forensics report and the report from a CGI expert," said Spencer. "Take a few days to absorb the details and come back to me, OK?"

Freeman's call came the next day. "I've gone over the video and notes and I've put together some tentative proposals for an investigation. When would you like me to start?"

This is better, thought Spencer. "I'll get back to you on that. I've got to clear it with my boss and get Peter Meaking out of the bungalow. Remember what I said about confidentiality, if you talk about this to anyone you'd be thrown off the investigation."

"No chance of that," replied Freeman. "This is too good an opportunity to miss, I'm not going to mess it up." He paused. "One

thing, I can't do this on my own, I'll need a couple of post grad students to help me, will that be all right?"

"As long as they understand the same rules of confidentiality as you, yes," replied Spencer. "I'll call you back with a starting time. By the way do you know Professor Standing?"

"By name and reputation," replied Freeman. "Why do you want him on the team as well?"

"Absolutely not," replied Spencer, "I've already spoken to him and he's convinced the whole thing is a fake. He wouldn't even visit the garden."

Freeman chuckled. "Well what is being suggested goes against everything he's been teaching for the last twenty years. I can understand his position even if I don't agree with it. Anyway, enough about him, I'm putting the equipment together I'll need, as soon as you give the word, we can start."

Spencer stood at the edge of the Meaking's garden as Judith Wilkes pushed a wheeled cart over the grass.

"What is that thing?" he asked Freeman standing next to him.

"Ground penetrating radar," replied Freeman.

"Oh like they use on the that TV archeology program," said Spencer.

Freeman nodded. "Judith will take readings right across the garden and then Anton will plug the results into his computer."

Spencer opened a folder and ran his finger down a list of names. "Judith Wilkes and Anton Bracks. Are they the only students you're bringing with you?"

Freeman nodded. "I thought it would be easier to keep this under wraps if I kept the numbers down. Judith and Anton are good kids, they know they have to keep quiet about this until I give the word."

Spencer nodded. "Is that radar thing all you're going to do?" he asked.

"Oh no, this is just the start," replied Freeman. "We'll survey the garden with a magnetometer after we've finished with the radar. I

know your forensics people have examined the garden, but we did a fingertip search all the same. We've taken samples of the grass and earth where the Meakings were standing, they're back at the lab waiting for us. There's the silver box to examine and the wire cutters we saw on the video. We've already started on the cutters, they were a bit of a disappointment. I thought we might find traces of the wire the silver ball was hanging from in the indents on the cutter blades. Unfortunately, we haven't so far. We'll put the blades under an electron microscope next, if there's the smallest trace on the blades, that should show them up."

"What about the silver box?" asked Spencer.

"We'll put a piece of that in the mass spectrometer and try and see what it's made of. We're a bit stuck at the moment, we can't find anything to cut it with. I'm waiting to get hold of a diamond saw, that should do it."

"It's that hard?" asked Spencer in amazement.

Freeman nodded. "If old man Standing had bothered to examine the box it might have changed his mind. Still, his loss, my gain. He'll be spitting rivets when I publish my findings."

"Whoa," cried Spencer, holding up his hands. "This is still an ongoing case, there'll be nothing published until we say so."

"I know that," replied Freeman. "I presume I'll be able to publish eventually."

"Eventually," replied Spencer.

"It'll be worth the wait," replied Freeman with relish.

Their conversation was interrupted by Wilkes. "Found something," she cried excitedly.

Up close, George realized the vehicle looked like a fat mechanical caterpillar. The native in the armour was standing on the ramp by the door beckoning them in. George and Marjorie looked at each other and with George holding onto Ruff's coat, they followed the native up the ramp. Inside was a long room with a row of similarly dressed natives sitting on benches down each side. Like parachutists waiting for a drop, thought George. They only stirred slightly as George and Marjorie entered the interior, but when Ruff arrived the effect was dramatic. The natives nearest to the door bunched up in an effort to move further down the room. The native who had waved them in, backed away and indicated two vacant spaces near the door. As they moved towards the bench with Ruff, there was an undignified scramble of the occupants to move away from them.

"I think I was wrong about Ruff not biting, he may be more dangerous than we think," whispered George. "We may have the equivalent of a tiger following us about."

"The way they're reacting, I reckon they've seen animals like Ruff before," said Marjorie. "That could mean they have visited the planet with water tower."

"Could be," replied George. "On the other hand we could be on the other side of the same planet for all we know."

Marjorie shook her head. "I don't think so, the sun here is a different colour, it was much redder on the last planet."

While they were talking, the end door swung ponderously closed and dim lights came on down the centre of the room. They felt the vehicle start moving and so they sat down with Marjorie holding tightly

on to Ruff's coat. George had taken the bar from Marjorie and held it in front of him like a crusader knight with the end planted on the floor between his feet. George heard a muffled giggle from Marjorie. He turned to her as she lent over to him.

"I keep thinking about the rabbit hole," she whispered. "Seeing them all lined up like that, they look more than ever like Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee.

George snorted. "I wonder which ones which," he whispered. He stared across the aisle to the native opposite. "All right then son?" he said.

A pair of eyes stared back at him through the transparent helmet.

"Obviously they don't feel like talking," he muttered.

By George's watch, they had been traveling for about half an hour when the vehicle came to a halt. The door opened and they were waved out. They emerged up a ramp into a large windowless room. They both jumped as a door boomed shut behind them. What had been the ramp had now closed like a drawbridge. Alarmed, they looked around. The walls, floor and ceiling were bare metal with only a single light in the ceiling. They were trapped in what appeared to be a cell with no way out. This was not the reception they had hoped for. They both staggered as the room started moving. They could hear a faint whine coming from under the floor which rose and fell in volume.

"I think we're in a vehicle of some kind," said George. He thumped the floor with the bar. "I reckon that's the sound of an engine. They must have backed it up against that tank thing so we walked straight into it." He looked at the silver ball hanging from his left hand. "I don't want them to see this, I wish I could take it off."

"We can hide it," said Marjorie.

George raised his eyebrows.

"Pull out your shirt," ordered Marjorie.

When George's shirttails were hanging down his back, Marjorie used George's penknife to cut a strip of material from the bottom of

the shirt. Holding the ball carefully, to avoid touching the rings or the black spot, she twisted the ball round George's finger until it was on the back of his hand. She wrapped the strip of material round his hand holding the ball in place. She knotted the material tightly and stood back.

"How's that," she said.

George wagged his hand. "That'll do," he said. He turned so Marjorie could tuck the remains of his shirt back into his trousers and then paused, his face frowning. "I'm having a change of mind about this lot. I think we should use the ball."

"Oh George," exclaimed Marjorie in exasperation. "Why change your mind now when we could be miles from where we arrived. Why didn't you use the ball before we got into that long vehicle."

George waved his arms around. "That was before they locked us in here. Hold on to me and Ruff, I'll use the ball."

"Well?" asked Marjorie a few minutes later.

George shook his head. "Nothing, we must be too far from the power source. We'll have to think again." He cocked his head to one side as the whining died away. "Hold up," he said. "The motor's stopped."

They turned round to face the door as it dropped down. As the daylight flooded in, they could see they were in a courtyard of some kind surrounded by armour clad natives. Ahead they could see a door leading to a dark tunnel. The native beckoned them out.

"Stay here," said George. He stepped down the ramp and peered around. His hunch was correct, they were in a box like vehicle with a row of large wheels down each side. The native was getting impatient. He beckoned again, indicating they should go through the door into the tunnel.

George turned back to Marjorie.

"I definitely don't like the look of that tunnel, I'm going to try and get us out of here."

Marjorie raised her eyebrows. "How," she whispered.

"We'll hijack this vehicle," replied George. "And make a run for it back to the park where we started from."

"You won't know how to drive it or where the park is," hissed Marjorie.

George nodded at the line of natives. "They've got two hands like us, I reckon it won't be too hard to figure out how the controls work. We'll work out the park bit later."

Marjorie shrugged her shoulders. "OK, I'll go with that, what'll we do?"

"Come out slowly, then we'll make a dash for the front of this vehicle. If there is a driving compartment, we'll climb in and try to get away."

Marjorie slowly emerged from the vehicle, clutching tightly onto Ruff's coat. When she had joined George outside, he nodded and they turned and dashed down the left hand side of the vehicle. Their sudden move took the natives completely by surprise, they were halfway down the side before any of them moved. As they reached the front, George realised the vehicle resembled the security vans that carried cash about the streets at home. He wrenched at a very ordinary looking door handle and pulled the door open. Marjorie dived through the door like a rat up a drainpipe, with Ruff closely following her. As George was about to climb in, a native rushed up brandishing a short tube. The native pointed the tube at George and green light played over him with as little effect as the lights from the spheres. As the native came nearer, George swung his bar to knock the tube out of the native's hands. As the native staggered back, George drove the bar into the native's middle, knocking it to the ground. George scoped up the tube and threw it into the cab, then dived in himself, slamming the door behind him.

A long bench seat ran the width of the cab. In front of the seat was a large window with a panel below it. Two joystick like handles stuck out of the panel with a yellow button between them. George put his hands on the handles and felt them move.

“Oh ho,” he said, “I reckon I can drive this, it’s just like a bloody tank.

He moved both handles forwards experimentally. When nothing happened, he tutted to himself and pressed the yellow button between the handles. He smiled to himself as he heard the whine of the motors starting up. The natives had by this time reached the front of the van. George pushed the left handle forwards as far as he could. The van swung violently round side swiping the natives like skittles at a bowling alley. Ahead was the entrance to the courtyard, so George pushed both handles to their stops. The van surged forwards, scattering natives in all directions as it sped out of the courtyard.

“Wayhay,” yelled George, “We’re off.” He turned to Marjorie, “Now which way do you reckon we should go?”

Marjorie pointed through the windscreen at a wide street in front of them. “That way, is good as any,” she said.

“I can’t believe we got away with that,” said George. “Most of them just stood there while we were hijacking their vehicle.”

“Yeah, well if a couple of strange beings turned up in one of our parks and bullets had no effect on them, I think we’d be a bit cautious about dealing with them,” replied Marjorie reflectively.

George nodded. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” He concentrated on the controls. “All we’ve got to do now is find the park where we first appeared.”

Marjorie gave a short laugh. “Yeah that’s all, piece of cake my love.”

The van was very skittish. The slightest difference in pressure on the handles caused the vehicle to swerve violently to either side. It took George several minutes to get the hang of it, but once he'd cracked it, their progress was reasonably straight. They were on a wide road, with oncoming vehicles swerving out of their way. George realized he was on the wrong side of the road, so he angled across the road so he was traveling in the same direction as the other traffic. He wasn't concerned about breaking their traffic laws, more about meeting a another vehicle in a headlong crash.

While George was sorting out the controls, Marjorie was examining the tube George had taken from the native.

"Any luck with that?" he asked.

Marjorie held up the tube. "There's a lens like a camera at one end and a grip like on a bike handlebar at the other end and another in the middle," she said, "I can't find a trigger or anything to fire it."

As she held the tube so George could see it, the end of the tube telescoped in her hand, with the end section sliding into the main tube. A green light flashed across the cab. Ruff squealed and sunk down lower on the floor at their feet.

"That's got it," said Marjorie with a grin.

"Just watch where you fire it," said George. "We don't want Ruff knocked out again."

Marjorie looked out of her side window. "I could try it on them," she said.

George looked across the cab through Marjorie's window. Two vehicles were pacing them.

"Try it," suggested George.

Marjorie put the tube against the window and aimed it at the nearest vehicle. Holding the two grips, she pushed the end of the tube inwards and watched with satisfaction as the vehicle was bathed in the green light. The results were dramatic. The vehicle swerved violently and spun off the road. The vehicle behind it braked hard, putting it out of Marjorie's view.

"I don't know if there's any more behind us," said Marjorie. "I can't look out, I can't find any way of winding the window down."

George nodded at the metal bar leaning on the seat next to him. "Try breaking it with that," he said.

Marjorie put the tube on her lap and took the bar in both hands. She hit the side window with all her strength with the result that when the bar rebounded off the window it nearly took George's head off.

"Hey, watch it love," shouted George.

"Sorry love, I'll try it again a bit more carefully," replied Marjorie.

She stabbed at the window again and was rewarded with a slight crack across the centre. A few more blows broke the window completely, the shards flying out of the cab to be sucked away by the wind. Marjorie used the bar to knock away the remains of the window and stuck her head out.

"We've got quite a convoy behind us," she shouted. "Shall I give them a go with the tube?"

Without waiting for an answer, she stuck the tube out of the window and aimed it down the side of the cab at the following vehicles. The first two immediately lost control, veering wildly across the road. The following vehicles braked hard until they were several hundred yards behind them.

"Right, we've lost our escort, now where are we going?" asked Marjorie, always one to ask difficult questions.

Up to now, George had been concentrating on keeping the van on the road, with not much thought as to where they were going. He frowned. "I dunno love, I was just concentrating on getting as far away

from that courtyard as possible. I can't recognize landmarks because there were no windows in the vehicles we were picked up in." He turned briefly to Marjorie. "Any ideas would be welcome."

"We could try the silver ball," answered Marjorie. "If we get near enough to where we appeared, it could work. We might not have to go all the way there."

George nodded. "We'd have to stop first. We're doing, what, about forty miles an hour? It would be a bumpy ride if we appeared somewhere else doing that speed."

Marjorie looked out of the side window. "They're still hanging well back, do you want to try it now?"

George nodded and as he pulled back both handles he felt the van slowing. He pulled harder and they came to a halt in the middle of the road. Suddenly, the van shot backwards, throwing George and Marjorie against the windscreen. The handles, still clutched in George's hands were pushed forwards as he shot out of his seat. The van came to an abrupt halt and then accelerated forwards. After a period of yo-yoing backwards and forwards, George finally got the van under control and brought it to a halt.

"George," said Marjorie in her best school maam voice.

"Sorry love," muttered George. "This takes a bit of handling, I think I've sorted it now. What about that lot behind us, are they still there?"

Marjorie leaned out of her window. "Yeah, still there, they've stopped about a hundred yards away."

George nodded. "Right hang on to me and Ruff and don't let go of the bar, the tube and the water bottle."

As he felt Marjorie gripping his arm, he moved the makeshift bandage on his hand until he could touch the surface of the ball.

"Here goes," said.

"Are you doing it?" asked Marjorie.

George nodded. "Nothing's happening. We're not near enough." He pulled the bandage over the ball and gripped the levers. "Have to go further and try again," he said.

"We could be going further from the power source," said Marjorie.

"We'll give it a few more tries and if nothing happens, we'll turn round and go in the opposite direction," said George.

Marjorie nodded. "If they'll let us," she said.

"I think they'll stay well clear," replied George, "they don't know what to make of us, don't worry love, we'll be all right."

Despite his brave words, George was worried. So far he reckoned they had been dealing with the equivalent of a police force. What would happen if they called in the army. If there was such an organization on this planet, they would be bound to have heavier, more efficient weapons. He just hoped they could get the ball working before they showed up. They had driven for about another ten minutes when Marjorie said "Give it another go."

George pulled the van to a halt and after making sure Marjorie was holding on to him and Ruff, tried the ball. He shook his head.

"Still nothing, we'll give it another ten minutes and then turn round."

Marjorie nodded, too worried to speak. She'd seen some sort of aircraft in the distance. It hadn't come near them yet, but if it was looking for them, it was only a matter of time. She debated telling George, but decided against it, he had enough on his plate without piling on more worries.

George pulled over to the side of the road. "We'll give it another try, if nothing happens, we'll turn round. Are you hanging on to Ruff and our bits and pieces?"

Marjorie nodded and casually looked out of the window. Her eyes widened. The aircraft was coming straight at them at treetop height. Sparkles of light appeared on the wings and Marjorie had just time to scream before the back of the van was shredded from the hail of missiles fired from the aircraft.

Spencer looked up at Judith Wilkes's excited cry. "What is it?" he shouted.

"Let's go and see," said Mark Freeman, taking a more sensible approach.

They crossed the garden to where Bracks sat with a laptop computer. Judith Wilkes joined them a second later and plugged a lead from the magnetometer into the laptop.

"Has it come out?" she asked, "I got a good spike on the screen."

Bracks touched his laptop. "Clear as day, it's about a metre and a half down."

Spencer looked at the computer. On the screen, a lot of wavy lines with a peak in the centre were visible. He turned to Freeman. "What do you reckon it is?"

"Well, to get a return like that, it's either metal or stone. The signal is so strong, I'd go for metal," replied Freeman.

Spencer did a quick mental calculation, he couldn't get his head round metric values, to get a idea of the depth he had to convert to feet and inches. "About five feet down, you say?" he asked Bracks.

Bracks nodded and held his hands apart. It's about a metre by a half a metre in size."

"Right," said Spencer rubbing his hands. "Let's get a JCB in and dig it up."

Freeman studied the side gate. "It'll have to be a mini digger to get through there, otherwise we'll have to take the fence down."

Spencer shook his head. "A mini digger will have to do, we don't want to attract more attention than we've got already."

"That's a point," said Freeman. "What are the neighbours making of all this, or the press for that matter."

"So far we've kept it relatively quiet," replied Spencer. "The neighbours think the Meakings are having some work done on their garden. I don't think they spotted the original police car and mine is a standard car, no flashing lights."

"Good," replied Freeman, "I prefer to work without someone looking over my shoulder."

Freeman leant against the bungalow wall watching the digger at work. "It's going to make a bloody mess of their garden," he said to Spencer.

Spencer gave a short laugh. "Serve them right for disappearing," he replied.

"Bye the way, who's paying for this?" asked Freeman.

"At the moment, it's all part of the police investigation so we'll pay. Anything more, I'll have to clear it with my boss."

Freeman raised his eyebrows. "More?"

"Yeah, like pulling their house down, something like that," replied Spencer with a grin. He nodded at the bright orange lines sprayed on the grass. "Why such a big hole, it must be about ten by twenty feet."

Freeman waved his hand across the garden. "We know from the video the position where the couple disappeared and we know George found the silver box in the pond he was digging. Our hole is going to be big enough to cover both areas. We're concentrating on the signal at first with a two metre square hole, then depending what we find, we'll deepen the whole lot."

"It's not very deep at the moment," said Spencer.

"We'll only go down to the top of whatever's down there. The rest we'll dig out by hand. That's why we're doing a two metre square hole at first so the hole is big enough for us to work in," replied Freeman. "Also, we don't want the digger driver seeing anything if we turn up something interesting."

Spencer nodded with understanding. "How long till we reach it?"

Freeman nodded at the hole. "Another hour should do it, then we can see what we've got."

Spencer checked his watch. "OK, I'll be off then. Call me when you find something"

The call came later that day. Hearing Freeman's voice on the phone, Spencer could hardly contain his excitement.

"You've found something?" he asked.

"Yeah, a busted wheelbarrow," said Freeman tiredly. "It must have been dumped by the builders".

It took a moment for Spencer to recover. "What five feet down, builders wouldn't dig a hole that deep just to bury a wheelbarrow surely."

"I went to the council and studied the plans of the Meaking's bungalow, something I should have done earlier," replied Freeman. "There were going to be two bungalows on that site. The builders were broke as they were digging the foundations for the second bungalow. I reckon they dumped the wheelbarrow in the foundation hole before they filled them in."

"So what are you going to do now?" asked Spencer, "Is that it?"

"Oh no," replied Freeman, "Now we'll start on the spot where the Meaking's disappeared and the area of his pond. Mr. Meaking found the silver box about three feet down. We want to see if we can find anything else. We're going to make a big hole so that'll take some time, so I'll call you later."

"OK, keep me posted," said Spencer. He put the phone down with a bang, his hopes for an early result evaporating. "Shit," he exclaimed.

George found himself in the middle of a swirling mass of flying glass and metal. Before he could take in what was happening there was a sudden lurch as the bottom dropped out of his world and he felt himself falling. The fall only lasted a brief moment before he hit with a bone jarring impact, flinging him across the cab. It took a moment before he recovered his senses.

“Marjorie,” he called urgently, “are you all right?”

Marjorie moaned softly beside him. “My leg,” she whispered.

George realized he couldn’t see very well. He wiped his eyes and when he looked at his hand it was covered in blood. A lot of blood. The silver ball was gone and so was his finger. He tore the sleeve off his shirt and wrapped it round his hand, the makeshift bandage turning instantly red with blood. He stared at his hand. It should be hurting, he thought but funnily enough, he felt nothing. He shrugged, wiped his eyes again and turned to Marjorie. She was half off the seat with her legs crumpled in the footwell.

“George, I can’t move my leg,” she said faintly.

George pushed a pile of glass debris from his lap and leaned across the seat. He extended his arm and grasped Marjorie’s hand.

“Hang on love, I’ll have to get out and come round to your side,” he said quietly, “I can’t reach you from here.”

He pulled his makeshift haversack holding Ruff’s food over his head, laid it on the seat and kicked his door open. Looking out he realized they were somewhere else, the silver ball had worked its magic again. They had landed on an area paved with multicoloured slabs. A few hundred yards away, domed shaped buildings were

visible. As he climbed out of the cab, he saw only the front part of the van had come with them, the rear was a mangled mess with the back door completely missing.

He walked round the front of the van, his feet bouncing on the ground. The gravity on this planet must be much lighter he thought, unlike the previous planets they had visited. The air too was different, with a sharpness that left an acidic taste in his mouth. Reaching Marjorie's side of the van, he wrenched the door open, lent inside and put his arms round her shoulders.

"I'm going to lift you up onto the seat, OK, love," he said. "Then we can see what's what."

Marjorie bit her lip and nodded.

George carefully lifted her until she was sitting on the seat so he could look at her legs. The left leg looked OK, but the right one was definitely not, he could see blood seeping into the cuff of her jeans.

"I'll have to get you out so I can look at your leg," he said. "I'll be as gentle as I can."

It took several minutes to maneuver Marjorie across the seat and out of the cab. George laid her carefully onto the ground and eased her jeans cuff up her leg. A piece of glass was imbedded in the side of her leg above the ankle. George looked up. "You've got a nasty cut with a bit of glass in it," he said.

"Can you take it out?" asked Marjorie.

"I could, but it could make it worse," replied George. "The wound might start bleeding badly if the glass is removed."

"Well we can't leave it in there, I can't walk with that in my leg," replied Marjorie.

George didn't like it but he could see she was right, the glass had to come out. He ripped off the other sleeve of his shirt and turned it inside out so the relatively clean inside would be against the wound.

"Ready?" he said.

Marjorie bit her lip and nodded. George put his bloody fingers round the wound and pulled the glass out with his other hand. To his

relief, the glass came out in one piece. He squeezed the wound until the blood welled up and satisfied there was nothing else in the cut, he quickly wound the shirt sleeve round her leg and knotted it tightly. He held up the piece of glass.

"Done," he said.

He reached into the cab and retrieved the water container. He helped Marjorie to sit up and offered it to her.

"Here, have a drink," he said.

Marjorie took a long drink and put the cap back on the container. As she looked round, her eyes widened. "George, your hand," she shrieked.

George looked at the blood stained cloth round his hand. "Yeah, bit of a bummer that. The silver ball got caught in the side of the seat and when we crashed, I was thrown about a bit. I moved but the ball and my finger didn't."

He sat down with a thump, feeling suddenly faint. Up to now, he'd been running on adrenaline, now the emergency with Marjorie was over, the full impact of his wound hit him. He lent back against one of the van's wheels and closed his eyes.

"Just let me rest for a bit, love. I'll be all right," he said tiredly.

Marjorie shuffled across to him and put her arm round his shoulders. She raised his left arm above his head and propped his elbow on her shoulder. My God, she thought, every time we move, things get worse and we're no nearer to getting home. "Got to reduce the blood loss," she said.

George nodded. "Good move," he murmured, "Should have thought of that earlier."

Marjorie held the water container up to him. "Here, you have a drink now, you need it. When you've recovered a bit, we'll find the ball, it must be in the cab."

George took a few sips and put down the container. "I hope it is," he sighed, "I've really buggered things up."

"George, none of this is your fault. We're both in this together,"

replied Marjorie. "You got us out of danger, that's the main thing."

George shook his head. "What danger? Maybe it was a mistake taking the van like that."

"You didn't see the aircraft firing at us then," said Marjorie.

George's eyes widened. "Aircraft, what aircraft?"

"Just as you were rubbing the silver ball an aircraft of some kind appeared and fired at us. If the ball hadn't worked, we'd be dead now."

George half sat up, "Bloody hell," he exclaimed.

"So no more talk of this being your fault. We made it."

"We did," he mumbled. "Only I don't know why half the van came with us. We certainly won't be driving it any more, the thing is a wreck."

Marjorie reached up and touched George's face. "Apart from your hand, you've got a nasty cut on your head. How do you feel love?"

George put on a show of bravado, not wanting to worry Marjorie. "I'm all right, my hand's painful, but I can stand that. It's you I was worried about. I'm just glad your leg isn't broken. We're a long way from any hospital."

"That's a point, where are we?" asked Marjorie.

"I think we're in some sort of town, I could see buildings when I got out of the cab. No sign of the inhabitants yet." His voice faltered as his chin dropped to his chest.

A loud hissing made Marjorie look up. Ruff was staring out of the cab doorway, his frill a bright red. She looked in the direction Ruff was facing.

"I think you were wrong about that, it looks like the inhabitants have arrived," said Marjorie quietly.

George closed his eyes. "Can you deal with it Marge, I don't feel so good," he whispered. He slumped back against the wheel and passed out.

The inhabitants arrived at the remains of the van in two's and three's. Dressed in bright clothing, decorated with what appeared to

be jewelry, they were all about five feet tall with thin bodies and small heads on the end of long necks. Multi-faceted eyes stared at the pair as they sat against the wheel. Marjorie stared back. They're like overgrown beetles she thought, what are they going to make of us? She noticed a few of them were using what appeared to be very earthlike mobile phones. Within a few minutes, a number of vehicles arrived. Three beetles got out of one of the vehicles and warily approached them. Slowly, one crouched down next to Marjorie and extended it's arm. The hand on the end of the arm looked like a bunch of thin, black, knobbly twigs to Marjorie. She forced herself not to move when the beetle gently touched her ankle. It then moved to George and lifted his hand. It scuttled backwards as Ruff hissed at it from the door of the cab. Frightened what they might do to her pet, Marjorie beckoned to Ruff. To her surprise, he jumped down from the cab and sat down next to her. She put her arm round Ruff's neck and held him close to restrain him. It took a moment before one of the beetles approached again, this time carrying a box. It opened the box and pulled out a thin plastic sheet. Marjorie realized with a start that the creature in front of her had four arms. Staring straight into Marjorie's face, it gently held her foot with one pair of hands and removed the makeshift bandage. It then wrapped the sheet round her ankle with the another pair of hands. Still staring at her, it touched George's hand. Marjorie kept her features composed at it wrapped the same sort of plastic round his hand. They're trying to help us she thought. She lifted George's hand pointing to his severed finger. Then she pointed to the cab. The beetles chattered to each other and one of them moved to the cab.

George moved slightly and half opened his eyes. "What's happening love?" he slurred.

"I think they're trying to help us," replied Marjorie. "Lay quiet, save your strength."

This exchange brought a bout of excited chattering from the beetles. The doors of the other vehicles opened and more beetles

arrived, this time pushing wheeled platforms. George was lifted on to one platform and Marjorie onto another. She called to Ruff, who jumped up onto the platform beside her. Within minutes, they were in one of the vehicles and on their way. To where, thought Marjorie?

The vehicle doors opened and they were wheeled into one of the domed buildings. Inside, a milky white radiance filled the room. They entered a small room off the main room and Marjorie felt the familiar feeling of a descending lift. They emerged into another room where the two wheeled platforms were separated. Alarmed, at being separated from her husband, Marjorie called out to George, but he was out of it, he was laying flat on his back with his mouth open. Catching flies as Marjorie thought of it. One of the beetles pressed what looked like one of George's spray cans to her neck and everything went black.

When she awoke, it took a second or two to work out her surroundings. She was laying on a padded mat on the floor of a small domed room. George was laying next to her on a similar mat. Between them, Ruff dozed, snoring gently. Relieved they were all together, Marjorie sat up and examined her leg. The wound was clean and closed, with a shiny varnish like film over the area. She suddenly realised her clothes had been replaced. Her jumper and blood stained jeans were gone, replaced with what looked like a bright blue boiler suit with a high collar round her neck. As she sat up, the one-piece garment fell open at the seal that ran down her front and the top of her legs like an upside down letter Y. Her right leg had been left outside the trouser leg and as she slowly worked her leg into the trouser leg, wriggling her foot to work it into the integral sock, she realized with some relief she still had on her underwear. She pulled the front of the suit together and pressed the edges which sealed at a touch. Velcro, thought Marjorie. She felt the material

between her fingers. It wasn't cloth, it had the feel of a plastic coated fabric rather like the cover George used to put over his motorbike in his younger days. Below her arms and slightly to the front, she found a pair of empty sleeves hanging down. My God, she thought, I wasn't dreaming, those things did have four arms. At first she thought she had been fitted with a new pair of trainers, but closer examination revealed they were her own shoes, cleaned to perfection. The trainer for her right foot was laying beside her, as she pulled it on, George stirred and half rolled over. He opened his eyes.

"What happened love?" he asked groggily.

"They've fixed the wound in my leg," she replied, "how's your hand?"

George held his left hand up to his face and stared cross-eyed at his fingers. He blinked to get his hand in focus.

"Well I'll be damned, they've sewn my finger back on," he exclaimed. "That wire took it off clean as a cheese cutter, I didn't think I'd see it again." He looked closer. "I can't believe it, there's hardly a mark where it was cut off." He stared at his hand. "I wonder how long we've been here, I mean my finger looks almost healed up, that would take days."

"Does it hurt?" asked Marjorie.

George nodded his head, "It does a bit if I try to move it, otherwise it's OK, just a slight tinge, nothing to write home about." He studied his hand again. "It's amazing, I can't even see any stitch marks."

"Superglue," said Marjorie, "They're using that back home for some operations I believe." She touched his head. "They've fixed the cut on your head, too. It's covered in some sort of shiny film, like spray plaster, just like my leg."

George gingerly touched his head. "No pain there either," he said. He bent forwards. "What does it look like?"

"I can see the line of the cut," replied Marjorie, "It hasn't healed so I don't think we've been here for more than a few hours."

George nodded at Marjorie's new clothes. "I see they've fitted you

out.”

Marjorie nodded back. “And you, haven’t you noticed?”

George looked down patted his new clothes. “So they have,” he exclaimed. He looked at his feet. “They’ve cleaned my boots as well.”

“It looks like we struck lucky this time,” said Marjorie. “Although I can’t understand how they knew what to do, we’re so different to them.”

“What are they like then?” asked George, “I never got to see them properly.”

“They’re like big black beetles walking on two legs,” replied Marjorie. “They’ve got skinny little hands like a bunch of twigs and big eyes like a dragonfly.” She nodded at his suit. “They also have four arms, see, you’ve got a spare set of sleeves below the one’s your arms are in.”

“Bloody hell,” said George. “And they’re the ones that treated us?”

Marjorie nodded. “I think so, they wheeled us into a room and one of them pressed something on my neck that put me out. Unless something else came in afterwards, I reckon it was them what done it.”

“It was they that did it,” corrected George.

Marjorie smiled, “I was being ungrammatical on purpose, for effect.”

George smiled back. “I knew that,” he said. He looked around. “I wonder what happens next?”

Nothing happened for the next couple of hours. Both their watches were gone so they had no way of telling the time, but they were content to rest and recover and more importantly, they were all together again. Then a door in the wall opened and three beetles walked in. George sat up and stared.

“Bloody hell,” he said quietly. “They do look like big beetles.”

The beetles stood at the end of the mats and beckoned with their arms indicating the two should follow them. George and Marjorie stood up, Marjorie quickly catching George’s arm as he swayed on

his feet.

"Still feel a bit groggy," he said, smiling faintly. Taking a deep breath, he smiled again at Marjorie. "All right now," he said.

Marjorie gave Ruff a shake to wake him up and they were escorted out of the room. Two beetles stayed behind them with the single beetle guiding them down a short corridor, where they were ushered into another room. Their escorts directed them into the centre of the room and took up positions by the door. A large table ran down the length of the room, with half a dozen beetles standing behind it. George and Marjorie did a double take. All their possessions were laid out neatly on the table. Their eyes immediately fastened on the middle of the table. There, amongst the pile of their goods, was the silver ball. Marjorie elbowed George in the ribs.

"We've got to get that back," she whispered.

George nodded. "If they'll let us have it," he whispered back.

Marjorie felt her neck. Laying on the table was the gold chain she always wore. She noticed some of the beetles also wore jewelry and wondered if they realized what her chain was. The beetle in the centre tapped on the table. It picked up the metal bar and pushed it across the table. George thought fast. He didn't think the beetles would appreciate the real reason he carried it, so he took the bar and held it like a walking stick, leaning heavily on it as if he needed it for support. The beetle gave a very human like nod and beckoned to George to return the bar to the table. George reluctantly complied. Marjorie reached forwards and touched her gold chain. She pointed to a beetle further down the line with a similar decoration and tapped her neck. The beetle pushed the chain towards her. Marjorie smiled to herself and put the chain round her neck. To her satisfaction, the beetle did not gesture for her to replace it on the table. George quickly caught on. He tapped the silver ball and pointed at his finger. The beetle picked up the ball and held it in its hand. George held his breath. If the beetle rubbed the black spot, it could vanish in a haze of blue light and then they would really be in the shit. The beetle pushed

the silver ball towards George who quickly slipped one of his undamaged fingers through the wire loop. The loop tightened as before, this time without nearly cutting off his finger. He swung the ball from the loop and held his hand up so the beetles could see it was attached to his finger. The beetle in the centre nodded again, seeming satisfied it was a piece of personal jewelry like Marjorie's gold chain. George struggled to keep the smirk of triumph off his face as he glanced at Marjorie. The carried out the same pantomime with their watches and in short time they were back on their wrists. George's jumper with Ruff's food was quickly demonstrated with Ruff quickly eating a 'sprout' when George took one out of the jumper. He gave Ruff some water from the container and mimed drinking from it himself. George pointed to his lighter and cigarettes which were pushed across the table towards him. The cigarettes posed a problem. Would the beetles understand smoking. George decided not to risk demonstrating smoking, so he took a cigarette out of the packet and pretended to eat it. The beetle nodded again, indicating he should put the packet back on the table. His new clothes had only a breast pocket in a similar position to his old shirt so George dropped the lighter into the pocket. The beetle pushed George's penknife across the table. Both blades were folded in so it looked like a piece of shiny metal. George dropped it into his pocket next to his lighter. They must think we like our jewelry thought George as the beetle nodded.

Last of all was the tube with the lens. George carefully picked it up and making sure it was aimed well away from Ruff, he pushed in the end of the tube so the light illuminated a circle in the wall. The beetles looked at the tube then at the light on the wall and indicated to George to return the tube to the table. The beetles went into a huddle, chittering quietly to each other.

While the beetles were ignoring them, Marjorie turned to George. "Do you notice how they nod their heads," she whispered.

George nodded.

"I was wondering what they reminded me of," continued Marjorie. "It suddenly came to me. A praying mantis. They're the only insect that can turn their head I think."

"Aren't they the ones where the female eats their mate," asked George.

Marjorie nodded. "I think you'll be safe, I don't think you're their type."

George gave a brief grin. "I should bloody well hope not," he said. "Especially as I think they're armed. Those three that brought us in here are carrying sticks. As we passed one, I noticed two small buttons on the end of it's stick. They look like cattle prods to me. I think they're a bit nervous about us."

Their conversation was interrupted by the three beetles by the door. They beckoned to George and Marjorie to follow them. At first they thought they were being taken back to the room they had started from, but as they entered they realized they had been led to a new room. Against one wall was a hole in the floor and a very ordinary looking wash basin next to it. On the floor between the mats, a bowl on a small table held what looked like slices of melon, with a large container of water next to it.

Marjorie's eyes were instantly drawn to the slices.

"What do you reckon, George, do we dare eat it?"

"Well I'm bloody starving, It must be about two days since we last ate," replied George. "I'm going to try it."

They both sampled the slices with tiny bites and were presently surprised. The slices were sweet and juicy and to their relief, after a apprehensive wait, had no unpleasant side effects. They took the hole in the floor to be a toilet. If it wasn't, someone was going to be very cross, thought George as he squatted over it. There was no paper so they had to wash themselves with water from the basin. It filled with water as soon as they put their hands in it. The water drained away when they removed their hands. To their amusement, Ruff also use the hole as a toilet, indicating he was either very well

trained or possessed a higher intelligence than they had previously suspected.

At the end of about two days, the door opened And two beetles accompanied by three escorts carrying the same sticks they'd seen earlier. The two beetles came into the room carrying a large haversack like bag. It dumped the bag on the floor and stood back. When George opened the bag, he could see it was full of Ruff's food. George hefted the weight of the bag. He knew how many 'sprouts' he stuffed in his jumper, the bag contained many more. He turned to Marjorie.

"Where the hell did they get these from?" he wondered. "Surely they didn't go back to the first planet we landed on."

Marjorie picked one of the 'sprouts' out of the bag. "They're not the same, look."

"They must have made them themselves," said George. "They probably used the originals as a sample. I hope they'll be all right for Ruff." He tossed one to Ruff, who took it to the side of the room and proceeded to eat it noisily.

"Let's hope the food they've made for us is OK too," said Marjorie.

George shrugged. "Well, we've been OK on it so far," he replied.

Marjorie smiled. "Clever beetles," she said with a grin.

The other beetle held out the metal bar to George. He took it from the knobby fingers and nodded at the beetle.

"Here, look what they've done to the bar," he said to Marjorie.

At one end of the bar was a soft padded fitting, sticking out at right angles to the bar.

"They've made it into a crutch," said George in amazement.

Marjorie gave a short laugh. "Perhaps they thought you needed it, you were in a bit of a state when they found us."

A third beetle came into the room and started to remove the bowl with the slices of fruit, replacing it with a new bowl. George and Marjorie looked at each other in amazement. In the new bowl were George's cigarette packet a stack of what looked like cigarettes.

“George,” cried Marjorie, “ We can’t eat those.”

George put his hand on the bowl of fruit the beetle was about to take away. Quickly pocketing the cigarette packet, He pointed back to the table and then took the bowl with the cigarettes and offered it to the beetle. It took a while, but with many gestures, George finally got the message home, he wanted the fruit, not the cigarettes. The beetles looked at each other and left the room, taking the bowl with the cigarettes with them.

“That was you, pretending to eat your cigarettes,” said Marjorie accusingly. “They must have thought it was our food. I always told you your smoking with be the death of you, now it was almost the death of us both.”

George said nothing, he was used to Marjorie complaining about his smoking. He’d started when he was in the army and had smoked for too long to give it up now. He opened the packet and found two of the cigarettes had been carefully sliced from end to end. “Bloody hell, they’ve cut up my fags,” he grumbled.

Marjorie raised her eyes to heaven, but said nothing.

For the next two days, they settled into an easy routine. Fresh food was brought to them at first light along with a new water container. Thankfully, it was the fruit slices, not the cigarettes. They debated whether they should consider using the silver ball, but decided to wait until they had completely recovered from their injuries. As soon as they were left alone, they had tried the door and found it locked, but decided to accept what they were sure was only a temporary imprisonment. They also were glad to just relax after the trials of last two or three days. The constant supply of food, although monotonous, played a major part of their decision to wait. Having gone several days without eating, they wanted to build up their reserves before making any decisions.

Towards the end of the second day, George wandered round the room, stopping every now and then to look out of the window. Outside, the paved area stretched for several hundred yards, with a

line of round domes preventing any further view. There was no sign of the beetles or anything else for that matter.

"You're bored," said Marjorie, lounging on her padded mat.

George nodded. "They might have put a TV in for us," he said with a grin. "Apart from the beetle that brings us our food and drink, not much else is happening. I was thinking of what our government would do if a couple of beetles turned up out of nowhere. They'd have half the scientist in the world queuing up to interview them and try and learn their language. Apart from treating us and giving us food and water, this lot have left us alone. You'd think they would want to find out from us what it was all about."

Marjorie nodded slowly. "They have an advance society, that's obvious from the way they fixed us up. It could be they're trying to decide what to do about us. There could be quite a squabble going on behind the scenes."

They were interrupted by three escort beetles entering the room and indicating they should come with them. George and Marjorie looked at each other with raised eyebrows. They picked up the water container and the haversack containing Ruff's food and followed the beetles through the door.

"Well this is different," said George.

"Do you think they understood what you were saying?" asked Marjorie. "It's a bit of coincidence they walk in just after you were complaining no one was talking to us."

George shook his head. "I don't see how they could learn our language, not in the short time we've been here."

"I wonder where they're taking us," said Marjorie.

They soon found out. After a short walk down a corridor, they were led into another room. The room was much larger than the room they had just left with the same padded mats, toilet hole and wash basin. What caused them to stop inside the doorway and stare was the wreck of their van in the centre of the room.

George spun round as the door shut behind him. "What the heck is

going on, why have they shut us in with that thing," he said with exasperation.

"Look," said Marjorie, pointing at the large windows on one side of the dome wall. A line of beetles were slowly walking past staring into the room. It took only a short while for the penny to drop.

"Bloody hell," exclaimed George. "You know what this is, we're exhibits in a bloody zoo."

George turned away from the window, his fists opening and clenching in frustration and annoyance.

"I can't believe it," he said, "No attempt to contact us or find out where we came from, just putting us on show for a crowd to gawp at. Right, that does it, we're getting out of here, let's get our things and go." Noticing the look on Marjorie's face he stopped. "What?" he asked.

"George, I'm scared," said Marjorie. "Every time we make a move, we end up in more trouble. All right, this time, the beetles fixed us up, but I'm scared what we'll find at the next place we end up."

George put his hand on her shoulder.

"I know what you mean, love, but our only choice is to use the silver ball or stay here."

Marjorie nodded slowly. "I suppose you're right. What about sitting in the cab of the van, it would give us a some sort of protection when we get to our next destination."

George looked doubtful. "I dunno love, we had a nasty drop last time we arrived. I don't know how high we were, but it was high enough to give us a nasty jolt when we landed."

Marjorie shook her head. "I think it was the attack by that plane that bounced us into the air. Just dropping wouldn't have caused all the damage we can see on the van."

George thought for a moment. He nodded. "You might be right, OK, we'll give it a try if the insides are still in one piece." He opened the door and peered inside the cab. "Looks clean and tidy," he said. "Hold on, wasn't the windscreen smashed. I thought part of it was

what I pulled out of your leg.”

Marjorie stood next to him and examined the front of the cab.

“You’re right,” she said, “Now I think of it, the windscreen was smashed in. I must confess I wasn’t taking much notice of it at the time, I had other things to worry about. I wonder why they bothered to replace it?”

George shrugged his shoulders. “Who cares, let’s get loaded up and go.”

Marjorie climbed into the cab. George put on the haversack containing Ruff’s food and piled their possessions onto the seat. He shepherded Ruff onto the seat next to Marjorie.

“Hold on to me and Ruff just in case,” he said as he climbed in.

Marjorie nodded and clutched George’s sleeve with one hand and Ruff’s coat with the other. She shuffled along the seat so the water container and George’s bar were pressed against her leg. Remembering what happened the last time they moved, she drew her legs out of the footwell up onto the seat.

“Ready” she said through tight lips. She didn’t express the thought that nagged at her. Were they near enough to the power source for the silver ball to work?

They emerged in bright sunlight with thousands of shiny particles dancing all round them. It was like being inside a shaken snow ball ornament. They sat openmouthed at the spectacle, as the particles slowly drifted away on the wind. In front of them, a section of wall of the domed room they’d recently left, slowly collapsed onto the ground.

“Ha!” shouted George. “We’ve brought half the room with us, I wonder what the beetles will make of that.”

“I wonder why it happened this time,” said Marjorie, “I mean, the first time we moved we didn’t bring half our garden with us, or the other times, we just moved ourselves.”

“What about the van, half of that came with us,” replied George.

Marjorie nodded slowly. “That’s true. Maybe it’s something to do with how you rub your finger on the ball.”

George shrugged his shoulders. "Who cares, the main thing we got away." He stared through the windscreen. "Now, let's see where are we."

Ahead of them, a rolling landscape of what appeared to be grass stretched as far as they could see. To their right hand side, about a mile away, the edge of a forest made a solid wall of green. It was cold, they could feel icy air nipping at their faces through the broken window on Marjorie's side of the cab. George opened the door and climbed onto the roof of the cab.

"It's the same as far as I can see," he shouted, "Can't see any buildings."

Marjorie let out a sigh of relief. The knot in her stomach slowly relaxed as she realized there were no nasties to threaten them. She put her head out of the window and peered up. "You better come back inside," she said. "It's cold out there."

George leaned over the roof. "I'm not a bit cold, I think these clothes must have some sort of heating built in. I can feel the cold on my hands and face, but the rest of me is quite toasty."

Marjorie patted her body. "Yes, now you've mentioned it, you're right, how clever of the beetles." She pulled at her collar to snug it round her neck. As she let go of the fabric, the collar sprang up round her neck and face giving her the appearance of a head peering out of a bucket. She looked up at George with just her eyes showing above the fabric. "Really clever beetles," she laughed.

George climbed back into the cab and pulled up his collar. He made faces at Marjorie over the top of his collar.

"I feel like a dog just back from the vet," laughed George. "Bit of a design failure here," he said touching his collar.

"Not for the beetles," replied Marjorie, pulling her collar down. "They had longer necks than us."

George nodded and pulled his collar down so he could speak clearly. "Well, we got away again and this place looks a lot calmer than the last two," he said.

"What shall we do?" questioned Marjorie. "There's nothing here, shall we move on."

"You realise what you just said. You're getting quite blasé about this hopping about from planet to planet," replied George.

Marjorie grinned back at him. "You get used to anything eventually. Now, do we stay or do we go?"

George thought for a moment. "Well, now we're here, we might as well explore for a bit. If we don't wander too far from the cab we'll know the ball will work."

They got out of the cab and looked around.

"There's nothing but grass in that direction," said George. "Let's make for the forest, we might find some fruits or something we can eat."

Marjorie pulled a face. "Not too sure about that," she replied. "Remember what happened to me last time I ate something."

"Yeah, you're right," replied George. "Anyway, let's have a quick look and then move on, OK?"

Marjorie nodded in agreement, so they set off towards the forest with Ruff plodding between them. Marjorie had stopped calling Ruff when they moved, he seemed to know his name already and followed them everywhere they went. They had only been walking for a few minutes when a pack of animals emerged from the trees.

"Oh oh," said George. "Back to the cab."

It was too late. The animals ran straight at them. They were the size of a large dog, long and lean with a lurid orange and black coats and a mouthful of sharp teeth. The lead animal heading the pack jumped at George with it's teeth bared and ran straight into George's bar. The shock of the blow sent the animal tumbling but it picked itself up and charged again. This time, George's aim was better, hitting the animal squarely on the head. The animal twisted in the air and fell to the ground with crushed skull. The rest of the pack were close behind and George held his bar ready. A blur of red sprang between George and Marjorie. Ruff charged at the animals, with his claws at

full extension. His frill was now a brilliant red and his coat erect like a porcupine's quills. He tore into the pack, his claws and teeth shredding the animals. George couldn't believe how fast he was moving, up to now, he'd only seen Ruff plodding along beside them. The pack were scattered like a pile of leaves in a strong wind with Ruff in the centre of a whirling mass of blood and torn flesh. Within seconds, five of the animals were dead and the rest were running panic stricken for the trees. Ruff tore open one of the animals and gorged himself on the flesh. When he was full, he slowly walked back to George and Marjorie who stood open mouthed at the carnage.

"George," whispered Marjorie clutching his arm. "Look at the teeth."

As Ruff was walking back towards them, chewing the last of his meal, two large dagger like teeth were visible in the upper and lower jaw.

"Bloody hell," said George. "Where did they come from, I never saw anything like that when I was giving him water."

Marjorie's grip on George' arm grew tighter as Ruff got closer. "George, I'm worried, do you think we're safe?"

George said nothing but clutched his bar a little tighter as Ruff approached them. He sat down between them and started licking the blood from his claws. George looked down at Ruff. His frill had reverted to its normal white and his coat was now laying flat. He totally ignored the pair of them as he concentrated on cleaning his claws.

George shrugged. "I dunno, he's been alright up to now, I think we're safe. Mind you he's shown us a completely different side to his nature."

"Remember when we got into Tweedles vehicle," said Marjorie, "No wonder, they all backed away from Ruff. I'm sure they knew what he was capable of."

George bent down and holding Ruff's head, he pulled down the lips. "That's why we never saw the teeth," he said. "Look they're

tucked right under the lips." He stroked Ruff's jaw. "Come on lad, show us how you did it."

To his surprise, Ruff's jaws flexed, the dagger like teeth moving clear of the lips. George hastily let go of Ruff's head and the teeth retracted out of sight.

"No wonder he's got a big mouth, it's to make room for those bloody great fangs. He's like a bloody shark, only they flex the whole jaw forwards when they attack," mused George. He stood up and smiled at Marjorie. "I'm sure we're safe, when he went for those animals, he was defending us."

"George." Marjorie's voice had a had edge of tension.

"What?"

Marjorie beckoned with her head. "We've got company."

Approaching them were four natives. They were clothed in heavy furs, their faces half hidden by hoods. They stopped about ten feet away and stared at George and Marjorie with small deep set eyes. A large nose which seemed totally out of proportion to their heads dominated their faces. They were about five feet tall and all carried long spears. They were the nearest to a human being they'd seen so far, but what really caught George and Marjorie's attention were the two animals walking between them. They were identical to Ruff. One of the natives planted his spear in the ground and walked warily towards them. George and Marjorie stood their ground and waited. The native walked up to George and studied him from all angles. Then he turned to Marjorie. He reached out a hand and touched her breast. Almost instinctively, Marjorie straight armed the native, her stiff fingers punching into the native's throat. It was a move she'd often practiced without ever allowing contact with her opponent. Only the thick fur hood saved the natives throat from severe damage. Even so, the native collapsed onto the ground making retching noises. Between them, Ruff moved forwards making a low hissing, his ruff turning red. George held his coat to restrain him.

"Steady lad," he said, warily watching the other natives.

It seemed he needn't have worried, as the native slowly climbed to his feet, the other natives were laughing uproariously. He rejoined his companions who took turns slapping him on the back, their laughter growing louder.

"Looks like your keep fit and karate training has paid off," whispered George, "I think you've won their respect."

"Bloody right," replied Marjorie, "I hope they realise my tits are off limits."

"I think at least one of them got the message," replied George with a grin.

While they were talking, the native Marjorie had felled opened a bag and walked towards them. He pulled out what looked like strips of meat from the bag and offered it to Marjorie. He spoke a few words and nodded at Marjorie.

She couldn't understand a word but the tone seemed friendly and not at all aggressive. "Shall take it?" asked Marjorie.

George nodded. "I looks like dried meat, you know beef jerky. I think it's a peace offering."

Marjorie took the meat from the native and nodded her head in thanks. The native rubbed his throat and gave a very human like grin to her. He took one of the strips of meat and put it in his mouth. Marjorie nodded and did the same. Once the native saw her eating it, he passed a few strips to George. The meat was hard and chewy, but softened as he chewed.

"It seems we've made friends," said George between bites. "Let's hope they're sincere and its not a trap of some sort."

"I think my punch and the fact we've got Ruff with us has swung it for us," replied Marjorie. "At least I hope so."

Ruff moved towards the other animals. The natives stood back as the three animals circled each other touching noses at intervals. The neck frills on the animals pulsed red and white, slowly fading to all white as their circling decreased. With all the twisting and turning, after a few minutes, George could not tell which animal was Ruff. He

turned to Marjorie.

"I hope we haven't lost him," he said quietly.

One of the animals walked back to them and sat between them.

"I suppose that's Ruff," said Marjorie. "They all look the same."

George ran his hand over the animal's back which rippled under his touch. "Yeah," he said. "That's our Ruff."

The other two animals rejoined the natives who turned and walked away. When they had gone a few yards, they turned and looked at George and Marjorie.

"It looks like they're inviting us to go with them," said George.

"Do we?" asked Marjorie.

George thought for a moment. "I think so, they seem friendly enough. If they'd wanted to harm us, they could have done it easily, there are four of them all armed with spears and with two animals like Ruff, they could have easily done us in."

"OK," replied Marjorie. "Let's go, but if they kill us, I'll never forgive you."

They set off at a brisk walk towards the forest. As they approached, George got his first good look at the trees. They seemed very familiar, very much like the fir trees he'd seen on their visit to Scotland. The ground between the trees was covered with short bracken like plants, some of which were covered in small pink flowers. Marjorie stopped and picked a bunch and arranged them into her breast pocket.

"Very nice," grinned George, "I hope that's for me and not for our Eskimo friends."

"Do you know, you're right, I've been trying to think what they reminded me of, they are like Eskimos," replied Marjorie.

"I hope they don't expect me to share my wife with them," said George. "I think that was one of their customs."

Marjorie smiled. "You've been watching too many old films. Nowadays, Eskimos live in centrally heated houses and drive Skidoos."

"Yeah, but this lot don't appear to be as advanced as the ones on Earth," replied George.

They walked for a while in silence then Marjorie turned to George. "It surprised me seeing animals like Ruff," she said. "Did Ruff's type originally come from here, or from the planet with the abandoned village?"

"Or why the tweedles knew enough about Ruff to be wary of him," replied George. "Their light weapon affected them and Ruff. It implies contact between all three planets."

"I wonder if they are using the same thing that's moving us about,"

wondered Marjorie.

George shook his head. "Not the beetles for sure. They didn't seem to recognise our silver ball as anything but jewellery. We'll just have to put it down to a mystery. Maybe it'll come clearer, but I doubt it. Maybe it's something we're never going to find out about."

"Hmm," murmured Marjorie reflectively.

As they walked deeper into the forest, they noticed the ground was rising until they were walking up a moderate slope. Then abruptly, they came to a large clearing in the trees on a level plateau. In front of them was a large circle of about twenty solidly built timber houses all facing inwards towards the centre of the clearing. As they entered the circle of houses, George could see they were built clear of the ground with log steps leading up to a veranda. They had small windows covered with what looked like a stretched animal skin. The roof of each house was flat, high at the back and sloping down to the front and covered in flat branches. The roof overlapped the front wall covering a veranda and was supported by stout posts. In the central area, a group of children were playing with animals like Ruff. When they saw George and Marjorie they stopped in their tracks and stared. The animals formed a defensive line in front of the children, their ruffs pulsing red.

One of the natives let out a loud whistle and people and animals spilled out of the houses. Within seconds, the central area was full of people. When they saw George and Marjorie they bunched into a compact crowd and stared at them. Some were in full furs, others in a type of jerkin and trousers made from soft animal skins. George and Marjorie could see many in the crowd were women and children, which put their minds at ease. George had one worry that these people were a hunting party, which could have made them rather unpredictable and aggressive. Seeing the women and children gave him the reassurance that this was a village which would hopefully be more settled. One of the natives that had accompanied George and Marjorie walked forward and spoke to the crowd. As he spoke,

George could see the tension in the crowd relaxing. Several of the men and women came forward to stare at them, their eyes wide with curiosity. George and Marjorie nodded and smiled at the crowd in front of them. Some of the children pushed forwards and approached them. They stared up at their faces and then at Ruff. As one child reached out his hand to Ruff, George held on to Ruff's coat to hold him back.

"Steady lad," he said as the child touched Ruff's nose. He was thinking of Ruff's mouthful of cutlery inches from the child's fingers. Ruff took the poking fingers with dogged patience, even opening his mouth to lick the child's hand with his blue tongue. The child giggled and ran back to one of the adults. This seemed to break any remaining tension and the people crowded round them, looking into their faces and stroking Ruff.

"We were bloody lucky we had Ruff with us," said George quietly. "I think he's made all the difference to how these people have accepted us."

"Did you see how their animals lined up to protect the children when they first saw us, I think they use animals like Ruff as a defence against animals like the ones that attacked us," replied Marjorie. "Look, they're all over the place, they're not just pets."

An old man flanked by two younger men approached them. From the reverential way the young men supported him, helping him walk, George reckoned he must be the chief or head of the village. He nodded and smiled and indicated they should go to one of the houses. It was the biggest house in the village with carved posts arranged in front of the veranda. George and Marjorie followed him up the steps into the house. Their first impression was the smoke. The house was all one room with a fire pit lined with stones in the centre. The smoke curled lazily upwards to the roof where it seeped through cracks in the branches. The small windows let in very little light and as their eyes got used to the gloom, they could see benches arranged round the walls. Part of the walls were curtained off, making

small alcoves. Where the curtains were pulled back, they could see beds padded with soft branches. A large pot sat on the fire, its bubbling contents filling the air with mouth watering aromas. The old man gestured to them to sit and three women who had followed them into the house, dipped small bowls into the pot on the fire and handed them to George and Marjorie. Another bowl was put on the floor for Ruff. The bowls contained a thick soup with small pieces of meat and unidentified vegetables floating in it. More bowls were handed out to the other men and seeing them drinking from the bowls, George and Marjorie, followed suit. Ruff by this time had already buried his nose in the bowl and was noisily lapping up the contents. George took a sip. It tasted no different to various soups or stews he'd eaten, in fact it was better than some of the stuff he'd had to consume during his army days. The old man, put down his bowl and spoke to them. George stood up and held out his hands, trying to indicate he could not understand. Then he had an idea. He tapped himself on his chest and said his name. He repeated the pantomime with Marjorie and waited to see what response he would get. The men went into a huddle and a whisper of their conversation drifted across the room. The group broke from their huddle and the old man pointed at George.

"George", he said quite clearly.

George nodded his head vigorously, trying to conceal his amazement that the man had picked up his name. The man pointed at Marjorie and repeated her name. Marjorie smiled and nodded. The man then tapped his chest. "Agollonaster" he said.

That was a bit of a mouthful, but George repeated it back as best he could. The man nodded, it seemed some sort of communication had been established, however slight.

The meal finished, they were ushered back outside. They slowly walked round the village, followed by a crowd of children and animals. The adults stood in front of their houses and raised their hands as they passed. Ruff ran off to join the other animals, rejoining

George and Marjorie at intervals, then running off again.

"He's found some playmates," said Marjorie.

"We might lose him," said George. "He might decide to stay here."

"I hope not," replied Marjorie, "I've got used to having him around and I think he's fond of us in his own way."

George nodded absentmindedly. He'd been studying the village and was puzzled. Marjorie noticed his frown. "Something wrong?" she asked.

George waved his hands round. "There's something phoney about this place. The whole set-up doesn't make sense. Did you notice the pot on the fire, I'm sure it was made of metal. The woman used a carved wooden spoon to ladle out the stew and when she tapped the side of the pot, it rang, just like when you tap the spoon on the sides of your saucepans. The spears the natives carry are pointed with stone. These people don't appear to have reached the metal working stage yet so how come they have a metal pot."

Marjorie raised an eyebrow. "Go on," she said.

"When we were sitting inside the house, I'm sure I saw what looked like a small lens in the corner of the roof. If these people are not at the metal working stage, they sure as hell wouldn't be making glass lenses." George nodded at the houses. "How did they cut down enough trees to make the houses, they all look about the same age, as if they were all built at about the same time. It would take ages to cut down enough trees to build one house with a stone axe, let alone twenty. Look at the way the logs are cut and fitted, to me, they look like they were cut up with a chop saw." He nodded at the crowd following them. "It's almost like someone built this settlement and plonked these people into it as some sort of experiment."

Marjorie was quiet for a moment. "Now you mention it, I noticed some sort of vegetables in the stew they gave us. I didn't see any cultivated ground, so where did the vegetables come from. I think you're right, there is something strange about this place."

"If it is an experiment by some more advanced society, chances

are it was a lens saw and this place is being monitored. That would mean they know about us," replied George. "They might not appreciate our presence here."

Marjorie nodded. "It's a reasonable theory, if you're right, I think we ought to make tracks and get out."

After making a circuit of the central area, they headed for the path through the trees leading to the remains of their vehicle. As they walked between the row of houses, three natives blocked their way. They waved them back to the chief's house with urgent gestures. George stood his ground and shook his head. The natives gestures became more emphatic, it seemed they did not want George and Marjorie to leave. George bent down and smoothed a patch of earth. With his knife, he drew a quick diagram of the village, the trees and their vehicle. Pointing to himself and Marjorie, he walked his fingers to the drawing of the vehicle and then back to the village. He repeated this over and over again while the natives stared at the diagrams. Eventually, one of the natives left the group and returned a short time later with the chief. George nodded to him and repeated walking his fingers to the vehicle and back. After he'd repeated this a number of times, the old man smiled and nodded. He pointed to the three natives who had blocked their path and touched their chests.

"I think we've convinced them we're only visiting the vehicle and we're coming back," said George. "Although it looks like we're going to have an escort."

"Let's go then before they change their minds," whispered Marjorie. "Although it looks like we've lost Ruff."

They threaded their way through the crowd of natives and slowly walked towards the trees. Suddenly the crowd parted as Ruff raced towards them. He circled them hissing as he butted against their legs.

"Ruff," cried Marjorie as she bent down to pat his back. "We thought we'd lost you."

Her excitement was short lived. After circling them a few times,

Ruff ran back through the crowd of natives.

Marjorie stood up. "Oh well, perhaps it's best he stays here after all," she said.

George shook his head. "He's coming back," he said. "And it looks like he's brought a mate with him."

Both animals approached them. Seeing them close together, they could recognise Ruff, he was bigger and stockier than the other animal. Ruff took his usual position between George and Marjorie and hissed at the other animal. It cautiously inched forwards until it was alongside Ruff. The two animals touched noses and they both settled down onto the ground. Marjorie looked at the two animals between them and then at George.

"Now what do we do?" she asked.

George grinned. "Take them with us of course, if Ruff wants to bring along a friend, who are we to stop him."

The crowd of natives followed them as far as the edge of the houses and stopped. Only the three natives the old man had touched accompanied them as they threaded their way through the trees. Eventually, they reached the remains of their vehicle.

"What do we do?" asked Marjorie.

George pulled open a door and looked inside. Their water container and the haversack with Ruff's food had not been touched, they were still on the seat.

"We'll get in nice and slowly," replied George. "Then when we're all ready, I'll try rubbing the ball and hope it gets us out of here."

Marjorie climbed in first, followed by Ruff and the other animal. George climbed in last and slid along the seat. He deliberately left the door open so the three natives could see them. Marjorie put her head out of the window she had broken and waved to the natives, smiling broadly. The natives walked round the front of the vehicle and peered through the window talking loudly to each other. Marjorie pushed the haversack and water container into the footwell and planted her feet firmly in contact with them. She felt along the animals

backs until she could touch George's coat.

"Ready when you are," she said quietly.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see George rubbing the ball. Their inactivity inside the cab was causing the natives to become more and more agitated. They shouted, gesturing with their hands for them to get out of the cab. As the blue halo appeared, the shouting intensified. They stepped back and started screaming at the vehicle and waving their spears. As the halo intensified, one of the natives threw his spear through the window. Marjorie sitting in the cramped confines of the cab, could do nothing to dodge it. A second before they vanished, the spear hit her in the side of her chest.

For a second, George thought they had arrived at night, but then realized they were under a canopy of tall, jungle like trees which cut out virtually all the light Marjorie moaned quietly, her head hanging down. She coughed and clutched at her chest. Alarmed, George lent over the two animals and touched her arm.

"Marge, what's wrong?" he cried.

Slowly Marjorie's head came up. "One of those bloody natives threw a spear at me, got me right in the chest."

"Oh Christ," exclaimed George. He pushed open his door and pushed his way through thick foliage round the front of the van and pulled open the door next to Marjorie. He climbed into the cab and put his arm round her.

"Where are you hurt?" he gently asked.

Marjorie raised her right arm with an effort. "Under there," she said touching the side of her chest.

"I can't see anything," said George. He paused and looked more closely. "Hold on, I can see a little dimple in your clothes. I don't think the spear point went through."

Marjorie pushed away the end of the spear where it had fallen on to her seat. "Maybe not," she replied. "It still bloody hurts." She raised her hand, "Give me a minute to get my breath back." She lent back on her seat and relaxed, taking short shallow breaths. After a minute or two, she sat up.

"Whoo, that was rough," she said, smiling faintly at George.

George pulled open the front of her clothing and eased her arm out of the sleeve. He pulled the fabric aside and gently raised her arm.

He gently felt her ribs.

"You've got a nice bruise coming, but I don't think anything is broken. It looks like the clothes the beetles gave us are spear proof."

Marjorie smiled as she re-dressed herself. "Very clever beetles," she said. She looked around. "Where are we?"

George gestured at the window, "We seem to have ended up in a jungle, I haven't had a chance to look around yet."

Marjorie stretched on the seat. "Let's get out, I need to stand up, I feel cramped sitting here."

George backed out of the cab and helped Marjorie down. Now they were out of the cab, a low humming noise could be heard.

"Hear that?" said George cocking his head to one side.

Marjorie nodded. "I wonder what it is," she pointed at the trees to the side of the van. "It seems to be coming from over there."

Without even thinking about it, they walked in the direction of the noise, picking their way through waist high bushes.

"We must be mad," said George, "Here we are on a strange planet and the first thing we do, is look for what's making a funny noise. They say curiosity killed the cat, I reckon it applies to us too. We're not that far from a cage full of inquisitive monkeys."

Marjorie elbowed him in the ribs. "Get away with you," she said, "Where's your sense of adventure." She gestured to the two animals plodding along between them. "They seem quite happy to go exploring,"

George shrugged. "Ignorance is bliss," he said.

After about a hundred yards, they could see they were coming to the edge of the forest with bright sunlight flooding through the thinning trees. Emerging into the open, they came to an area of broken ground with upturned earth and uprooted trees laying in all directions. About twenty feet away, at the far edge of the broken ground, the earth sloped away to a steep incline. They cautiously approached the edge and peered over. In front of them was a deep gorge where the earth had been torn apart, with the bottom some

eighty feet below them.

Marjorie shaded her eyes against the glare of the sun. "It must be almost a mile wide," she said. "Something pretty violent happened here."

"Not too long ago either," replied George, "Some of those uprooted trees still have leaves on them." He looked along the gorge to his left and right. "Can't see either end, it could go on for miles."

The sides and bottom of the gorge were almost covered in broken trees and upturned earth, but what immediately caught their attention was a silver dome standing above the detritus littering the bottom of the gorge.

George looked at Marjorie. "Wow, look at that, I wonder if that could be a power source like the ones we reckon are at each place we visit when we use the silver ball."

Marjorie nodded. "Do you know, I think you could be right," she said. "We assumed all the others were buried, it looks like this earthquake or whatever, has exposed this one."

George looked down the slope. "What do you reckon, shall we have a look?"

Marjorie looked doubtful. "What, go down there, do you think we can?"

George gestured at the slope in front of them and nodded. "The ground's so broken up, it would be almost like walking down a staircase. There's a lot of upturned trees to hang on to as well. I don't think it would be that hard."

Marjorie looked unconvinced. "What about the animals."

"They'll come with us of course," replied George. "With their claws, they'd have no trouble scrambling over that lot." He paused. "Tell you what, stay here with the animals and I'll nip back to the van and get my bar. It'll help us if we come to an awkward bit."

Marjorie grabbed George's arm. "No," she said firmly. "If anything happened to you, I'd be stuck here on my own. Remember what you said, we must never be more than a few feet apart. We'll both go

back to the van."

George nodded slowly. "Yeah, you're right, sorry love, I wasn't thinking."

The trip to the van and back only took them ten minutes. George used the bar to break off two long branches from the nearest tree. He stuck them in the ground near the edge a few feet apart, with the top of the branches touching to form a large triangle and stood back.

"What have you done that for?" asked Marjorie in a puzzled tone of voice.

George gestured at his handiwork. "I want to make sure we come back up the same way as we went down," he replied. "This will show us the way. It wouldn't do to get lost, we might never find the van."

Marjorie nodded her approval. "Good thinking," she said with a grin. She looked down the slope at the dome. "It's funny, that humming noise is the only thing I can hear. I'd have thought there would be much more noise in a jungle."

George slowly turned in a circle, listening intently. "You're right, it is very quiet," he gestured at the gorge in front of them. "Perhaps whatever happened here frightened all the animals away. Ready to go?"

Marjorie nodded and they slowly worked their way down the slope, inching their way round uprooted trees that littered their path. It was easier going than they first thought, it took them only about twenty minutes to reach the bottom. George looked up to the top.

"It'll be easier going back up," he said, "You can see the way we came down, but there's an easier path over to the right a bit. We'll use that when we go back."

Marjorie nodded and turned to look at the dome. The part they could see rose to a height of about thirty feet. "I wonder how much is buried," she said.

"Well I aint digging down to find out," said George.

"It must be made of pretty tough stuff," said Marjorie, "Look at the trees and rocks that have bounced off it, there's not a mark on it."

"Must be made of impervium," replied George.

"What's that, I've never heard of it," asked Marjorie.

"Shouldn't think you have," replied George with a grin, "I just made it up."

Marjorie punched his arm. "Bugger," she said. "Come on, let's walk round it, there's nothing to see this side."

Half way round the dome, their progress was halted by a mass of huge tree trunks piled up against the side of the dome. As they detoured round the debris they saw what looked like three dead animals half buried under the mass of shattered timber. They moved cautiously forwards and stopped.

"They're not animals," whispered Marjorie, "They're wearing clothes."

"They're not Beetles or Tweedles," said George, "More like skinny lizards, I wonder what they were doing here."

They stared down at the nearest body. It had the same general proportion as a man, with two legs and arms and a small head. with large staring eyes. The helmet on its head had been partially pulled off by the impact of the tree trunks. It was wearing a tight fitting garment with a belt round the waist and straps over the shoulders. Pouches hung from the waist belt and shoulder straps. Bulging body armour covered the upper part of the body. George bent down and opened one of the pouches. He pulled out a handful of metallic implements.

He looked at Marjorie. "These are tools," he said. "I think these lizards were here to inspect the dome for damage after the ground opened."

Marjorie clutched George's arm. "George, that one over there, it moved, it's not dead."

They hurried over to where the lizard lay half buried under the trunk of a large tree. They sat down on either side of it and looked at each other.

"George, what can we do?" asked Marjorie helplessly.

"There's no way we can shift that tree trunk," replied George quietly."

Hearing their voices, the lizard turned its head towards them and tried to open its eyes.

Marjorie gently wiped mud and stones from its face and eyes. "We don't know how to help you," she said.

"It won't understand you," said George.

"I know," replied Marjorie, "But at least from the sound of my voice, it knows we don't mean it any harm. At least I hope so."

The lizard opened its eyes and stared at them. After a short while, it slowly moved its arm and rested its long fingers on one of the shoulder pouches. It tapped slowly on the pouch.

"I think it wants something in that pouch," said George. "Let's see."

He opened the pouch and pulled out a small plastic bottle. He shook the bottle and could hear a liquid sloshing about inside it. The top had a simple snap on lid which he flipped open. The lizard tried to guide his hand but the effort was too much, its arm flopped back down. George took a guess what was wanted and held the bottle to the lizards mouth. Marjorie supported its head as the lizard gulped the liquid and closed its eyes. It opened them again and flicked its eyes down to its belt.

"It wants something else," said Marjorie.

George touched each pouch in turn, closely watching the lizards face. On one pouch the lizard blinked its eyes several times. George opened the pouch and removed a number of small metallic cylinders. He held them up in turn until one was chosen by the blinking eyes. He placed the cylinder in the lizards hand and waited as the long fingers painfully curled round it. The lizard slowly moved its hand until the cylinder was pressed against its body. A slight hiss was heard and the lizard shuddered, its hand dropping the cylinder. It stared at George as its eyes slowly closed, the whole body relaxing.

"It's gone," said Marjorie.

"It knew it was finished," said George, "That must have been some

sort of suicide stuff in that cylinder. At least it didn't suffer a long drawn out death." He paused, his head coming up. "Feel that?" he asked urgently.

The ground under their feet was trembling with slowly increasing violence. Marjorie looked across the gorge. On the far side, rocks and earth were sliding down into the gorge.

"Let's get out of here," she shouted.

They turned and scrambled round the tree trunks and started frantically climbing, making for the branches George had pushed into the top of the gorge. The vibrations became more violent, almost throwing them off their feet.

"Do you think we can make it?" panted Marjorie.

George looked over his shoulder at the avalanche of rocks rolling into the gorge.

"Just keep going love, we'll make it all right," he said, while a little voice in his head wondered if this time, they'd pushed their luck too far.

They reached the top of the gorge in a frantic rush, with the roar of the avalanche behind them spurring them on. They raced through the trees and bushes and scrambled into the cab.

“So far so good,” panted George, “Now let’s see if we can get out of here.” He looked at Marjorie, who nodded back at him.

George carefully rubbed the silver ball again, his grin nearly splitting his face as the familiar blue haze surrounded them.

The relief on their faces as they arrived at their new location was palpable. The blue sky and the open vista meant nothing could be concealed that might be a threat to their safety. Ahead of them, they could see a rolling landscape covered with what appeared to be tall grass. Small trees and shrubs poked their branches above the grass.

“We’re either on a very similar planet to the one with the village or we’re on the same planet, but a different location,” said George.

Marjorie studied the scenery through the window. “Yeah, it does look the same. That’s a first, up to now we’ve always gone to a different planet.” She paused, “George, I can’t stop thinking about those poor lizards. I’m so glad we were able to help it die easily rather than be buried alive under that avalanche.”

“It was its own choice,” replied George quietly, “We couldn’t do anything else to help it.” His face screwed up in frustration. “I wish I’d thought to take some of those tools from its pouch.” He added.

“We were running for our lives at the time,” replied Marjorie. “Anyway, what could you do with them?”

George shrugged. “Nothing, just interested, that’s all.” He pushed open his door. “Let’s have a look around.”

George got out and walked round the front of the van as Marjorie stepped down from the cab. As they stepped away from the van, they stopped and stared. Previously hidden by the bulk of the van body, they could now see the outskirts of a city not a hundred yards away. George shaded his eyes against the glare of the sun.

"I don't think we're on the planet with the village," he said quietly. "This is something altogether different. Either the people who built that have the most impressive hanging gardens or that place is deserted, look, all the buildings are overgrown with vegetation."

Marjorie nodded. "It looks like it's been abandoned for ages. Do you know, there's a pattern emerging here."

"How do you mean?" asked George.

Marjorie waved her hand at the buildings in front of them.

"This place looks abandoned. The first planet was also abandoned. The second and third had totally different kinds of inhabitants, the Tweedles and the Beetles are nothing like each other. The village may be primitive or some sort of experiment, who knows and the jungle planet was completely overgrown. To me that suggests whoever made the silver ball is long gone. The planets we visited are either deserted, primitive or have been taken over by different beings. I don't think any of them knew anything about the silver balls, our arrival was a total mystery to them."

"You're forgetting our dead lizards, aren't you?" replied George. "I think they were there to check for damage to the power source after the gorge opened. To me, that means they knew all about the power sources and what they do. They may even be the folk that made the silver ball in the first place."

"If that dome is a power source for the silver ball. It's only a theory or ours after all," replied Marjorie.

"It was right near where we appeared," said George, "It's the most logical conclusion to make."

"Your theory was that everywhere we stopped was important, like the stations on the underground," replied Marjorie. "So far,

everywhere we've arrived has been either in the middle of nowhere, with no buildings or anything, or if there are inhabitants, there's no sign they're using the silver balls."

The folk that made the silver ball could have moved on," said George, "You know, gone on to better things."

Marjorie nodded slowly. "It just seems daft to leave all that technology behind. If the lizards are the ones that made the power sources and the silver ball, they must be an advanced society. If they've moved on, why bother to look at the power source in the gorge? And get killed by something as primitive as an earthquake."

"We could argue the toss for ever and never find an answer," replied George. "Do you want to explore for a bit or shall we try to move on."

"Let's move," replied Marjorie, "I've had enough of this place already."

George nodded. "OK, back in the cab, let's go."

When they were all seated in the cab and in close contact, George ran his finger over the ball.

"I'm ready," said Marjorie, "You can start as soon as you like."

George looked up, his face ashen. "I am doing it, nothing's happening, the ball's not working."

For a moment, they both sat in a stunned silence then Marjorie reached over and grabbed his hand. "George, wasn't the dot in the center black?"

George nodded.

"Look," said Marjorie, holding up his hand. "The dot's turned red. The battery's flat."

George stared at the dot. "The battery's flat," he repeated woodenly. He let out a short hysterical laugh, quickly cut off. "It can't be as easy as that, what makes you think there's a battery inside it?"

Marjorie shrugged. "That's what happens when my phone battery goes flat, the little icon goes red."

"Yeah but," began George.

"It's the most likely explanation," interrupted Marjorie. "All we've got to do is find a way of charging it again."

George patted his chest. "I seem to have left my silver ball charger at home."

Marjorie punched him on his arm. "Sarky bugger, anyhow, I bet I'm right."

George idly rubbed his arm, thinking. "You know, you could be right. It's the old KISS principle."

"KISS?" queried Marjorie, raising an eyebrow.

"Keep It Simple Stupid," replied George. "The simplest solution to any engineering problem is usually the best. It doesn't matter who made the silver ball, they chose the simplest way to show a low charge, that is to change the colour of the dot."

"So what do we do?" asked Marjorie.

George looked out of the window. "It's getting dark, I think we'd better get some sleep and think again in the morning."

They pulled the doors shut and put the animals on the seat next to the broken window. This gave them some added security, anything trying to get in through the window would be met with a mouthful of teeth. Marjorie snuggled up to George and leaned her head on his shoulder. He put his arm round her and pulled her close. Marjorie nodded at the animal coiled up next to Ruff.

"What are we going to call him?" she asked. "He must have a name."

George smiled to himself. "You choose," he said.

"Ruffy," said Marjorie.

"Ruffy?" echoed George.

Marjorie nodded. "Yes, I think it suits him."

Privately, George thought Fang or Claw would have been more suitable for both animals, but if Marjorie liked Ruffy, Ruffy it would be. After a while, the sun dipped below the horizon and the stars came out, painting the sky with a thousand tiny dots of light.

"Isn't this romantic," sighed Marjorie.

George kissed her on the forehead. "Go to sleep," he said quietly.

They were woken by the sun streaming through the windows. George stretched and looked at his watch.

"It's only been six hours since the sun went down, this planet must have a fast rotation."

"Funny, I can't feel any difference," replied Marjorie, straight faced.

"Twit," said George opening the door. "I'm going to attend to a call of nature, see you in a minute."

Marjorie and the animals followed him out. As George was writing his name on the ground, Marjorie stripped off and squatted down in the grass.

"It's all right for you," she said, "You don't have to undress to pee. I feel safer with you and the animals around when I'm like this."

George watched with interest as Ruff and Ruffy squatted over

holes they had dug. After they'd finished, they carefully covered the holes like a cat and bounded off into the long grass.

"Well, now we've all Christened this place, we'd better have a think about what to do." He idly looked at the silver ball, then called to Marjorie.

"What?" asked Marjorie, as she sealed herself back into her suit.

George held out his hand. "Look at the dot," he said.

Marjorie walked over to him and held his hand. She peered at the silver ball and then at George.

"I don't know if my eyes are playing tricks, but hasn't a tiny section of the dot turned black?"

George nodded. "That's what I think, I just wanted you to confirm it. I thought my eyes might be playing tricks as well."

With rising excitement, Marjorie squeezed his arm. "Do you think the ball is recharging?"

"That's exactly what I think," replied George.

"How?"

"Well, it's nothing we've done," replied George. "I think it must be getting its charge from the power source under the ground."

Marjorie lifted his hand again and studied the ball. "As far as I can make out, there's a black segment equal to about ten minutes on a clock face. It was completely red last night, now six hours later, we've got this much." She did a quick calculation in her head. "Theoretically, if it goes on at this pace, it should be fully charged in about thirty six hours. If your watch is right, and the days equal the nights, that would make it about three days on this planet." She looked at George. "Can we wait here three days do you think?"

George looked around. "Well, on the face of it, there's nothing I can see to prevent us staying. But who knows, there could be a horde of natives out for blood arriving in the next minute, or a hurricane. Who knows, we'll just have to take it as it comes."

"We have water, but what'll we eat," asked Marjorie.

"We could look at that city," replied George, "We might find

something we could eat there.”

Marjorie shook her head. “I don’t like the look of that place. I know it looks deserted, but who knows what’s lurking in there. I’d rather stay out here, even if we do get hungry.”

“On the other hand, we don’t have to stay here for three days. We could wait until it’s say, half charged and then go,” said George.

Marjorie shook her head. “I’d rather wait until it’s fully charged. Supposing it won’t charge at our next destination.”

George nodded slowly. “Good point, yeah, we’ll wait until we have a full charge.”

Later that day, their food problem was solved. Ruff and Ruffy bounded back to the van, dragging a dead animal. They dropped it down and started tearing at it, gulping down mouthfuls of meat.

“I wonder if they’d let me take some of that,” said George, rising to his feet.

“Careful,” warned Marjorie. “Animals can be very possessive about their grub.”

“I’ll be careful,” replied George. He walked over to Ruff and taking out his penknife sat down next to him. He slowly put his hand out and touched the carcass. Both animals stopped eating for a second and stared at him, then resumed eating as if nothing had happened. The animal was the size of a large dog with short thin legs and a long neck. It vaguely reminded George of a squat deer. Neither Ruff or Ruffy made a move against him as he carefully cut a chunk of meat from the hind quarters of the animal. He rose and walked back to where Marjorie was leaning against the side of the van.

“Got some dinner,” he said with a grin.

Marjorie made a face. “I don’t fancy raw meat,” she said.

“You don’t have to, I’ll make a fire and cook it,” said George.

Marjorie smiled. “Oh yeah and how are you going to light a fire. Rub two boy scouts together?”

George took out his lighter. “No need for that,” he said, “I have this.”

“Do you know, I’d completely forgotten you had that on you,” said

Marjorie,

George collected a handful of the dried grassy like plants and gathered some broken branches of the scrubby bushes that grew in scattered clumps. Arranging them in the back part of the van he soon had a fire going. When it was good and hot, he laid the chunk of meat on the fire. Picking up a handful of grass, he wiped the blood from his hands and used a stick to turn the meat. When he took the meat from the fire, the meat was burnt rather black on the outside, rather like the potatoes he used to cook as a child on the fireworks bonfire, but once he's pared the burnt bits off, the rest was edible. George cut the chunk in half and handed a piece to Marjorie. Ever the gentleman, he gave Marjorie a bunch of grass to act as a serviette. They sat down with their backs to the van and started eating. George finished his meal and wiped his chin. He lit a cigarette, lent his head back against the van and sighed contentedly.

"I hope we can get home soon, I'm almost out of fags," he said. He looked up "All right?" he asked Marjorie.

She nodded round a mouthful of food, she couldn't eat as fast as George.

"Surprisingly good," she finally said. "If Ruff keeps this up, we won't go hungry."

George nodded at the two animals laying on the ground in front of them. "Yes, they're two good lads," he said, stifling a belch.

"I don't know about two good lads," said Marjorie. "I think Ruffy's a female. I also think she might be pregnant."

George studied Ruffy for a moment. "What makes you think that?" Marjorie shuffled across the grass and sat next to Ruffy. She parted the coat round Ruffy's middle.

"Look at the size of her belly, she's got teats and they're getting bigger.

George peered at the animal. "I dunno, I just think she's a bit more podgy round the middle than Ruff."

Marjorie shook her head. "She's got bigger in just the short time

we've had her, I wouldn't be surprised if she gave birth soon."

George laughed. "We'd better stop calling her him then," he said. He looked at Ruff. "Didn't take you long, did it, old son."

"I don't think Ruff is the father," said Marjorie. "They haven't been together long enough."

"Depends how long it takes the babies to grow," replied George. "They could pop them out like mice for all we know."

"I don't think so," replied Marjorie. "Usually, the bigger the animal, the longer the gestation period. Ruffy is a lot bigger than your average mouse."

"She's also completely different to anything we've got on Earth, just look at her, we've got nothing like that at home, you can't really make comparisons," said George. "Teats would make her a mammal, she looks too weird to be a mammal to me."

"We've got weird animals at home, what about the duck billed platypus," replied Marjorie, "Now they're really weird. They lay eggs like a lizard, but suckle their young like a mammal. Not that they have teats, the babies suckle the milk from the fur."

"Get away," said George. "How did you know that?"

"I must have read it somewhere," replied Marjorie. She looked at Ruffy. "I wonder if she'll lay eggs or give birth to live young."

"Well she's got a coat like a porcupine, a body like a dog, a tail like a rat and a head like nothing on Earth. It's anybody's guess."

Marjorie nodded. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see. By the way, changing the subject, how's the black dot coming on?"

George looked at the silver ball. "Equal to about quarter past," he said. "We're getting there."

They sat quiet for a moment, then Marjorie said, "George I've just thought of something. Which way round to you trace the circle round the black dot?"

George thought for a moment, then he circled his finger in the air. "That way, I think. I hadn't really thought about it, I just circle one, two, three and then touch the black dot."

Marjorie studied how his finger moved. "You're circling clockwise, if you did that all the time, maybe that's why we kept going from place to place. What do you think might happen if you circled anti-clockwise.?"

If George had been a cartoon character a light bulb would have appeared over his head. "We might go on a reverse course," he said excitedly. "We might be able to get back home." He hugged his wife. "Marjorie, you're a genius."

Marjorie kissed him on his nose. "Let's see if it works first before you let fly with compliments."

"It will be nice to get home," said George, reflectively. He rubbed his chin which now sported the beginnings of a beard. "To have a shave and a proper wash will seem like a luxury."

Marjorie stroked his face. "I rather like you with a beard, makes your look distinguished."

"Hmm," said George.

"You have two white streaks either side of your chin, a bit like a badger," she said.

"I thought you said it made me look distinguished, now you're saying I look like a badger," complained George.

"A very nice badger," smiled Marjorie.

"Putting the beard to one side, I've just thought of a snag about a reverse course," said George. "If we do go on a reverse course, we're going to visit all the places we stopped at on the way here."

Marjorie raised an eyebrow. "So?"

"At least two planets have quite advanced civilizations," replied George. "They might be waiting for us. If we turn up in the same place as last time, we could be caught in some sort of trap."

"Not if we leave immediately after we arrive," replied Marjorie.

"That's the snag," said George. "Supposing the silver ball has to wait for a while before it works again. We've never tested that, It's always been some time before we've used it again, we've never used it straight away after we've arrived."

"Mmmm," murmured Marjorie. Her face lit up. "What about the last place we visited. We didn't see anybody to disturb us, we were in the middle of a jungle. We can try the rubbing the dot immediately we arrive and see if it works."

George nodded. "That'll give some breathing space to sort ourselves out if it doesn't work straight away."

The next days seemed to pass at a snails pace. Marjorie noticed George looking at the silver ball.

"Looking at it won't make it go any faster," she said.

George sighed, "I know, I'm just impatient to be off. I want to find out if your idea about the reverse course works. Also we're getting a bit low on water, it would be nice to get home before it runs out."

On the morning of the third day, George woke up and stretched. He glanced at the silver ball and shook Marjorie awake

"Hey, look," he cried excitedly. "We have a black dot."

Marjorie leaned across the seat. "Yep, all black, that's quicker than we thought it would be. Good, now let's get out of here."

They hadn't taken account of the two animals. As soon as George opened the door, they were out and running through the grass. Within seconds, they had disappeared. After several minutes frantic calling, they sat down against the cab and looked at each other.

"They could be out hunting," said George, "If they are, they could be gone all day. What do you reckon, do we wait for them to come back or go without them?"

"Wait for them," said Marjorie emphatically. "We can't just leave them here."

George nodded. "OK, we'll wait."

After what seemed ages, but was only half an hour by George's watch, the two animals returned.

"Right, get them into the cab," said George.

Once they were settled on the seat, George looked at Marjorie.

"Now?" he said.

Marjorie nodded and gripped his arm with one hand and the two

animals coats with the other.

George carefully rubbed the silver ball and the familiar blue haze surrounded them. They were off again.

When they arrived, they thought for a moment, the reverse course had not worked. They'd hoped to be on the jungle planet, but the towering trees and bushes of the jungle had vanished. Suddenly, the van tilted. To their horror, they realized the gorge had widened to include the spot where they had previously been. They had appeared on the side of the gorge and were now sliding down a steep slope with an ever increasing speed. George frantically rubbed the ball as Marjorie tried to hold him on the seat. The look of panic on their faces relaxed slightly as blue haze surrounded them.

They landed with a crash, the van tilting over at an alarming angle. For a second, they thought it would roll right over, but after a nail biting moment, it tipped back onto its wheels. The van bounced on its suspension and finally came to rest. George and Marjorie climbed back on to the seat where they had been thrown off by the impact and recovered their breaths.

"Bloody hell," panted George, "That was close."

"But it worked," shouted Marjorie in excitement. "The reverse course has worked."

"It did," agreed George, "But that was too close for comfort. We were dead lucky the silver ball worked before we got up too much speed down the hill."

"At least it's flat here," said Marjorie, "I'd rather not go through that again." She peered through the windscreen. "We should be on the village planet, are we?"

George gestured through the windscreen at the nearby forest and the broken remnants of the beetles dome. "Looks like it," he said.

"Then let's go," replied Marjorie. "Next stop the beetles."

George rubbed the silver ball, "Let's hope so," he said."

They arrived in a cloud of broken plastic or glass.

"What the hell?" shouted George.

As the shards settled round them, they could see the front of the cab had demolished part of a dome. In the centre was a plinth with the tube they had taken from the Tweedles sitting on top of it. George lifted his hand ready to rub the silver ball again.

"Hold it a minute," said Marjorie, holding up her hand. She opened her door and jumped across to the plinth. She grabbed the tube and ran back to the cab. When she was inside she slammed the door and shouted. "Ready when you are."

"What was that all about," said George his finger hovering over the silver ball, "I thought the whole idea was to get in and out as quickly as possible."

"We want proof we've visited planets when we get back home," said Marjorie. "This is proof."

"What about them," replied George, nodding at the two animals on the seat between them. "Don't you think they would be proof enough we've been to a planet?"

Marjorie held the tube up, "Now we've got proof we've visited more than one planet." She made a face, "Anyway, I wanted it back, the beetles had no right to nick it from us."

George raised his eyes to heaven in mock despair then nodded at the window. "Time to go," he said.

Marjorie followed his gaze. A number of beetles were fast approaching them. George held his breath and with a silent prayer, rubbed the silver ball.

They emerged in the middle of a busy street lined with tall buildings. George had barely enough time to take in where they were, when a fast approaching vehicle filled his view through the windscreen. The vehicle swerved wildly, trying to avoid a head on collision. It hit the front corner of the cab, spinning it round, throwing

George and Marjorie off the seat. George clutched his hands to his chest to stop them shaking and desperately rubbed the ball. They emerged in the middle of their own private sand storm. The cab finally came to a halt and George and Marjorie levered themselves upright back on to the seat as the sand settled round them. They were back on the first planet they had visited.

George wiped his forehead. "Bloody hell, I'd forgotten we'd landed in the middle of a road on the Tweedles planet." "Lucky we were in the cab," said Marjorie shakily. "We were on foot the last time, we were lucky we didn't get killed then." She pushed at her door. When it wouldn't open, she stuck her head out of the window. "We've dug quite a hole for ourselves," she said.

"Yeah, we were spinning a bit when we landed," replied George. "Lucky for us it wasn't a hard surface, we'd have gone skating all over the countryside."

George kicked at his door and finally pushed it open. He climbed out of the cab and looked around. The last time they had arrived, it had been night, this time they had arrived in daylight. He climbed onto the roof of the cab for a better look and after a minute or two, he climbed back down.

"Nobody around, just like last time, we've got the place to ourselves," he said.

"OK, next stop Morocco," said Marjorie. "Do we stay in the cab or go on foot?"

George thought for a moment. "I'd like to take the cab back with us if we can. There might be technology in it that could be useful."

Marjorie nodded. "Right in the cab it is. Is there anything stopping us going right now?"

"I'd like to make a lead or something to control the animals, we don't want them running off when we get back to Earth. I'll have to make them now, we certainly can't do at the side of the road in Morocco," said George.

"What are you going to make leads from," asked Marjorie, "We

haven't got anything with us that'll do."

"I'll look in the back of the cab," replied George, "The fact it's partially demolished should help. Maybe I can find some wiring."

George lent on the back of the van and peered into the interior of the body. About eight feet of bodywork remained, the rest had been sheared off. Apart from the time when he'd made a fire in there, he'd never really looked closely at the bodywork. Now he could see the floor was a double skin with what looked like the ends of wires poking out. He walked back to the cab and grabbed his metal bar where it had fallen into the footwell. At the back end of the body, he pushed the bar into the gap between the floor panels and heaved. After some effort, he managed to tear the upper panel loose. Now visible were thin strips of plastic with what at first looked like wires sandwiched between them. George climbed into the interior and cut a bunch of the plastic strips as far forward as he could reach, right up against the metal panel separating the cab from the body. He climbed out of the body and held up the strips to show Marjorie.

"What have you got?" she asked.

"I thought they were wires at first," replied George, "But they're not, they look like a printed circuit between two layers of plastic" He gripped the strips in his hands and tugged hard. He looked up, "They're strong enough, they'll do for leads."

He tied a loop round each animal's neck, being careful to avoid the frill and then attached a length of plastic strip to each loop.

"There," he said standing back to admire his handiwork, "That should do."

"Can you make a loop at the other end," said Marjorie, "You might be able to hold them, but that plastic will slip through my hand without something to hold on to."

George bent down and tied a loop to the end of each strip. "There, OK?" he said.

Marjorie nodded and looked down at the animals. "I'm surprised they let you do that, I can't believe they've ever had a collar and lead

on before."

George grinned. "After seeing the way Ruff killed those animals, nothing about them surprises me." He picked up the ends of the strips. "Let's see how they behave on a lead."

He gave one lead to Marjorie and together, they walked the animals round the cab.

"Good as gold," said George with satisfaction. "Just like they've been doing it for ages. Like I said, nothing about these two surprises me anymore."

They led the animals to the cab and climbed in after them. Once they were settled, George pulled the door shut and held up his hand. "Ready?" he said.

Marjorie nodded and tightened her grip on his arm.

"Here goes," said George.

They arrived with a thump as the van settled on the earth at the side of the road. It was dark but they were sure they were in the right place. They had previously spent some time at the side of the Moroccan road, so the moonlight bathed a familiar scene and the scents of the Moroccan night air filled the cab.

George looked across to Marjorie, his teeth gleaming in the pale light. "We've done it love, next stop home."

Marjorie opened her mouth to reply but the words never came as they were suddenly bathed in light. A loudspeaker crackled and the sound of a voice shouting in Arabic shattered the night air. Blinded by the lights, George shaded his eyes to cut out the glare. As his eyes adjusted, he could see figures coming towards them, their silhouettes distorted into stick figures by the intensity of the lights.

"George," shouted Marjorie, "They've got guns, quick rub the spot,"

George was quicker off the mark than Marjorie, as she was shouting, the blue haze was enveloping them.

They arrived with a sudden crash, the van tipped violently sideways and then it was falling. The fall only lasted a second, but it was enough to rattle their teeth when they landed. The van rocked

violently and then settled as clumps of earth showered down on the roof. It was dark, but Marjorie and George could see a wall of earth a foot away all round the cab, they appeared to have landed in a large hole. Marjorie put her head out of the window.

"Where are we," she cried, looking up at a patch of sky faintly visible six feet above their heads, "We can't be back on Earth, we never had a hole like this in our garden."

The sky above their heads suddenly lit up. A head appeared, silhouetted against the brightness of the light.

"Hello?" it said.

"You speak English?" asked Marjorie open mouthed.

"Well, this is England," said the voice, "My name's Judith Wilkes."

"Wait there," said Wilkes, "I'll be back in a second."

The head disappeared only to be replaced by a different head half a minute later.

"Hello, are you Mr. and Mrs. Meaking?" It asked.

"Yes," shouted Marjorie, "Where are we?"

"You're in your garden, my name's Dr Freeman, hold on we'll get you out of there."

Freeman's head disappeared and after some muffled sounds, a ladder was slid down onto the roof of the cab. Marjorie tried to open the door, but the sides of the hole were too close. She half stood on the seat and pulled herself through the open window. Standing on the bottom of the window frame, she levered herself onto the roof of the cab. Scrambling across the roof, she grabbed the ladder and slowly climbed to the top, squinting against the glare of four arc lights arranged round the garden. A dark haired young man held out his hand and helped her off the ladder on to the level ground.

"Welcome back, I'm Mark Freeman, we've been trying to find out what happened to you for nearly two weeks now." He turned to a young woman standing next to him. "This is Judith Wilkes, she's been helping me."

Wilkes held out her hand. Rather bemused, Marjorie shook it and looked around. Her garden was a complete mess. A huge pile of earth covered what was her flower beds and a portacabin sat squarely on the patio in front of the bungalow. A door opened in the portacabin and a young man came out.

"I've called in," he said to Freeman.

Sounds of grunting came from the hole as George's head appeared at the top of the ladder.

"Had to get the animals onto the roof," he said to Marjorie as he stepped off the ladder. He looked at Freeman and his two companions, then at the garden.

"What have you done to my garden," he said rather testily. He was still rather shaken up at the reception they had received in Morocco.

Freeman held out his hand. "My name's Mark Freeman. This is Judith Wilkes and Anton Bracks. We've been"

He was interrupted by George. "Yeah, I heard while I was climbing the ladder." He turned back to the hole. "Hold on a minute, I want to get the animals out."

Freeman turned to Marjorie, "Animals?" he mouthed.

Marjorie smiled. "You'll see," she said.

George by this time was next to the hole. He knelt down by the top of the ladder and looked over the edge.

"Ruff, Ruffy, come on," he said encouragingly, tapping the ladder.

Freeman liked to think of himself as a cultured intelligent man, not given to expressing himself with expletives. When Ruff appeared at the top of the ladder and levered himself onto the grass, Freeman hastily stepped back, his eyes widening.

"What the fuck is that," he breathed.

He cannoned into Wilkes and Bracks who hadn't stepped back as fast as he had done. When Ruffy also appeared, they were ready to run, their heads turning towards the portacabin, estimating how fast they could reach the door.

George collected the leads and pulled the two animals next to him. They both sat down either side of George.

"Don't worry, they won't hurt you," he said with an evil grin. He was rather pissed off by what they had done to his garden and seeing their panic at the sight of the animals gave him some small satisfaction.

"What are they?" asked Freeman, recovering his composure at

seeing the animals sitting quietly.

"Just a couple of pets we picked up on our travels," replied George. "Now if you haven't wrecked our bungalow like you've done to our garden, we'd like to get something to eat and drink."

"Oh yes," said Marjorie enthusiastically, "I could murder a cup of tea."

George flicked the leads. "Come on," he said to the animals who obediently followed him as he and Marjorie walked towards the kitchen door. Freeman and his two companions followed at a safe distance, still rather wary at the sight of the two animals. When George and Marjorie were inside and the kitchen lights were on, they peered round the door.

"Can we come in?" asked Freeman.

George waved his hand. "Yeah, make yourselves at home, if you haven't done so already."

They slid nervously into the kitchen, keeping close to the wall and stood with the kitchen table in front of them.

Freeman couldn't take his eyes off the animals. "This is unbelievable, you must tell us all about what happened to you."

George nodded. "We will, but first things first." He filled the kettle and plugged it in. Marjorie opened a cupboard and took down some mugs.

"Cup of tea?" she asked the shell shocked trio.

Wilkes and Bracks stood open mouthed, still too shocked to speak.

"We'd love one," said Freeman, noting the silence of his companions.

The lights in the garden suddenly went out, the kitchen window turning dark with a hint of the predawn light. The sudden change made George and Marjorie look up.

"They're set to come on at any movement," explained Freeman nodding at the garden, "We didn't want to miss anything. It was Judith's turn on watch tonight, Anton and I were asleep in the

Portacabin."

George nodded.

The hissing of the kettle as it came to the boil gave a strangely homely atmosphere to what was a surrealistic situation.

"Anything to eat?" asked George, "I'm starving

"Let's see," said Marjorie opening the 'fridge. She inspected the contents, tapping her chin. "Not much left," she said.

Freeman looked embarrassed. "That was us, I'm afraid. We have been replacing things we took out, but at the moment, we've let things slide."

"Never mind," said Marjorie, taking out a pack of cheese. She opened another cupboard and took out some bread. She put two slices in the toaster and pressed the button. While she was waiting, she left the kitchen, opened the cupboard in the hall and put her head inside.

George followed her into the hall, "What are you after?" he asked.

Susie's old dog nest," replied Marjorie, as she rummaged amongst the piled up goods inside. "I kept it after she died in case we got another dog, Ah, got it," she said, emerging with a large furry bundle.

She walked back into the kitchen and gently moving the animals to one side, she put the dog nest on the floor in the corner. Ruff and Ruffy promptly climbed in as if was what they'd been waiting for since they'd moved into the kitchen. Marjorie spread butter and sliced cheese on the toast and put it under the grill. When the cheese was nicely bubbling, she slid the bread onto plates and put them on the table. George made the tea and put the mugs on the table.

"Drink up," he said, nodding at Freeman and his companions. George smothered his cheese toast with tomato ketchup and nibbled at the toast with tiny bites. He knew from experience not to take a big mouthful, the cheese was hot as lava

Marjorie went to a cupboard and took out two bowls. She filled them with water and put them on the floor in front of Ruff and Ruffy.

They both buried their heads in the bowls and noisily lapped up the water.

Marjorie looked at them. "They must have been thirsty, poor things," she said. "We'll have to buy some dog food for them later."

George finished his toast and drank from his mug. "Ah, that's better," he sighed. He rose and turned to the door. "I'll get some food the beetles made for us, that'll do for now."

As he went out of the door, Freeman turned to Marjorie, "Beetles?" he asked.

Marjorie smiled. "It's a long story, we'll fill you in later."

George returned with the haversack the beetles had given him, took out two of the 'sprouts' and put them on the floor. Both animals pounced on them and holding them down with their front claws, they quickly gulped them down. Then they sat down in the dog nest and licked their claws clean. When they had finished, they tucked their legs under their bodies and pushed their heads under the overhanging sides of the nest. To the casual glance, they looked like two large black dogs, albeit with rather fancy ruffled collars.

Marjorie looked at them affectionately. "They've taken to our kitchen like they've been here for ages," She sat down and massaged her back. "It's good to be back," she said contentedly.

George sat next to her and as he was about to pick up his mug to finish his tea, the silver ball slid from his finger and rolled onto the table. He picked it up and showed it to Marjorie. "Red," he said, "We just made it."

The comment passed over Freeman's head. He leaned forwards. "Oh yes, the famous silver ball. Can I see it?"

George nodded and passed it across the table. "Whatever you do, don't put your finger in the loop."

Freeman gingerly picked up the ball between finger and thumb. He looked up.

"We've seen this on the video, I didn't think I'd get to see it in real life." He turned it over in his fingers and carefully placed the ball back

on the table. "If you don't mind, I'd like you to tell us just what happened." He looked at his watch. "We haven't much time. Once word of what happened here got out, we were taken over by a Government scientific team. It was inevitable really I suppose, it was impossible to keep it quiet for long. We'd like to get your story before they get here." He looked at his watch again. "We have perhaps an hour or two before they arrive. We had strict instructions to call in if anything happened, I'd like to have delayed calling in, but we couldn't, the whole garden is under surveillance, so they'd know if we didn't call right away."

"So what's the hurry?" asked Marjorie.

"I think now you're back, we'll be pushed out of it," replied Freeman glumly.

"And we've done most of the work," said Wilkes indignantly.

"That's right," added Bracks.

"What you'll be pushed right out of the investigation?" said George.

Freeman shrugged, "As we were in at the beginning, they'll probably let us participate, but only as observers. Probably not much more though, Sir Aubrey Standing is a right little Hitler, he just loves being in charge. It's probably the biggest thing that's happened in his career and he's not going to let anyone else share his glory." He paused and sipped his tea. "He was the first person the police were recommended to see about your disappearance. DI Spencer, the policeman in charge, said Standing good as told him he was the victim of an elaborate practical joke. Standing changed his mind once he realized how serious the police were taking it. Anyway, enough about him, tell us what happened."

Freeman set his mobile phone on voice recorder and placed it on the centre of the table. George and Marjorie spent the next half hour giving Freeman a quick run down on their adventures as Freeman's eyebrows climbed into his hairline at each new turn of events. While George was talking, Marjorie found her mobile phone and dialled.

"Who are you calling?" asked Freeman, "Not the papers, I hope."

There's already wild speculation about the mysterious disappearance of a middle aged couple. So far that's all they've got, we don't want to give them any more at the moment."

Marjorie shook her head. "My son, he has a right to know we're back and all right."

"Middle aged," grumbled George in an outraged tone. "We're not middle aged."

They were interrupted by a knock at the kitchen door. Detective Inspector Don Spencer entered the kitchen and stood with his hands on his hips staring at George and Marjorie. His tousled hair and unshaven chin suggested he'd only just got up and left his house in a hurry.

"So the wanderers return," he said, "Where the hell have you two been, we've been turning the country upside down looking for you as well as the airports and docks."

"I thought it only right to let him know," interrupted Bracks, "After all, Inspector Spencer was the one who brought us in on this in the first place"

"That phone call got me out of bed like a firecracker up my arse," said Spencer, "Even though it was four o'clock in the morning."

Freeman looked at George. "If you're going to tell him your story, you'd better be quick, Standing will be here soon."

Spencer grimaced. "That little weasel. He good as told me to get out of the investigation. I told him as it was a missing persons and a police matter, he had no right to interfere. He didn't like it, but I had the support of the chief constable so that set him straight." He paused. "Now, are you going to tell me what happened, I've seen the video and I'd like an explanation."

He stopped, his eyes staring. He'd just spotted the two animals laying in the corner of the kitchen. "What the....." he began.

Freeman laughed. "It's all right Don, I had the same reaction. George here tells me they're quite safe. Mr. and Mrs. Meaking have given me a quick outline of what happened. I'll write a report and

send it to you. It won't be complete, but now they're back, it will enable you to close the case." He paused at the sound of car doors slamming and footsteps hurrying up the garden path. "Sounds like Standing and his mates are here," he said, quickly picking up his phone and putting it in his pocket. "Standing is a little prick, excuse my language, but his assistant Carstairs is more amenable. I think he's a little embarrassed at the way his boss carries on. I'd talk to him if you want anything done."

Professor Standing and Carstairs entered the kitchen. A group of men crowded round the kitchen door, but Standing held up his hand holding them back. He was short and thin with piercing blue eyes. His almost white hair was unkempt, long and curly and stuck out all round his head like a dandelion clock. Dressed in a tweed jacket with elbow patches and grey flannel trousers, baggy at the knees, he was almost a caricature of a mad professor from the early B movies. Carstairs was a younger man, and though rather conservatively dressed, George could almost feel a more spirited persona trying to escape. Standing's gaze swept round the room.

"I hope you haven't been talking to the Meakings Dr. Freeman," he said abruptly, "The investigation must be carried out by my team, your work here is finished."

George took an instant dislike to Standing the moment he opened his mouth. He'd immediately seen through the carefully cultivated image Standing was trying to portray, that of a senior eminent scientist who was so committed to his work, he had little or no time for his personal appearance. George had dealings with men like him in the army. Snotty officers so full of their own importance, who threw their weight about. He stood up.

"I'll talk to who I like," he said, "Who are you to tell me who I can talk to."

"Anything to do with this comes under the official secrets act," replied Standing. "I'm afraid you can only talk to designated officials."

George stuck out his chin. "Is that so, well for your information, I haven't signed the official secrets act."

Standing set his mouth in a tight line. "Nevertheless, the act will stand, I...."

He was interrupted by the front door bell ringing. He grunted and turned for the hall. "Wait here," he said.

Bloody cheek, thought George, telling me what to do in my own house. He ignored Standing and followed him to the front door. He was just in time to hear his son on the doorstep protesting loudly.

"It's my mother and father, you must let us in," he said.

"I'm afraid that's impossible," said Standing. "Go home, you will be informed of developments in due course." He made to close the door but was stopped by George's beefy arm.

"It's my house and I decide who comes in, not you.," said George, poking Standing in the chest. He pulled the door fully open. "Come in son," he said, ignoring Standing's spluttered protests.

Peter and his wife Amy slowly entered the hall, not sure what was going on. Amy put down her daughter who ran into the kitchen. She cannoned into Marjorie and hugged her tightly.

"Nan," she cried, "They said you were lost."

Marjorie lifted her up. "No Christine love, that was a mistake, we're all right," she said. She put Christine down as Peter and Amy entered the kitchen. They rushed to her and hugged her tightly.

"Are you and dad all right?" asked Peter. "We were worried sick when we saw the video of you and dad disappearing. We couldn't wait to get over here when we got your call."

"Hallo, what are you?" said a childish voice.

The hugging quickly broke up as they turned and saw Christine approaching the two animals with her hand out. George started to move forwards, but he was too late. Christine sat in front of the animals and started petting their heads. Ruff and Ruffy butted against her hand like a couple of cats, licking her fingers with their blue tongues and extending and contracting their claws, their frills flashing red.

Christine giggled and turned to her parents. "Mummy, they're

tasting me," she said delightedly.

Peter and Amy moved towards the dog nest. "Dad, what are those things?" cried Peter, "Are they safe?"

George relaxed somewhat, remembering how Ruff had reacted to being stroked by the child in the village.

"They're our new pets," he said smiling, "We picked them up on our travels."

Peter stared at him, "Travels, where did you travel to pick up things like that?"

"We'll tell you all about it later," said George. He walked over to the animals and picked up Christine. Better safe than sorry, he thought. It was all very well thinking it was safe for the little girl in the village to pet Ruff, but this was his granddaughter. Ruff and Ruffy got up and stood next to him, coiling their tails round his legs.

"Meet Ruff and Ruffy," he said.

Standing had slowly followed George back into the kitchen. As he came through the door, Carstairs, having seen the animals properly for the first time, was desperately trying to attract his attention, he pointed to the corner of the kitchen where George stood with the animals.

Standing looked in disbelief. "What are those things, he spluttered. "Whatever they are, you can't keep them here."

"Oh, and why not" said George belligerently.

"Look at them," shouted Standing, "They're like nothing on Earth." He realised what he'd just said and stopped talking, standing with his mouth open. "Where have you been, where did those things come from?" he faltered.

"We'll tell you later," replied George, "If you ask nicely."

Standing shook his head. "Those things will have to be taken away. We can't let you keep dangerous animals like those in your house.

"How do you know their dangerous?" queried George, putting to the back of his mind the way Ruff had shredded the animals that had attacked them. "You don't know what sort of animals they are."

"Just one look at the claws is enough," said Standing, "They look dangerous to me."

"Oh so you're the expert now," retorted Marjorie, "As a matter of interest what is your sphere of expertise?"

Standing wasn't used to being talked to like that. He drew himself up. "If you must know, my speciality is particle physics." He said haughtily.

"Not in exobiology then," snapped Marjorie. "So you have no idea if these animals are dangerous or not. And another thing, just what law are you going to use to take them?"

Standing floundered for a second. "It'll be something like the dangerous dogs act," he said.

"Not good enough," said George, "I want to know precisely just what law you're going to use to take our animals."

Standing waved his hand in dismissal. "We'll sort that out later, for now they have to go."

George stuck his chin forwards. "Try it," he said, "and I'll sue you personally for theft." He stabbed his finger at Standing. "Take them away and you'll get nothing out of us. We won't tell you a bloody thing about what happened to us."

Standing looked at George's face which was positively glowering and hastily backtracked.

"Look, we seem to have got off on the wrong foot," he said in a conciliatory tone. "What if we say you can stay here tonight and tomorrow we take you to our science facility where you can tell us what happened to you. The animals will stay with you."

Somewhat mollified, George nodded slowly. "OK, I suppose we'll have to tell our story eventually. But the animals stay with us."

"I saw a silver ball in the table, it that the one shown in the video?" asked Standing, quickly changing to a less problematic subject.

George nodded.

"Have you any objection if we take it with us today? We'd like to start examining it as soon possible."

"No, you take it," said George," There's some more stuff in the hole in the garden. You can have that as well." He lifted the haversack containing the animals food. "Hold on," he said, taking several of the 'sprouts' out of the bag and putting them to one side, "You might as well take this as well."

Standing raised and eyebrow. "More?"

George smiled. "Yeah, the hole in the garden where we landed. There's the remains of a vehicle we hijacked from one planet and inside it you'll find a container of water from another planet along with a beam weapon of some kind"

"Another planet?" gasped Standing, "And this vehicle is sitting in a hole in your garden?"

George nodded.

Standing pulled his phone from his pocket and frantically dialed. He walked into the garden and after a minute or two, he returned.

"I've arranged for the vehicle to be picked up and quarantined. If you are telling the truth and you have been to another planet, there may be organisms on that vehicle which we can't allow to escape into the environment. They'll take the silver ball and the rucksack as well," He stared at George. "I take it you have no objections."

George shrugged, "Yeah, take em, we don't need them anymore."

Half an hour later, a commotion from outside drew George to the lounge window. On the road outside their bungalow was the largest crane he had ever seen. Hydraulic jacks slid ponderously down at each corner and the arm of the crane started extending. As George went back into the kitchen a man he vaguely recognised as one of Standing's scientists came through the door.

"Hello, we haven't been introduced," he said to George, "My name's Chris Bolton, We're here to take your vehicle out of the hole in your back garden."

George eyed the crane. "Do you reckon it'll reach?" he asked.

Bolton measured the depth of George's back garden with his eye. "Yeah, I think so. I've got a couple of lads with me to shrink wrap it,

cover it in a tarp and fix the lifting gear. We should be out of your hair in about half an hour."

"Do you want some tea when you're finished?" asked Marjorie.

Bolton pursed his lips, "Um, better not, as soon as we've got it on a low loader, I think it better if we shot off straight away."

He took the rucksack and silver ball from Standing and walked back in to the garden. "Thanks anyway," he said over his shoulder.

"This vehicle," interrupted Standing, "What did you say was in it?"

"A container of water from another planet along with a beam weapon of some kind," repeated George.

Standing's eyes lit up. "A beam weapon, from another planet?"

"Don't get too excited," interrupted George, "It doesn't work on us."

"From another planet," said Standing in a far away voice. He could already see his Nobel Prize becoming a distinct possibility.

It took some time, but peace finally descended on the Meakings household. Standing had allowed his team into the kitchen and introduced them one by one. George promptly forgot their names, the lasting impression he was left with was they had more degrees after their names than you could shake a stick at. At George's insistence, they were kept away from the animals, he wasn't ready for them to be examined by curious scientists yet.

Arrangements were made to fill in the hole in the garden and remove the lights and Portacabin. Slowly, the bungalow emptied. Spencer arranged for a couple of policemen to stand guard by the front door with George and Marjorie promising to keep them supplied with tea. Peter and Amy finally left for their home after reassurances both their parents were all right. Christine had a little tantrum at leaving the two animals, but after a promise she could visit them again, she finally quietened down.

After she shut the front door on the last of the visitors, Marjorie stretched and yawned.

"Me for a shower and then bed," she said.

"Me too," said George.

Half an hour later, all was quiet and dark in the bungalow.

The next morning, George made his way from the bedroom to the kitchen to make an morning cup of tea. In spite of feeling tired when he'd gone to bed,, he'd awoken at his usual time after only a few hours sleep. He stopped at the kitchen door and called to Marjorie over his shoulder.

"Hey Marge, you remember we were wondering if Ruffy would give birth to live young or lay eggs?"

"Yes, I remember," shouted Marjorie from the bedroom.

"Well it's eggs," said George. "We've got three of them."

"What?" Marjorie ran into the kitchen, her night dress flapping around her. She looked down at the dog nest. "Good grief," she said quietly.

Laying half under Ruffy's belly were three dark brown eggs with her whip like tail coiled protectively round them. The feather-like end of her tail was spread out almost concealing the eggs.

Marjorie bent down and slowly reached out her hand. Ruffy hissed quietly at her.

"It's all right darling, I just want to have a look," soothed Marjorie.

She gently touched one of the eggs. They were not hard like a hen's eggs, but were flexible and leathery. They were the shape of a large bean, about five inches long by three inches wide. Marjorie removed her hand and patted Ruffy on the head. She stood up and looked at George.

"Well, that's a turn up for the book," she said. "I wonder how long before they hatch."

George shrugged. "We'll find out eventually. One thing, she doesn't leave here until they do hatch out, whatever Standing wants." He wandered into the hall to the telephone table, his slippers slapping on the wooden floor. "I'd better call him, he left his number here I think."

After a short conversation, he put the phone down. "We have a slight problem," he said.

"What's that?" asked Marjorie.

George walked into the lounge and carefully parted the curtains an inch. "Look," he said.

Marjorie joined him at the window where George held the curtains to one side. She peeped through the crack. "Oh no," she cried.

Outside on the road, all they could see were white vans with large satellite dishes on their roofs. A crowd of men and women were

being held back by uniformed police.

"There's been a leak," said George glumly, "The press know all about us."

"Who?" questioned Marjorie.

George shrugged. "God knows. It could be Freeman's lot or maybe Peter. He was a bit miffed at being told he couldn't stay here last night."

"This is going to make things awkward," said Marjorie in a masterpiece of understatement. "How are we going to go shopping, or anything. We'll be prisoners in our own home."

"They'll have to bring supplies in for us," replied George. "That's a minor matter, Standing was furious when he told me, he threatened to find the culprit and have him jailed." He let the curtains fall back into place. "All that lot arrived just before dawn, I don't know how we missed it."

"We were tired George," replied Marjorie, "No wonder after what we've been through."

"Yeah, I suppose so," said George, slumping onto a chair.

"George, your pyjama trousers are gaping," said Marjorie, "If the press see you like that, what would they think."

"Bollocks to the press," grumbled George. He stood up, hitching his pyjama trousers together. "We'd better get dressed. Standing and a couple of biologists are coming over, they want to look at Ruffy and her eggs."

Later that day, a sudden clamour of people shouting by the front gate, heralded the arrival of Standing and his men. They fought their way through the crowd at the gate, ignoring the shouts and questions thrown at them. Standing led his men through the front door.

"We'll have to do something about that lot," he said testily nodding at the press outside. "I don't know who is responsible for the leak, but by God, they'll be in trouble when I find out who it is."

He suddenly seemed to become aware he hadn't introduced his companions.

"This is Professor Trands and Dr. Foster," he said.

"Eh?" said George.

Foster smiled. "Once I got my doctorate the jokes started. I've never been to Gloucester, in the rain or the dry."

George smiled, rather taken with the man's sense of humour. "I wasn't going to say a thing," he lied.

"Call me Ian," said Foster.

"Oh yes," added Trands, "My name's Paul, I think we can dispense with formalities here."

George and Marjorie shook hands with the two men.

"Now, can we see the animals." interrupted Standing.

George held up his hand. "You can, but just the biologists. Keep it quiet and Marjorie goes with you. You can look but not touch, OK?"

Both men looked disappointed.

"Can we take pictures?" asked Trands.

George nodded. "Yes, but don't use flash. I don't want the animals disturbed. They know and trust us, I don't want them bothered by strangers."

"Agreed," said both men together.

Both men slowly followed Marjorie through the kitchen door. Marjorie squatted down in front of the dog nest and carefully unwrapped Ruffy's tail from the eggs so they could be clearly seen. Ruff, who had been half laying on Ruffy's back rose to his feet, his frill pulsing red and white.

Marjorie soothed him. "It's all right darling, we're just looking," she said quietly.

Ruff resumed his previous position, his eyes focused intently on the two men.

"Will it be all right?" asked Trands nervously, nodding at the obviously alert Ruff.

Marjorie nodded. "Just don't make any sudden moves. They seem to trust me, but they're obviously a bit suspicious of you two."

Trands and Foster nodded and knelt down behind Marjorie. Trands

pulled his small case next to him and opened the lid. He turned to Foster, "Shall we use my kit?" he asked.

Foster nodded. "Might as well, I think we both have the same stuff, we can pool the information on the computer later."

Trands took a white piece of plastic in the shape of the letter L, inscribed with markings in millimeters. He passed it to Marjorie.

"Would you lay that next to one of the eggs?" he asked.

When the plastic was positioned to his satisfaction, Trands took a number photographs.

"Let's start gradually," said Foster, "Do you think they'd let you take a mouth swab?"

Marjorie nodded and held out her hand. "Let's see," she said.

Trends took a plastic tube from his case and flipped open the top. He took out an oversized cotton bud.

"Could you rub that round the inside of the mouth?" he asked.

Marjorie nodded and taking the cotton bud, she gently wiped it round the inside of Ruffy's mouth. Trends took the bud from her and slid it back into the tube. He opened another tube and passed another bud to Marjorie.

"Could you do the same to the other animal?"

When the bud was safely back in the plastic tube, Trands sat back on his heels.

"I don't want to disturb the animals, but could you touch one of the eggs and describe it to me," he said.

"I don't think that would be a problem," replied Marjorie, "Ruffy let me touch them before."

She gently ran her finger over one of the eggs and looked up.

"It feels like a leather purse stuffed with notes," she said. "There's a certain amount of give, but not much."

"When the eggs hatch, could you preserve the eggshells," asked Foster. "Put them in a bag in the 'fridge, we can learn a lot from what's left when the young hatch out." He stared at the animals, "I'd dearly like to take a blood sample,"

Marjorie shook her head. "No chance," she said, "At least not with either of you doing it," she paused. "They might let me take some blood, they're calmer than I thought they would be."

"You could do that?" asked Trands.

Marjorie nodded. "I was a nurse for over thirty years, if they let me, taking blood should be no problem."

Trands dived into his case and handed Marjorie two syringes. Marjorie uncapped one of the syringes and slowly moved towards Ruffy. She saw at once she would never find a vein on the body or legs, the long bristles covered every inch, but veins or arteries were faintly visible on the ruff. She gently felt round the ruff until she found the largest vein.

"I'm not going to hurt you darling," she soothed as she slid the needle into the vein. She slowly withdrew the plunger and when the barrel of the syringe was full of blood, she removed the needle from the vein, capped it and passed the syringe to Trands. After taking blood from Ruff she sat back as Trands carefully put both syringes in a metal case.

"That was nicely done," said Trands, "You haven't lost your touch. Why did you leave nursing, if that's not too personal a question."

"I burst a disk lifting a heavy patient who had half fallen out of bed," replied Marjorie. "I didn't want to leave, but I could hardly walk with the pain, so I had to." She stood up. "Right is that it?"

Both men nodded and followed Marjorie out of the kitchen.

"This is incredible," Trands said to Foster, "A whole new species" The men went into a huddle, talking quietly to each other.

George and Marjorie couldn't hardly understand a thing they were saying. Words like aeropyles, chorion and blastocoele were tossed back and forth.

While the men were deep in conversation, Marjorie, pulled George to one side. "What was all that about?" she hissed .

"What was all about what?" asked George.

"That business of Foster never going to Gloucester in the rain or

dry," replied Marjorie in exasperation. "What's going to Gloucester have to do with Ruffy having eggs."

George grinned. "Nothing, don't you remember the old rhyme.?"

Marjorie shook her head.

George put his mouth next to her ear. "Doctor Foster went to Gloucester in the pouring rain. He fell into a puddle up to his middle and never went there again," he whispered.

Marjorie raised her eyes to heaven.

Trands and Foster finally broke up their huddle and looked up.

"Forgive us," said Trands, "This is so exciting for us. We've never seen anything like these animals before."

"Well, they did come from another planet," said Marjorie with the air of a long distance traveler.

The men stood there open mouthed.

"Did you say another planet?" asked Trands.

"Another planet," gasped Foster. "Where, how?"

"Oh yes, you haven't heard our story yet, have you," said George. "Once the eggs have hatched and the babies are safe, we'll come to wherever you want and tell you all about it." He held up his hand as Standing was about to speak. "I said not until the eggs hatch, that's final, OK?"

George ushered the three men out of the door and shut it with a sigh of relief.

"Right, that's got rid of them for the moment," he said with satisfaction. "We've got the chance of a bit of peace until the eggs hatch. Then I suppose we'll be pushed from pillar to post."

George has spoken too soon. The phone rang and after he'd had a short conversation, he put the phone down.

"They want to send a couple of doctors over to take blood samples and whatnot," he said. "I agreed, as long as they weren't too intrusive. OK with you my love?"

Marjorie nodded. "I suppose so. Actually it could be for our own good, we don't know what we could have picked up during our

travels."

"That's what I thought," replied George.

"When are they coming?" asked Marjorie.

"Soon," replied George resignedly.

The knock at the door came half an hour later. A man and a woman stood on the doorstep. Both carried large suitcases.

"Hello," said the woman brightly, "I'm Doctor Ferris and this is Doctor Bryant."

George backed into the hall and beckoned them in.

"Where do you want us?" he asked.

"Um, the bedroom would probably be most suitable," said Ferris. "If you would go there, we'll get suited up."

"Suited up?" queried Marjorie.

"Oh yes," replied Ferris, "We must ensure we get clean samples, we don't want anything from us contaminating our results."

"You're taking this very seriously," said George.

"Well," said Bryant, "it's not every day we examine somebody that's been to another planet."

George's stepped back a pace. "How do you know that," he exclaimed, "We've heard there's been a leak, but we haven't told our full story yet."

Bryant held up two fingers. "The first leak came from someone in the police force. Not much detail, only that two people had vanished and mysteriously reappeared two weeks later." He smiled. "The real juicy stuff came from the university. It seems a certain Dr. Freeman had written up his notes on his computer and one of the technical staff had downloaded it onto a memory stick. Then he sold the story to the press. Hopefully, he'll be able to spend the money the papers paid him when he comes out of jail."

"Oh poor Mark," said Marjorie, "Will he get into trouble?"

Bryant shrugged. "I don't think he'll be sacked, but he certainly received a rocket for not encrypting his notes."

"There couldn't have been much," said George. "We only gave him the bare bones, we didn't have time for much else."

"It was enough to send the press and TV into a frenzy," replied Ferris.

"Bloody hell," whispered George.

"I see you've got your curtains drawn," said Bryant. "Have you looked out recently?"

George nodded. "Yeah, we saw all the TV vans with the aerials on their roofs."

Bryant smiled. "Not any more. The police have moved them right to the end of the road."

George shook his head. "Do you know, I never noticed that when I let you in," he shook his head again. "I must be losing it."

You've got armed police patrolling at the front and a Police Landrover is parked in the field at the end of your garden."

Marjorie's eyes widened. "What, why," she gasped.

"You might not realise it, but you're the two most famous people in England at the moment," said Bryant. "There's a lot of people who would like to get at you."

"Are we in danger then?" asked Marjorie fearfully.

Bryant shook his head. "Only from the press. But once the news goes world wide, and it will shortly, there could be people who might think you've brought back new technology that could make them a lot of money." He spread his hands. "Hence the armed guard. By the way, your phone has been cut off. You can dial out, but only certain people can get through to you. Otherwise it would never stop ringing now the media have your phone number."

"What about our mobile phones?" asked Marjorie.

"Same thing," said Ferris, "You might not realise it, but the Government are pulling out all the stops to give you some privacy.

Everyone on the case knows about your row with Professor Standing, they want to keep you sweet so you tell them your story.” She waved her hands, as if dismissing the whole affair. “Anyway, enough about that, let’s get on with the examination. If you would go to the bedroom, we’ll follow you in shortly.”

When Ferris and Bryant walked into the bedroom, George and Marjorie could hardly recognise them. Dressed from head to toe in white hooded suits, their faces were covered with masks and glasses. Light blue rubber gloves encased their hands.

Ferris and Bryant put their cases on the bed.

“There’s no need for you to strip, just take off your tops and your shoes and socks,” said Ferris.

Bryant moved in front of George and Ferris in front of Marjorie. George didn’t really like being examined by another man, he’d had enough of that during his army days, but he kept quiet for the sake of his manly dignity.

Blood was taken from both of them and sealed and labelled in small bottles. Swabs were taken from inside their mouths and noses and between their fingers and toes. Their nails were cleaned and a small skin sample was scraped from their forearms.

“We have showered since we got back,” said George.

“No matter,” replied Ferris, packing the swabs in her case. “Showering wouldn’t remove everything, we’ll still get good samples.”

The doctors listened to their hearts and lungs with their stethoscopes and nodded in that mysterious way that doctors do.

“All right?” asked George as Bryant took his stethoscope from his ears.

“Eh, oh, yes, nothing wrong there.” Bryant looked at Ferris who nodded in agreement.

Bryant and Ferris rummaged through their cases and held up small bottles and a plastic bag.

“We’d like a urine sample,” said Ferris, handing out the bottles. “We like you to take it in mid-stream, so to speak.”

George and Marjorie nodded.

"We'd also like a sample of a bowel movement," said Bryant. "Nothing special, just fold the paper in half and put it in the bag and seal it."

George and Marjorie looked at each other.

"Wanna go first?" asked George, nodding at the toilet door.

After those pleasantries were over, George and Marjorie washed and dressed and joined the doctors in the lounge.

"Cup of tea?" asked Marjorie.

Both doctors nodded and Marjorie headed for the kitchen.

"One question," asked Ferris. "What clothes were you wearing during your adventures? If you don't mind, we'd like to take them with us."

"Well, I started out with my old gardening clothes and Marge had on her jeans and jumper. That was before the accident. The beetles fixed us up and gave us new clothes."

Accident?" said both doctors together.

George nodded. "Yeah, I cut my finger off and cut my head open. Marge had a piece of glass in her leg. The beetles fixed us up."

Both doctors nearly jumped off the settee in their haste to look at George's hands.

Bryant took both George's hands in his. "Which hand, which finger," he asked breathlessly.

George held up his left hand and wiggled his finger. "That's the one that was cut off." He tapped the side of his head. "The cut was about there."

Both doctors carefully examined George's finger and head.

"How long ago did this happen?" asked Ferris.

George thought for a moment. "About nine or ten days ago," he said. "All the days have sort of merged into one, I can't be more certain 'till I've gone over it with Marge."

Marjorie walked in with a tray of teas. As she put the tray down, Bryant said.

"Mrs. Meaking, can we look at your leg, where the glass went in?"

"Oh that," said Marjorie, "It's all healed up now." She lifted the leg of her jeans. "There's barely anything to see, just a little line where the cut was."

Bryant and Ferris stared at the faint mark on Marjorie's leg, then at each other.

"And this happened at the same time as Mr. Meakings accident?" asked Bryant.

Marjorie nodded. "I think they used something like super glue to hold the cut together and spray plaster to seal it up. Nothing very advanced, we've got the same things in our cupboards right now."

"You don't put a finger back on with super glue," said Ferris, rather awestruck. "We better take some samples round the site of your injuries."

She opened her case and carefully took skin scrapings of George's head and finger and Marjorie's leg. Putting the samples back in her case, she looked up.

"We really need to get a MRI scan of those wounds to see what procedure has been carried out."

Marjorie shrugged, "We've no objections to that, have we love?"

George nodded in agreement. He'd long realised that was the secret to a happy marriage.

After a hurried phone call by Bryant, half an hour later, a car drew up outside their front gate. Even with a police escort, they had to run the gauntlet of the press and TV, even though they could not be seen through the blacked out windows of the car. Marjorie was at first worried about leaving Ruff and Ruffy on their own, but after she put a "sprout" in front of each of them, they ate it and promptly fell asleep. Escorted by Bryant and Ferris, they were shepherded into the scanning department of the local hospital. At the technicians request, they both removed their watches, George handed over his knife from his pocket and Marjorie took off her necklace. As neither of the wounds were on the main parts of their bodies, but on their extremities, they didn't have to strip and put on hospital gowns, so the scanning was over in a short time. They were led to a side room and within a short time their pictures appeared on a computer monitor. Both doctors craned their necks forwards to examine the pictures.

"Can you expand that," said Ferris, pointing to the picture of George's finger.

George and Marjorie stood back as the two doctors muttered to each other. Finally Bryant stood up. He took out a note book and after quickly scribbling in it, he tore out a page and passed it to the technician.

"That's my email number at the university, will you send copies of those to me please."

That gave George an idea. Seeing the page from the notepad on the desk in front of the monitors, he bent down and wrote his own

email address.

"I'd like a copy too," he said.

The technician looked startled, he wasn't used to patients asking for copies of their results. He looked at the doctors for support.

Bryant nodded. "That will be OK, send it at the same time you send the results to me."

As they were walking back to the car, Marjorie said, "What do you want the results for?"

"Just interested," replied George, "I've never seen the inside of my head before."

"Hmmp," snorted Marjorie, "They'll probably find nothing in it."

They got into the car and drove back towards their bungalow with the two doctors.

Bryant swivelled in the front seat and looked over his shoulder. "We'll see you safely in, then we'll pick up our car and be on our way" he said.

"Before you go, we need some supplies," said Marjorie. "Our fridge is nearly empty, we need to go shopping."

Bryant and Ferris looked at each other.

"I don't think it would be a good idea for you to wander round your local supermarket," said Ferris. "If you give us a list, we'll pass it on and have your stuff delivered."

Marjorie didn't like the idea of someone else choosing her shopping. They'd be bound to choose stringy runner beans and the tomatoes would probably be soft.

"Why can't we do our own shopping?" she asked.

Ferris smiled. "I don't think you realise just how famous you two are. If you went to a supermarket, you'd be mobbed in minutes."

Marjorie opened her mouth in astonishment, the realisation of how much their lives had changed finally hitting home.

"I'd better give you a list when we get home then," she said resignedly.

They'd been back a couple of hours when the front doorbell rang.

George cautiously opened the door, wondering who would be on his doorstep now.

"Hello," said Judith Wilkes. She held up two bags, "I've brought your shopping."

George took the bags from her.

"Hold on," she said, "I've more in the car."

George followed her down the front path and collected two more bags from the boot. At the front door, he turned to her.

"Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?" he asked.

Judith nodded, "That would be nice," she said brightly.

After the shopping was packed away they were settled in the lounge with their tea. Marjorie said, "How come you did the shopping for us?"

Wilkes made a face. "They didn't want to bring anyone else into the investigation team. I was chosen because I'm the lowest in the pecking order." She paused. "Well, Anton as well, we tossed for it and I lost."

"What has happened to Doctor Freeman, I heard someone stole his notes and sold them to the press," asked George.

Wilkes took a sip of her tea and put the cup down. "There was an awful row about that. The lad that copied the notes has been arrested under the official secrets act and poor Mark is facing a university disciplinary hearing."

"You can tell them from us, if they decide to sack him, they'll get no cooperation from us," said Marjorie. We like Mark, he treated us like human beings, not like objects on a slide like that man Standing."

Wilkes smiled. "That's good to hear, I'll certainly pass on your message. By the way, Professor Standing nearly lost his job as leader of the team. There was a right old ding dong about the way he spoke to you. Other members of the team only allowed him to stay providing he changed his attitude." She drained her cup and rose from her chair. "Right, I'd better be off." She paused, "What's that funny noise."

George held up his hand as they all listened intently. A soft chirping was coming from the kitchen.

"I bet I know what that is," said George, rising from his chair.

He went into the kitchen followed by Marjorie and an intensely curious Wilkes.

In the dog nest, three rat sized animals were nuzzling at Ruffy's stomach.

“Oh wow,” exclaimed Wilkes, I’d heard you had eggs, but I never expected to see them hatch.”

“You can be one of the Godmothers,” said George with a grin.

They all bent down in front of the dog nest. The pups were miniature versions of Ruffy except for the soft downy fur in place of the hard bristles.

“They look different,” said George, “Look, they’ve got a spike in their heads.”

Wilkes peered closer. “It’s like an egg tooth,” she said. “Most young birds and reptiles have one to help break out of the egg.”

“Well, that’s increased my knowledge,” said George with a grin. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.” He looked at Marjorie, “You?”

Marjorie shook her head.

“There’s more if you want to hear it,” said Wilkes, anxious to share knowledge.

George nodded. “Go ahead, anything that helps us to understand what’s going on is all right by us.”

“Well,” Wilkes took a deep breath. “Chicks have what is called a pipping muscle to give them strength to break out. The muscle helps the chick force the egg tooth through the egg’s inner membrane to the air sac so it can breath before hatching. This is called internal pipping. Once the chick breaks the inner membrane, it starts on the egg shell until it makes a hole so it can breath outside air. This is called external pipping. Now, I’m not saying this is what happened with these babies, because their eggshells are leathery, more like a

snake, and they don't necessarily have an air sac but most animals that come from eggs do have an egg tooth to help them break out. The egg tooth either drops off or is reabsorbed after a few days." She looked up. "Have I gone on too much, I've been told I have that tendency."

Marjorie shook her head, smiling. "Not at all Judith, you gave us the facts without the condescending tone some people use when talking to what they think are their educational inferiors. If you carry on like that, you'll make an excellent lecturer."

Wilkes blushed and stammered her thanks.

"One thing," said George holding up his hand. "I thought you and Anton were studying physics like Mark Freeman, you seem well up on biology."

Wilkes smiled. "I keep chickens at home as pets," she said. "As matter of interest, when were the eggs laid?"

"Must have been sometime before dawn," said George, "We went to bed very late and we found them when we came into the kitchen this morning."

"And they were only laid this morning, wow, that was really fast," replied Wilkes. She thought for a moment. "I think what you have here is a combination of a live birth and an egg. Those pups grew inside the eggs and when they were laid, the pups were ready almost straight away to hatch out. It could be some sort of survival process, the pups might be too vulnerable with a live birth."

"Hold on," said Marjorie, "I'll write that down. It'll be something to show the biologists when they come here to see the pups."

Wilkes looked alarmed. "Oh, it's only a theory, I might be completely wrong, I wouldn't want to go up against a proper biologist."

Marjorie smiled. "Don't worry, we'll keep your name out of it. It's just so we have something to throw back at these professionals when they come to see us with all their technical talk."

When Wilkes had gone, George said, "I suppose I'd better phone

Standing and tell him the eggs have hatched."

Marjorie nodded. "In the meantime, I'll collect the egg shells, you remember Doctor Foster asked for them." She made a face. "Every time I say his name, I think of that stupid rhyme." She punched George in the ribs. "Grrrr," she growled, "In future keep your silly rhymes to yourself."

George pretended to be doubled up in pain. "I was only trying to add to your education," he said. He straightened up, "Do you think we ought to wait a couple of days before calling Standing. Those pups seem awfully small and Ruffy might not take kindly to us moving them."

"Let's see," said Marjorie.

They walked into the kitchen and knelt down in front of the dog nest.

"They've made a right old mess when the eggs hatched," said Marjorie. "Hand me some kitchen roll will you."

George tore several sheets from the roll and handed them to Marjorie. She gently lifted the three pups aside and mopped up the fluid that had soaked into the fur of the nest. Both Ruff and Ruffy came alert, but made no move to stop her. Marjorie picked up a pup which wriggled in her hand and placed it against Ruffy's stomach. As he did the same with the other two pups, Ruffy sank back into the nest.

Marjorie turned to George. "Well, she let me handle them, which is more that I thought she'd do."

She collected the eggs now split open down their lengths and looking like small deflated balloons, and placed them in a plastic food bag along with the sheets of kitchen roll she'd used to mop up. She put the bag in the fridge and washed her hands.

"Let's leave it for today, we can call Standing tomorrow," she said. She was interrupted by the front door bell ringing.

"Now what," grumbled George.

He opened the door to find Anton Bracks standing on the doorstep holding two large bags.

"I've brought your dog food," he said, "They were too heavy for Judith to carry."

George beckoned Bracks to come inside and led him to the kitchen. As Bracks entered, the room his eyes were immediately drawn to the dog nest.

"Oh my oh my," he said delightedly, "I'd heard you had eggs, but now they've hatched already. This is wonderful."

"Would you like to see them?" asked Marjorie. She bent down and invited Bracks to join her. Bracks dumped the heavy bags and knelt down in front of the dog nest. He looked at Marjorie. "Thank you for this," he said, smiling, "This is a real privilege."

Marjorie stood up and opened one of the bags. "I'll feed the animals, see if they take to dog food."

"If you're going to give them dog food, what were they eating before?" asked Bracks.

"We had some large vegetables," said George. "Later on, they caught and killed some sort of animal, that's why we think they'll eat the dog food."

Bracks nodded. "Vegetables and meat, that means they're omnivorous, good survival technique, it means they can eat whatever is available." He stood up. "Thanks for showing me the babies, but I'd better be going."

"Before you go, have you got Doctor Freeman's number?" asked George.

Bracks nodded and took his phone from his pocket. After swiping the screen a few times, he held it up to George who copied the number onto the calendar hanging on the wall.

"Standing was talking about taking us to his science facility. Where is that exactly?" asked George.

"It's at the local university," replied Bracks. "They've taken over part of the engineering department to do the initial examination and get your story. Other departments will be requisitioned if specialist equipment is needed. They chose the engineering department

because it's separate from the main building and has a large door to move heavy equipment in and out." He smiled. "It put a lot of noses out of joint, I can tell you. Standing didn't help, he didn't try to explain, he just quoted some Government regulation and cleared everyone out."

"Oh right," said George, "Being his usual charming self."

Bracks nodded in agreement. "Well, I really must be off now," he said.

Marjorie opened the fridge. "Before you go, can you take the eggshells back to the university, Doctor Foster asked for them."

Bracks nodded. That would be no trouble," he said taking the plastic bag from Marjorie. "Right, I really must go now, good night."

When George returned to the kitchen after seeing Bracks off, he saw Marjorie had filled two bowls with dog food. She put the bowls down in front of the dog nest and smiled as the two animals buried their noses in the food.

"Well, they've taken to dog food all right," she said.

George looked at his watch. "Even if we wanted to, it's too late to phone Standing now. What say we hit the hay?"

"Good idea," said Marjorie, stretching. "It's been a long day." She paused. "By the way, why did you want Freeman's number?"

"Something I've been thinking about," replied George. "I haven't worked the details out yet, I don't even know if it can be done. "I'll tell you about it tomorrow when I've thought it through."

"Oooo, a man of mystery," cooed Marjorie. "I can hardly wait 'till tomorrow."

George slapped her on her bottom. "Git up them stairs," he growled.

"George, we live in a bungalow," said Marjorie, straight faced.

"I know that," replied George. "Enough, let's go to bed."

And so they did.

The next morning over breakfast, Marjorie stared at George over the tea cups and plates of scrambled eggs.

"Well are you going to explain your cryptic comments of last night," she said.

George put down his fork and swallowed a mouthful of egg. "Standing's taken everything from us, but they've forgotten about the suits the beetles gave us. Now, those suits have some sort of heating system built in. When I took mine off when we got back, I examined it and I couldn't find anything that looked like a battery. I think we might be able to make some money from them if we can find someone to find out how they work."

Marjorie nodded slowly. "And you think Mark Freeman would be the right person to ask," she said.

George nodded. "He's the only scientist we know. He treated us all right the other day, I reckon it would be worth asking for his opinion at least."

Marjorie rested her elbows on the table, her face frowning as she thought about what George had just said.

"I wonder where we stand legally," she mused. "I mean, none of this stuff belongs to the Government, we brought it back without any help from them. I know they've taken most of it for study, but I wonder what the reaction would they be if we asked for it all back."

"Knowing Standing, he'd quote some Government regulation or something," said George. "What do you reckon about Freeman then?"

Marjorie nodded. "Yeah, give him a ring."

George put the phone down and walked back into the kitchen. He picked up his mug and drained the rest of his tea. "He'll be over in about an hour," he said. "I didn't tell him what it was about, just we wanted his advice on something."

Mark Freeman arrived within the promised hour. George let him in and ushered him into the lounge. "Have any trouble getting here?" he asked.

Freeman shook his head, holding up a small card. "They haven't taken away my pass, until Standing remembers, I'll have free access to your house. Now, what is this all about, you didn't give much away over the phone."

"It's about the suits the beetles gave us after they fixed us up," began George. "We think there's some sort of heating system built in, but we couldn't find any batteries and we wondered if you would take a look at them. If you could find out how they work, we would like to offer you some sort of partnership. Maybe we could find someone to make copies and make some money out of it, maybe sell them to camping and outdoor enthusiasts."

"Judith and Anton could also be included," added Marjorie. "They seem good kids and we'd like to help them if we can."

"Sounds intriguing," replied Freeman, "Can I see the suits. I must confess, I didn't take much notice of what you were wearing the first time we met, there was rather a lot going on."

George grinned. "That's a bit of an understatement if I ever heard one. We'll get the suits, we've put them in the wardrobe in a couple of plastic bags."

He left the room and returned a moment later with two plastic bags. He opened one, took out the suit and passed it to Freeman who unfolded it and laid it on the floor. He raised his eyes to George.

"Four arms, I never noticed that."

Marjorie smiled. "Like we said, beetles."

Freeman flexed the fabric with his fingers. "It's like a plasticized

woven material. If you look closely, you can see what looks like a weave running through it."

"It's like the old cover I used to put over my motorbike," said George.

"I thought exactly the same thing," said Marjorie.

"Great minds think alike," grinned George. He nodded at the suit. "What do you reckon, do you think you can work out where the heat comes from?"

Freeman nodded. "I'll have a good try. I'll cut a sample from the sock on one suit and try and blag some time on the electron microscope." As he was talking, he was sliding his hands over the suit. "Hello," he said, "This bit is distinctly warmer than the rest." He vigorously folded and unfolded a sleeve and then laid one hand on the sleeve and the other on a leg. He nodded. "Definitely warmer," he said tapping the sleeve. "It seems moving the fabric produces heat. I'd like to take a whole suit with me so I can go over it with a glass. I'd like to see if the weave varies over the surface."

George leaned forwards. "You've got an idea how this might work, haven't you."

Freeman nodded. "Just the beginnings of an idea. It could be the wearer's movements instigate the heating process. I might be wrong, but it's a good starting point. I'll get Anton to wear the suit with some stick-on thermometers. Then we'll see if we get a temperature rise over the course of a day"

"We weren't moving about much when our suits got warm," said Marjorie, "We were on a cold planet, that's when we realised the suits were heating up."

Freeman nodded. "The lab is quite warm, so I'll get him to take a slow walk round the grounds. That should tell us if the suit temperature climbs above ambient." He paused. "Are you happy if I take one suit and part of the sock off the other?"

George and Marjorie nodded.

"How long before you get some results?" asked George.

“Well, the temperature test can be carried out in one day,” said Freeman. “If we see a temperature rise, the next step is to find out how it works. That could take a lot longer.”

Marjorie opened a drawer and pulled out a pair of scissors. Under Freeman’s direction, she cut a small square of material from the sock on one of the suits. Freeman put the sample in the bag with the other suit and stood up.

“I’ll give you a call when I have some results,” he said

George nodded. “By the way you’re not working near Standing are you?”

Freeman smiled and shook his head. “No, I’m at a completely different university, Standing won’t know a thing about this.”

George nodded. “Good, I’ll see you out then.”

When he had gone, Marjorie packed the suit Freeman had left behind and looked at George.

“Well, he seems enthusiastic, let’s hope he comes up with something.”

“And doesn’t run off with the results,” said George.

Marjorie looked shocked. “You don’t really think he would, do you?”

George shrugged. “Probably not, but just in case I had this on voice record during our little talk.” He pulled his mobile phone out of his shirt pocket.

Marjorie smiled. “You devious sod, don’t you trust anybody?”

George shook his head. “As I said, he’s probably honest and will do what he said. But we’ve got him on record, just in case.”

The next morning, they were awoken by the insistent ringing on their phone. George grumbled as he got out of bed and padded to the hall telephone table. A few minutes later, he returned to the bedroom and sat on the bed.

“Who was it?” asked Marjorie.

“John Carstairs, Standing’s assistant. He’d like to come and see us,” replied George.

“Did he say why?” asked Marjorie.

George shook his head and started taking off his pyjamas. “Nope, he just wanted to talk to us. He said he’d be here at about ten o’clock.”

Marjorie threw back the duvet. “Better get up then and have some breakfast. We don’t want to meet him on an empty stomach.”

Carstairs rang the door bell at precisely ten o’clock. George let him in and led him into the lounge. Very punctual these scientists, thought George. When they were all seated, George crossed his legs and sat back in his chair.

“Right, what can we do for you?” he said.

Carstairs sat forwards in his seat. “Professor Standing would really like you to come to the university and give your account. He feels enough time has passed since you came back to settle in.”

“If it’s that important to him, why didn’t he come himself?” asked Marjorie.

Carstairs gave an embarrassed smile. “He knows he got off on the wrong foot with you. He thought you would be more willing to talk to

me."

George gave a short laugh. "So he sent you to smooth things over, how do you feel about that?"

Carstairs shrugged. "I don't mind. Whatever your feelings about Professor Standing, it is important we hear your story and have a proper look at your animals. There's a whole team of scientist absolutely itching to talk to you."

"Are you part of that team?" asked George.

Carstairs paused before answering. "I haven't the qualifications to properly participate," he said.

"You're not a doctor then?" asked Marjorie.

Carstairs shook his head. "I've got my Masters and I'm working towards my doctorate, but I haven't got there yet. Professor Standing is my tutor, that's why he asked me to be his assistant." He spread his hands. "Basically, that just consists of running errands and making sure things run reasonably smoothly." He smiled. "It would make things run very smoothly if you would come to the university."

"We never said we wouldn't come," said Marjorie, "We just wanted some time to readjust and wait for the eggs to hatch. At the moment, we can handle the pups, but moving them and Ruff and Ruffy might be a different matter. We could try though."

"We'd need some dog leads," said George. "At the moment, I've fixed some plastic printed circuits round their necks, but I'd like to replace them with some soft rope type leads."

Carstairs head came up. "Printed circuits?"

George nodded. "I took them from the back of the van. If you get me some proper leads, you can have the printed circuits."

"We can have some leads waiting for you at the Uni," said Carstairs. Now, can I tell them when you're coming, There's been a bunch of scientist waiting at the Uni every day for you."

George and Marjorie looked at each other.

"What about today," said George. Marjorie nodded in agreement.

Carstairs looked as if a ten ton weight had been lifted from his

shoulders. "Really, today?" he said smiling broadly.

"Yeah, why not," replied George. "We'll take the pups in the dog nest, I'm certain Ruff and Ruffy will follow us with no trouble. I'm sure we can all fit in the back of your car." He held up his hand. "There's one thing, at the moment, there's no way I can go back to work. We have some savings, but what are we going to live on during all these investigations?"

"We've already thought of that," said Carstairs. "Because of the unique circumstances, the university together with various government departments are going to pay you for your co-operation. The money will be available as soon as you attend the university."

George and Marjorie looked at each other.

"Well," said Marjorie, "That settles that problem, OK, we will come today."

Carstairs pulled out his phone. "I'll call ahead, let them know you're coming." He smiled again. "Thanks for this, I appreciate it."

"Don't mention it," said Marjorie, giving George a broad wink.

George gathered the two leads while Marjorie carefully lifted the dog nest, all the time making soothing noises to Ruff and Ruffy. It went more smoothly than they could have hoped, with the two animals following Marjorie compliantly out to the car. Marjorie sat in the middle of the back seat with the dog nest on her lap and the two animals jumped onto the seat on either side of her. George shut the back doors and sat in the front passenger seat. He looked across at Carstairs who was buckling his safety belt.

"How far to the university?" he asked.

"Only about half an hour," replied Carstairs, "Bye the way, please call me John."

George smiled to himself. "OK, John it is," he said.

When they arrived at the university, Carstairs drove round a winding road to a building with a large roller shutter at the front. As the car approached the building, the shutter clattered up and Carstairs drove into a large open area with offices along one side.

He parked in the centre of the area and George got out and opened the back door. He picked up the leads and shepherded the two animals out of the car. Behind him, the shutter rolled down, hitting the floor with a clang. Marjorie slid along the seat and got out of the car, carefully holding the dog nest to her body. In front of them were about twenty people, their faces alight with anticipation.

The people in front of him were all highly qualified, but George was determined stamp his authority over them. His army days had taught him the importance of making sure he was at the top of the pecking order. A sergeant who could not command the respect of his men was doomed to fail.

He held up his hand. "These two animals seem to trust us but they don't know any of you. If you see the ruff round their necks turning red, back off, it means they are angry or excited." He looked along the row of faces. "OK?"

The people in front of him nodded as one, reminding George of a bunch of nodding dogs in a car back window.

"I'm going to bring them to each of you in turn. Just hold out your hand and let them sniff you," he said.

All the hands came out together like a team of dancers practicing their routines. George slowly walked towards them and let the animals work their way down the line, sniffing and licking the outstretched hands. Some were more nervous than others, pulling their hands back as the animals approached them. At George's encouragement, they extended their arms again so the animals could check them out. When he reached the end of the line, he relaxed. He wasn't sure how Ruff or Ruffy would react to such a crowd, he was glad the introductions had passed off without incident. More important, all the scientists had obeyed him without question. He had set a precedent, any interviews would be on his terms, not theirs.

Standing stepped forwards, gesturing to one of the side offices. "If you would come this way," he said.

The office was larger than it looked from the outside. George and

Marjorie sat down on chairs at the front, the rest of the scientist taking chairs in rows facing them. As Marjorie put the dog nest at her feet, the scientists in the front row craned their necks to see into the it. Their view was obscured as Ruff and Ruffy immediately moved next to the nest and sat with their heads resting on the sides.

A scientist adjusted a video camera on a tripod and gave the thumbs up. "Ready to go," he said.

Standing sat forwards in his chair. "What we would like is a detailed account of what happened to you. Take as long as you like, refreshments will be served if you want to take a break." He paused and waved his hands at the assembled scientists. "Then we have a number of specialists who would like to question you further if that is agreeable."

George nodded. He looked at Marjorie. "Shall I start?" he said.

Their audience listened in fascinated silence, the few members who started to stand up to ask a question being shushed into silence. It was late in the afternoon when they finally finished their story.

“Well that account was something beyond our wildest expectations,” said Standing. “Before we start the questioning, do either of you know a man called Richard Dawnes?”

George and Marjorie looked at each other. George slowly shook his head. “No, sorry, the name doesn’t ring a bell. Who is he?”

“He’s an Australian oil worker who was arrested by the Moroccan police last week. You still don’t recall meeting him?”

George and Marjorie looked at each other as realization dawned.

“The man who gave us the water bottle,” exclaimed Marjorie.

“We never found out his name,” explained George. “He was just a bloke who stopped and gave us some water. It was only when you mentioned Morocco and we remembered he said he was Australian that we realized who you were talking about.” He paused. “Why was he arrested?”

“It appears you were seen arriving and vanishing on the N9 road north of Settat. A motorist saw what he described as a ball of blue light appearing by the roadside. When it vanished, two people were standing by the side of the road. Obviously wondering what on earth was going on, this motorist stopped and started filming with his camera phone. He slowly followed you in his car to the road sign where Mr. Downes stopped briefly to talk to you. Then he filmed you disappearing in another ball of blue light. He went straight to the

police, who would have dismissed his story out of hand if it wasn't for the video evidence he showed them. They traced Mr. Dawnes from his car number plate, and arrested him because of his seeming involvement of what was, to the police, an unexplained incident. He was only released when the leaked story about the pair of you was published abroad. Then the Moroccan police realized he had nothing to do with your strange behaviour."

"Poor bugger," said George shaking his head. "Wrong place at the wrong time. A motorist videoed us you say," he looked at Marjorie, "We never noticed another car, did we love."

Marjorie shook her head. "We had other things on our minds at the time," she said.

"When you said the Moroccan police believed the motorist, I now understand what happened to us," said George. "When we appeared in Morocco on our homeward journey, the Moroccan army was waiting for us."

Standing nodded. "Correct. They cordoned off the area where you appeared and disappeared just in case there was a repeat." He looked at his watch. "The time has simply flown past, it's getting rather late." He looked at the rows of scientists. "I suggest we adjourn for today and resume tomorrow." He turned to George and Marjorie. "Will that be agreeable with you?"

George and Marjorie nodded.

"Before you go," said Standing, "You mentioned something about printed circuits to Mr. Carstairs."

Carstairs stood up with two dog leads in his hands. "Can we change them now?" he asked.

George nodded. He took the dog leads from Carstairs and put them round the animals necks in place of the printed circuit leads he had made. He handed them to Carstairs who slid them into a plastic bag.

Standing stood up, facing the audience. "We'll call the meeting to a close now and let Mr. and Mrs. Meaking go home. It's been a long

day and I suspect they could do with a rest.”

The plainly disappointed scientists filed out of the room as Carstairs led George and Marjorie to his car.

“Half an hour and you’ll be home,” he said.

Marjorie nodded. “Can’t be too soon for me, I could murder a cup of tea.”

The next day, they arrived at the university bright and early. Standing shepherded them into a side office containing half a dozen chairs arranged round a table.

“Rather than having all the specialists in here to interview you at once, we’ll bring them in one at a time, it’ll be more productive that way and less tiring for you.” He paused, “I won’t be sitting in on all the interviews, I’ll just introduce you to the first of the specialists and leave you to their tender mercies.” John Carstairs will take over from now on.”

George and Marjorie nodded. It seemed Standing was being particularly helpful to make up for his previous behaviour. Standing consulted a list fastened to a clip board.

“The first scientists to see you are the ones who have completed or nearly completed their examinations of the artefacts you brought back. Others will take longer to get results, they’ll see you later. First on the rota are Andrew Mansfield and Karen Downing. They are anthropologists who are anxious to hear about the extraterrestrials you met on your travels.”

He gestured at a table in the corner of the room with cups and two large jugs on a tray. “Please help yourselves to tea or coffee. Oh, before I go, can you tell me again how you used the silver ball to travel from one destination to another.”

George traced his finger in the air.

“I circled the dot three times clockwise and then touched the central dot. We found that circling the dot anti-clockwise reversed our

journeys."

Standing nodded. "I just wanted to be sure I had that right," he said and left the room.

George and Marjorie were filling their cups when the two anthropologists came into the room. After introductions, they sat down and put a recorder and notebooks on the table in front of them.

"What we'd like is a detailed description of the extraterrestrials you met and anything you can tell us of their civilisation," said Downing. "We heard the outline the other day when you told us of your adventures, but we'd like you to tell us anything else you can remember. Go into as much detail as you can. Any points, however insignificant you might think they are, could be important." She consulted her notes. "I think we can ignore Morocco and the first planet you visited had no inhabitants, is that correct?"

George nodded. "There may have been people living there, but we saw no one, just the abandoned houses and the water tower.

Downing nodded. "The ET's on the next planet, you christened Tweedles. Could you elaborate on that."

George looked at Marjorie and smiled. "When we first saw them, Marjorie thought they all looked like Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee's brother. They all looked the same, we couldn't tell the sexes apart, if they had different sexes that is."

"I know you described them earlier," said Mansfield, "but could you go into a little more detail"

George deferred to Marjorie with a nod. It took Marjorie some time before the two anthropologists were satisfied, going over and over the same seemingly trivial point.

"We know they had weapons," said George. "That could mean they had criminals who broke the law just like us, or it could be it was a police state with the population held down. When we arrived, quite a crowd collected, but nobody did anything, maybe they were too scared to act without getting orders first. Those flying balls had weapons that would knock out a crowd, if they had them, it means

they needed them. Societies only build weapons if there's a need for them, I know that from my army days."

Mansfield nodded. "Good point, it seems your army experience has given you a viewpoint we could have missed. Now, the next group you called the Beetles. Could you tell us about them?"

"We called them Beetles because that's just what they looked like," said Marjorie. "They're obviously a society with advanced medical techniques, we know that from the way they treated us. Apart from treating our injuries, they seemed to have no interest in us other than putting us on display. They made no attempt to contact us, in fact they seemed very wary of us. We had an armed escort whenever we left the room they put us in."

She went on to give a detailed account of their time on the Beetles planet.

"You say most of the beetles you saw were wearing what you took to be jewellery, is that right?" asked Mansfield.

Marjorie nodded. "Is that important?"

"It suggest they have an aesthetic sense and can appreciate beauty," answered Mansfield.

"Aesthetic sense or not, after about five days with no contact except from the beetles bringing us food, we decided to leave when we realised we were in the equivalent of a zoo," said Marjorie.

"That is surprising," said Downing. "I'm trying to imagine what our reaction would be if two strange beings appeared out of nowhere. I'm sure we'd want to learn all about them."

George nodded. "That's what we thought. We couldn't understand why they didn't. Apart from treating us and then feeding us, we had no contact with them at all."

Mansfield got up and walked to the table in the corner of the room. He held up a pot. "Coffee?" he asked.

George and Marjorie nodded.

From his vantage point by the table, Mansfield got his first view of the animals laying in the dog nest in the opposite corner of the room.

"Oh my oh my, just look at them," he said with his eyebrows raised.

Downing rose in her seat and turned in the direction Mansfield was looking. "We didn't realise you would bring your animals with you," she said.

"We did leave them on their own once, but we don't want to leave them on their own again, they're very attached to us and we don't want them upset," replied Marjorie.

"Would you mind if we suspend our interview for a moment and let us look at them?" asked Downing.

"I don't see why not," replied George. "Approach them slowly, one at a time and let them smell you. Once they're satisfied you're OK, they'll let you stroke them. Don't touch the pups though, only Marjorie and me have touched them so far, we're keeping other people away until the pups have grown a bit."

Downing and Mansfield nodded and slowly approached the dog nest. After ten minutes they resumed their seats at the table.

"Well, thank you for that opportunity," said Mansfield. "We saw them at the first meeting, but this was an unexpected treat. To pet two extraterrestrial animals is not something that comes along very often."

"That's putting it mildly," said Downing with a broad grin.

"Right, back to work," said Mansfield. He briefly looked at his notes. "The next planet was the one with the village. You had doubts about that one, didn't you."

George nodded. "They were the most human like people we met. The adults wore heavy furs so we couldn't see what their bodies were like, but some of the children were only wearing light clothing and they looked pretty human to me."

George explained why he and Marjorie thought the village had not been built by the inhabitants.

"You also mentioned you got the second animal from that village," said Downing.

"That's right," agreed Marjorie. "We were surprised to see them. We thought it suggested contact between at least three of the planets

we visited."

"Three?" said Mansfield. "I thought you found the first animal on the planet with the pond and the second on the planet with the village, where's the third."

"The Tweedles planet," said Marjorie. "We didn't see animals like ours there, but the people were very wary of the one we had saved at the pond. It seems they knew the animals." She paused. "We've no proof of course, it's just how it looked to us."

Mansfield nodded. "Now we come to the beings you described as the lizards."

At the end of their story, George and Marjorie sat back.

"That's it," said George. "They're all the different people we met."

Downing closed her notebook with a flourish. "This is better than we could have hoped. We have proof that at least three civilizations are present on planets with strong proof that there was some sort of society on the planet with the pond. You've given us enough information to keep us busy for years, thank you very much."

George grinned. "You're welcome," he said.

Downing and Mansfield gathered up their notes and recorder. After using the phone on the wall, they shook George and Marjorie's hands and left the room.

"Time for another cup of tea," said Marjorie.

They'd barely started drinking their tea when Carstairs came into the room.

"I've just passed two very excited anthropologists," he said, "You must have exceeded their wildest expectations."

"That's what they said," smiled Marjorie.

"We have two astronomers to see you next, Professor Thomas Burgess and Doctor Ruth Darren. I've given them a call and they'll be here very soon."

"Where are they coming from?" asked Marjorie.

Carstairs waved his hand. "All the specialists waiting to see you today have a copy of our rota, they're waiting in our canteen," He

paused. "That's not as bad as it sounds, they have a lot to talk about to each other and the coffee and tea are not too bad." He nodded goodbye and left the room.

George and Marjorie nodded and sat by the table and waited.

"I don't know what we can tell a couple of astronomers," said George, "We don't know anything about astronomy."

"We'll just have to wait and see, won't we," replied Marjorie. She looked up as two people came through the door, "Here they are."

Professor Burgess and Doctor Darren sat down and introduced themselves. The both opened folders of notes and Burgess laid out a series of photographs on the table.

"Now we know you're not trained observers," said Burgess. "But what we'd like you to do is try and identify the various suns on the planets you visited and any information you can remember about the planets. These photographs may help you, they're computer generated images of various types of suns"

Marjorie nodded. "We'll do our best," she said.

Darren consulted her notes. "The first planet you visited you called the pond planet, any particular reason?"

George shrugged. "It was just our way of identifying the different planets we'd visited."

Burgess nodded. "Can you tell us about the sun?" he asked

"It was red, like a big tomato hanging in the sky," replied George.

"Bigger or smaller than our sun?" asked Darren.

"Oh much bigger," said George.

"Could you look at it, or was it dazzling like our own sun," asked Burgess.

"I must confess, we didn't look at it much," said George. "I seem to remember it wasn't as bright as our sun, but I put that down to it being red."

He looked to Marjorie for support.

"We had to wait for a while for the sun to come up before we went into the forest," replied Marjorie. "That's when we noticed how red it

was."

"Was it just red at sunrise like our sun, or was it still red when it climbed higher in the sky," asked Burgess.

"Oh no," replied Marjorie, "It was red all the time," she tapped one of the photographs laying on the table. "That's the nearest one to it."

The two astronomers looked at each other.

"K or M?" said Darren.

"There's a problem if it was a red giant," replied Burgess. "If the planet formed when the star was in the main sequence, say about the luminosity of our sun and it was in the habitable zone, it would have been destroyed when the star expanded when it turned into a red giant. On the other hand, if it was further out from the star and warmed up when the star turned into a red giant, would there be enough time for life to develop?"

Darren nodded. She turned to George and Marjorie. "What can you tell us about the planet."

"We arrived on the planet at night," said Marjorie. "That's when we realised we were not on Earth because of the two moons."

"Two moons?" said Burgess.

Marjorie nodded.

Burgess and Darren looked at each other.

"Could you see them clearly, like our own moon?" asked Burgess, "I mean were they big or small."

Marjorie thought for a moment. "I think one was bigger than the other, both of them were smaller than our moon."

"I take it you could see both of them together," said Darren. "About how far apart were they."

"Yes, we could see them both together," replied Marjorie. "I remember when I pointed at them, they were about a hands width apart."

"How fast were they moving," asked Darren.

Marjorie looked at George. "I'm sorry, we didn't notice, did we."

George nodded. "We had other things on our minds at the time,

sorry."

Burgess nodded, smiling. "Yes, we can well believe that. Now, can you give us more details about the planet?"

"It seemed mostly desert where we were," said Marjorie. "There was a forest, but all the plants were the same. We said at the time it seemed like a giant vegetable patch."

"So you don't think the forest was natural?" asked Burgess.

Marjorie shook her head. "There was no variation that we could see. Just the same plants over and over again."

"I'll take a wild stab in the dark and suggest life did not originate on that planet, but the planet was seeded," said Burgess. He turned to Darren. "What do you think, too fanciful?"

Darren smiled. "It is rather fanciful, however, it would explain how life appeared on a planet circling a red giant star," she said with a smile.

"One last thing about the planet," said Darren. "Did you notice the length of the day?"

George shook his head. "Sorry, no, we weren't there long enough. We were inside most of the time on the beetles planet, it was only on the last planet we visited that we knew the day length. It was about twelve hours from sunrise to sunrise. We only knew that because we were there for about three of its days."

Burgess nodded. "A fast rotation then. Right, moving on. The next planet you describe as the Tweedles. We know your reason for that, can you describe the sun on that planet?"

"It was just a plain ordinary sun," said George. "We noticed nothing extraordinary about it at all, did we Marge."

Marjorie shook her head. "Just an ordinary sun. It was hot where we were, but that could have been because it was summer, we've had hotter days in Spain on our holidays. We were obviously in a city so we can't tell you much about the planet, all we saw were buildings, a park like area and inside various forms of transport."

"Main sequence, say a G type, the same luminosity as our sun

then," murmured Burgess.

George interrupted him. "Before you ask us about the other planets we visited, we might as well tell you now, the suns on all the others seemed like our sun. The same sort of brightness and about the same size to look at in the sky. The pond planet was the only one that had a different sun." He shrugged. "I don't know if that's a disappointment to you, but that's what we remember."

Burgess shook his head. "No disappointment at all, in fact it is extremely relevant. It strongly suggests that the best chances of life starting and evolving are on planets circling suns very much like our own."

"You can tell that just from what we've told you?" asked Marjorie.

Burgess nodded. Some stars are very hot, like the blue ones which have a relatively short life. They probably use up their fuel too quickly for life to get going. Others are too cool. From your evidence, with the exception of one, all the planets you visited with any sort of life on them, circled suns like ours. Of course, it doesn't rule out life evolving on planets going round different types of stars, but it's good solid evidence that G type stars are the preferred type for life to start."

"As a matter of interest, what are the letters you keep referring to about stars," asked Marjorie.

Darren wrote in her note book, tore out a page and passed it to Marjorie.

"Look up the Hertzsprung Russell diagram on the internet. Basically it's a way of sorting stars into luminosity and surface temperature. I'm not talking down to you when I say it's a bit too complicated to explain properly in the time we have."

Marjorie smiled and put the paper in her jeans pocket.

Burgess and Darren gathered up their papers.

"I think we have enough to be going on with," said Burgess. "If we need to speak to you again, you will be available?"

George and Marjorie nodded.

"Right, I'll just let Mr. Carstairs know we're finished and we'll be on

our way," said Darren.

She used the phone and walked back to them.

"We really envy you two," said Darren, "We have to look at distant objects and try and work out what they are. You have actually been there."

"Not from choice," replied George. "It was pretty scary at times, I can tell you."

She nodded. "I can well believe that. Scary or not, we're still glad you made the journey and came back to tell us about it."

"One of our hopes is that Professor Standing and his team will find out how your silver ball works," said Burgess. "If they can crack that, who knows what we'll be able to do."

Carstairs came into the room and nodded to the two astronomers as they left.

That's all for today," he said to George and Marjorie, "Same time tomorrow?"

They nodded. Marjorie picked up the dog nest and they followed him out to the car.

The next day, once they were seated in the side office, Carstairs paused at the door.

"Doctor Beekman is next," he said. "He's a metallurgist. He'll be along shortly. He's from Germany but his English is very good, I don't think you'll have any trouble understanding him."

Beekman came through the door. He was a short round man with sandy hair combed over his bald spot.

"Very pleased to meet you," he said, holding out his hand.

Once the formalities were over, they sat down and Beekman put George's bar on the table. He looked at the corner of the room where Ruff and Ruffy were sitting next to the dog nest.

"That's the first good look I've had of the animals you brought back with you," he shook his head. "Absolutely amazing, I almost wish I was a biologist," he said with a smile. He put a small recorder on the table and turned it on.

"We'll deal with the bar you gave us first. You said you pulled this bar from a partly demolished house, were there other bars you could see?" he asked.

George nodded. "There were, but that was the only one I could easily pull out. I thought they were some sort of reinforcing rods because none of the blocks had any cement or anything holding them together. I think whoever built the houses relied on the blocks interlocking with each other and the steel bars."

Beekman was nodding and adding to his notes as George was speaking.

"You are correct when you described the bar as steel," said Beekman. "You said you were an engineer, are you familiar with austenite steel?"

George smiled. "From a long time ago, when I was at technical college."

Beekman nodded. "Well your bar is an austenite stainless steel with about eighteen percent chromium and eight percent nickel. On the face of it nothing very remarkable, we have the same sort of steel here on Earth. What is remarkable is that someone on another planet uses the same ingredients as us to obtain the same result." He tapped the top of the bar where the beetles had fixed a padded top. "The cross bar at the top is also steel with slightly less chromium. There are traces of weld rot where the top bar has been welded to the main bar."

"Weld rot?" queried Marjorie.

"When you weld some sorts of stainless steel, you can get rust forming at the weld line. The heat of the welding destroys the stainless property of the steel," explained George.

Beekman nodded with approval. "Couldn't have put it better myself. One last thing about the bar, the padding on the cross bar is a cellulose foam with a cover, also made from cellulose. It wouldn't have lasted very long," he added. "And now we come to the van you brought with you. I'm only dealing with the body, the electronics and physics people will be speaking to you later." He consulted his notes. "The body is mild steel covered with a sort of epoxy paint, as were the wheels. Again, nothing very new or exciting about that if it had been made on Earth. The fact it wasn't is extremely interesting."

"Can you explain that?" asked Marjorie, "I mean, metal is metal, isn't it?"

Beekman raised his hand. "The fact the body and the steel bar are similar to metals found on Earth make three very clear points."

He raised one finger. "Point one, your story proves there are planets going round other stars in our galaxy."

He raised a second finger. "Point two, it proves that some of those planets are inhabited by advance civilisations.

He raised a third finger. "Point three proves that those planets have a similar composition of minerals and ores as Earth, which strongly suggests that all planets go through the same process of creation." He paused, staring at the two across the table. "I don't think you realise just how significant your story has been to the scientific community. I'm afraid you are going to be the focus of attention for some time to come. This may seem a little scary, but I thought it wise to bring it to your attention."

George and Marjorie sat back in their chairs, looking at each other with wide eyes.

"Phew, thanks for that," said George. "Other people we've spoken to have hinted at much the same thing, but not quite as forcefully as you."

Beekman looked slightly alarmed. "I hope I haven't upset you, that wasn't my intention."

George waved his hand, brushing aside the notion. "No, we'll learn to live with it. It won't last for ever. The press will probably have a field day, but eventually the papers will just end up at the bottom of a parrot cage."

Beekman smiled at the analogy. "You're probably right, shall we carry on?"

George and Marjorie nodded.

Beekman cleared his throat. "The tyres were a plastic compound, which we haven't fully analysed yet, maybe we'll come back to that later. One puzzle was the glass. The composition of the remaining side window and the windscreen are totally different, can you explain that?"

George nodded. "You may remember we were fired at by the Tweedles. Well, that shattered the windscreen. When we ended up on the beetles planet, they replaced the windscreen. I don't know why, we couldn't understand them and they made no attempt to

understand us."

"They put the van in a room with us, we think as a sort of exhibit," said Marjorie. "Maybe, they wanted the van as complete as possible." She shrugged. "We'll never know for sure of course."

Beekman nodded. "Ah, yes, I do remember you telling us about being fired at. Thank you, that does explain the difference."

He flicked through his notes, licking his thumb and forefinger to assist turning the pages.

"Ah, here it is," he murmured. "The haversack you brought back. That was given to you by the beings you called the Beetles, is that right?"

The two nodded.

Beekman sighed. "Well again there was nothing new or exiting about it. The fabric is a type of polyester with aluminum buckles, on the face of it, nothing new or advanced. However, again, it shows your beetles on another planet use the same ingredients as us to obtain the same result."

He gathered up his notes and switched off the recorder. "I think that's all for now, I will need to talk to you again when we've got more results of our examination of the van, is that all right?"

George and Marjorie nodded.

Beekman used a phone on the wall and made a short call.

A minute later, Carstairs entered the room and showed Beekman to the door. He looked at his watch. "I think we'll break for lunch now and continue later. If you'll follow me, we have an excellent canteen."

George finished the last mouthful of his sausage, mash and beans and drained the tea from his mug. He nodded approval.

“Not bad, that,” he said. He rested his elbows on the table and stared across at Marjorie.

“What do you reckon on what old Beekman said, about us being the focus of attention for some time,”

Marjorie put down her fork. “It’s a bit scary, but I suppose we’ll have to get used to it. I’m wondering if we should hire a lawyer to speak for us on occasion. You know, you often see them speaking for other people on TV.

“Yeah, but they’re usually representing people that have just come out of court,” said George.

Marjorie shook her head. “Not always. Anyway, it’s something to think about, it could take some of the pressure off us.”

“We don’t know any lawyers,” replied George. “The last time we had any dealings with the law was when we bought the bungalow and that was some time ago.”

“Mark Freeman might be able to help us,” said Marjorie. She looked up as Carstairs entered the canteen. “Look’s like we’re on for the second act,” she said with a smile.

Carstairs escorted them back to the office where Jane Ferris and Richard Bryant were waiting for them.

“Doctors,” murmured George and Marjorie as they shook the doctors hands.

They sat down and Ferris took a bundle of notes from her

briefcase and laid them out on the table. She looked up.

"Well, you'll be pleased to know you're both disgustingly healthy," she said.

"Why disgustingly?," asked Marjorie.

"After gadding about round the universe, we expected you would show some deterioration to your health, even bring back some alien bugs," replied Ferris. "You really should have gone into quarantine the moment you turned up, you know. I think the confusion of your return and the row you had with Professor Standing rather messed things up. We didn't find out you'd been to other planets, until Professor Standing thought to tell us. That's why Doctor Bryant and I didn't see you until the day after your return."

"So we are healthy and we didn't bring any strange bugs back with us," said George.

Ferris shook her head. Oh yes you jolly well did," she said with a grin. She briefly glanced down at her notes. "We found a number of unknown bugs in your urine and stools. Unfortunately, they were dying off so fast, we probably missed quite a few. We did manage to save one. It's nearest Earthly equivalent is E.Coli, which in many cases is harmless." "We've christened it PseudoEcoli," said Bryant. "With a bit of luck, we'll manage to keep it alive for further study."

"I presume they're dying off because our bodies are too alien for them to live inside us," said Marjorie.

Ferris nodded. "Oh, I nearly forgot, you used to be a nurse didn't you. So you would know about bacteria and their hosts." She paused. "The answer appears to be yes."

"When the men came back from the moon, they put them into quarantine in case they brought back alien bugs with them," said George. "Does this mean they needn't have bothered?"

"On the face of it, yes," replied Ferris. "Although there's a lot more work needed to confirm that. Nowadays, we're more concerned about transporting Earthly bugs to other planets."

She consulted her notes again. "Your blood was clear of anything

dangerous, Earthly or alien, but we did find some possible alien pollen grains in your nose cavities. There are so many types of pollen and we're still searching the records. So far, we haven't found anything that matches, so for the time being, we're calling them alien. The biology group are trying to get them to germinate, but we don't expect any results in the near future." She looked up. "Where we have got new bacteria is from the water you brought back. They're growing nicely as long as we keep them in the water from the container, however, tests have shown they cannot survive in our bodies, they die almost immediately. If they don't die naturally, blood phagocytes recognize them as alien and consume them."

Bryant leaned forwards. "May I have another look at your finger, Mr. Meaking,?"

George extended his arm across the table. Bryant held his hand and manipulated his finger.

"Any pain?" she asked.

George shook his head. "For a few days after they put it back on, it was a bit painful if I tried to move it. That's gone now."

Bryant let go of his hand. "The MRI scans show a short rod of a plastic type material joining the two halves of the proximal phalange of your ring finger where it was sheared off, rather like an internal splint." He held up his hand, touching his finger. "The proximal phalange is the bone in the first part of your finger where it extends from the palm."

George nodded. "Well, thanks for that, I was wondering."

"Lucky it wasn't metal," said Marjorie. "If it had been, would the magnetic field in the scanner have any effect on it?"

The two Doctors looked at each other.

Finally, Bryant slowly shook his head. "If it had been metal, I don't think it would have been affected. However, I must confess a failure on our part, we should have thought of an internal splint and x-rayed the finger first."

"If it had been metal and it was affected by the scanner, what could

have happened, could it have moved and maybe broken my finger?" asked George.

"That would be the worse case," said Ferris.

"Again, we'd like to apologise for our oversight," said Bryant. He looked up. "On a more positive note, the flesh, tendons and nerves have all regenerated, we found some traces of unusual hormones in your blood, unfortunately, they were rapidly disappearing, so we only got a partial sample for testing. Now you said it was a race of beetle like beings that treated you, is that right?"

George nodded.

"Are you aware that some insects can regenerate their legs or antennae if they lose one through an accident?"

George's eyes widened. Insects, he thought, where is this leading? "Er, no, I wasn't aware that insects could do that. Some lizards, but not insects," he said.

"Well, the praying mantis, for instance can grow a new leg, we believe the remains of the hormones in your blood are the result of your beetles applying some sort of regenerative substance to your wound." Bryant spread his hands. "I only wish we could have taken your blood as soon as you returned, then we might have been able to take a proper sample."

"We would like you to come to us for regular testing," added Ferris. "The fact your body has made new cells could be problematic. At the moment, it appears the cell renewal has ceased, but we'd like to keep you under observation in case it starts again. There's always the possibility it could develop into a tumour." Seeing the look of alarm on George's face, she hastened to reassure him. "As I said, it appears there is no further cell renewal on your finger, so the chance of a tumour is remote, we'd just like to make sure."

"How often do you want to check?" asked George.

Ferris and Bryant looked at each other.

"Say every month for the first year," said Ferris. "After that, if there's no sign of a problem, yearly."

"I'll keep an eye on him," said Marjorie. "I know what to look for."

"We'd like to take another blood sample, if that's all right with you," said Bryant, "At the rate the hormones were falling, we don't think we'll find any trace., but we'd like to make sure."

George nodded. "When do you want to do it?" he asked.

Bryant smiled. "Now would be a good time." He bent down, picked up his case from the floor and placed it on the table. He took out a syringe and under his instruction, George rolled up his sleeve and Bryant took his sample of blood.

Ferris nodded. "As for the wound on your leg, Mrs. Meaking and Mr. Meakings head, you speculated they were closed with super glue and sealed with spray plaster."

Marjorie nodded.

"Well, we think you were nearer the truth than you thought. During our examination, samples we took from you indicate a very similar substances to the ones you suggested. The piece of glass that caused your leg wound, passed between the extensor digitorum longus and the fibula. As a nurse you are familiar with these terms?"

Marjorie nodded.

"You were very lucky, it missed tendons, nerves and muscles so basically, the wound was simply cleaned, closed and sealed." She turned to George. "Your head wound was superficial, I imagine it bled a lot, but it wasn't deep. That was also closed and sealed."

She shut her notes with a flourish. "I think that's all I have for you, now, is there anything you'd like to ask us?"

George raised his hand. "You said the piece of glass in Marjorie's leg passed between a digital something. Could you give me an explanation of that?"

"I can do better than that," smiled Ferris. She opened her notebook and rapidly drew a diagram. She slid the book across the table to George and tapped the diagram with her pencil.

"The extensor digitorum longus is that long muscle there, the fibula is one of the bones in the lower leg. The glass passed between

them.”

“Ah, the bones in the leg, tib and fib we called them. I never realised the fib was called the fibula.”

“No reason why you should,” replied Ferris. “The extensor digitorum longus is one of the muscles that control the movement of the foot. If that muscle had been cut, Mrs. Meaking’s movement would have been severely limited.”

“So she was a lucky girl,” replied George.

Ferris smiled and nodded. “She certainly was. Now, is there anything else?”

They both shook their heads.

“You say we’re both healthy and we haven’t brought back any nasties with us, I think that’s all we really need to know,” replied Marjorie.

Ferris and Bryant rose to their feet. “We’ll leave you now and let in Doctor Ludlow, the next specialist on the list,” said Ferris. “You might be surprised to know he’s an archeologist.” She used the phone on the wall and walked to the door. As followed Bryant out, she turned. “He’ll be in shortly. Bye.”

George and Marjorie looked at each other. “Archeologist?” said Marjorie, “I’d have thought that would be the last person who would want to talk to us.”

She was interrupted by a knock at the door. The door opened and in stepped a young man with long hair tied back in a pony tail. To George and Marjorie, he looked like anything but an archeologist, an out of time hippy maybe, but not a Doctor of archeology.

“Afternoon,” said the hippy, “I’m Peter Ludlow, pleased to meet you.”

“Pleased to meet you,” replied George and Marjorie together, still trying to work out why an archeologist would want to talk to them. Their question was answered when Ludlow sat down and laid on the table the remains of the spear the native had thrown at Marjorie.

Ludlow tapped the spear. “I’d like you to tell me as much about this

as you can," he said.

"Well, basically, it was thrown at me by a native," said Marjorie, "Other than that I don't know anything about it."

Ludlow's brow furrowed. "What can you tell me about the natives, were they hunter gatherers or were they living in one place for instance."

"We were taken to a village, but after a short while we began to have our doubts about it and the natives," said George. "They used stone tipped spears but they had a metal cooking pots and the houses they were living in were just too well built. We speculated someone had built the village and dropped the natives in it as some sort of experiment. I'm sure I saw a lens in one of the houses, so that gave us the idea the natives were being studied."

Ludlow tapped his finger on the spear. "So you weren't convinced the village was genuine?"

"The natives might have been," replied George, "But we don't think they built the houses."

"Hmm," murmured Ludlow. "That sort of ties in with my examination of the spear." He paused. "Let me explain." He held up the spear. "We can't identify the wooden haft, but if it came from another planet, that seems reasonable. The stone tip is medium grained quartzite rather clumsily chipped to a point." He turned the spear so they could see the point. "The thing is, this spear tip shows no sign of usewear. Now usewear is damage or wear on the edge of the tool from being used. This has all the hallmarks of being for ceremonial use only. Had you thought they could be carrying out a reenactment of primitive times. We do the same thing here, it's called experimental archeology. For instance, universities have built iron age roundhouses on the original foundations and teams try to live in them as near as iron age people as research allows. You can learn a lot doing that. I remember reading a paper where archeologists were puzzled by a depression in the doorways of round houses they'd excavated. During a reenactment, they discovered chickens used to

sit in the doorway scratching at the ground, causing the depression. You could never find out such a detail just from excavating. ”

Marjorie, shrugged. “If they were doing a reenactment of primitive times, they were carrying it a bit too far.” She nodded at the spear. “Remember one of them tried to kill me with that thing.”

Ludlow smiled sheepishly. “Yes I’d forgotten about that, rather blows my theory out of the water, doesn’t it.”

Marjorie nodded. “Sure does,” she smiled.

“Ah well, all is not lost,” said Ludlow. “From the tip, we now know that minerals common on Earth are found on other planets. It does tend to confirm the theory that planets go through the same process of creation in the same way and from the same basic ingredients.”

“Funnily enough, that’s exactly what Doctor Beekman said when he was telling us about some metal we brought back. Not from the same planet as the spear,” he added.

“We’ve got probably months if not years of research on this before we get all the answers,” said Ludlow. He stood up. “Well, it’s been a pleasure to meet you.” He held up the spear. “And thank you for this.”

Carstairs came into the room shortly after Ludlow had left.

“That will be all for today, same time tomorrow?”

George and Marjorie nodded.

“Tomorrow, the biologist are on the rota, you will be bringing the animals with you?” asked Carstairs.

“We wouldn’t leave them on their own, not while the pups are so young,” replied Marjorie. She went to the corner of the room and picked up the dog nest.

“Come on Ruff and Ruffy, time to go home,” she said brightly.

Carstairs walked with them out into the main room where he’d left the car.

After they’d had their evening meal, George fired up his computer. Scrolling through his e mails, he found the MRI pictures the hospital had sent him. He swung round in his chair.

“Look at that, Marge, you can see the little bit of plastic the beetles

put in to hold my finger together.”

Marjorie leaned on his shoulder and peered at the screen.

“I don’t know how you can see anything on that screen, look at it, it’s covered in dust.”

“Ah, that’s not ordinary dust,” replied George with a grin. “It’s pixel dust, at least that’s what one of the designers at work called it when I commented on the state of his screen.”

Marjorie raised her eyes heavenwards in mock despair. “Men,” she said.

The next morning, Mark Freeman phoned. George put the phone down and walked back into the kitchen where Marjorie was finishing her breakfast.

"That was Mark," said George in response to Marjorie's enquiry. "He's got some news for us about the clothes we gave him. He'd like to come round this evening to tell us about it."

"What time do you think we'll be back from the university?" asked Marjorie.

"Well, going on the last couple of days, I should think about five or six o'clock," replied George. "I told him to come round about seven."

Marjorie nodded and finished the rest of her toast.

Later that morning, they were drinking coffee in the university side office when Professor Trands and Doctor Foster walked in. They sat down at the table and pulled a sheaf of notes from their brief cases.

"The first thing we'd like to do is put your pets through the MRI scanner," said Trands. "Would you be agreeable to that?"

Marjorie frowned. "I don't know about that, we don't know how it would affect them. I know it does no harm to us, but they are totally different."

"We've thought about that," said Foster. He glanced at the dog nest in the corner of the room where Ruff and Ruffy were sitting with the pups. "Your animals have a long whip-like tail. Supposing we just scanned the end of the tail and then waited for a day or two. If no harmful effects were noted, we could scan the whole animal."

Marjorie turned to George. "What do you think?" she asked.

"Sound's reasonable," replied George. "I can imagine you lads are champing at the bit to see what their innards are like."

"That's putting it mildly," said Trands. "If you are agreeable, we could go over to the hospital right now and do the preliminary scan."

The drive to the hospital only took about half an hour. They were led down back corridors away from waiting patients to the scanning department where a couple of technicians were waiting for them.

"Now, how do we get the animals to lay still on the scanner table," mused Trands.

"When we were on the beetles planet, they took us to their equivalent of a hospital in a vehicle," said Marjorie. "The beetles put me on a stretcher and Ruffy was quite happy to jump up on it with me. If I laid on the table, Ruff and Ruffy might lay at my feet."

Trands eyed the length of the scanner table. He nodded. "Yes, if they would do that, I'm sure we'd have room to scan their tails, let's try it."

As Marjorie was about to climb onto the table, one of technicians stopped her.

"Are you wearing anything metal or in your clothing?" he asked.

Marjorie took off her gold necklace. "I have metal zips in my jeans and buckles on my jumper. Do I need to take them off?"

The technician nodded. "Best to," he said.

Under George's amused gaze, she stripped to her underwear. She touched her bra. "No metal wires in this," she said, "I don't like them, they dig in."

She climbed onto the table and called to Ruff.

"Come on boy, up."

The two biologists and technicians watched fascinated as Ruffy left the dog nest and jumped onto the table next to Marjorie.

"They're very obedient," remarked Foster, "After all, you've only had them for a short time."

Marjorie nodded. "I know all dog owners say this, but they seem to understand everything we say to them," she looked across to

George. "Would you arrange Ruff's tail nice and straight so just the end goes into the scanner.

George nodded and laid Ruffy down with gentle hand pressure and straightened his tail.

"OK," said the technician, "Everyone leave the room please."

After Ruff was scanned, the process was repeated with Ruffy. She obediently copied her mate and climbed onto the table next to Marjorie. When the scan was completed, she dressed and walked to the control room with Ruffy.

"Everything come out all right?" she asked.

Foster gestured at a screen. "Perfect, we scanned about four inches of their tails. We'll leave it for a few days and you can tell us if there is any reaction. If not, we'll do a whole body scan."

"Right," said Trands, "Back to the university."

Back at the office, they found a man waiting for them.

"This is Patrick Hall, one of our electronics experts," said Trands. "We both found something that made collaboration beneficial to all of us."

Hall nodded and sat down. He unzipped a long bag and drew out the tube, Marjorie had taken from the plinth on the beetles planet.

George and Marjorie looked at each other and shrugged.

"I can see you're puzzled, so let me explain," said Foster. "When we were examining the blood we took from your pets, we found they had a type of algae circulating in the blood stream. When we tried using various light sources to make the algae more visible, we noticed under a green light, they were giving off an oily substance. Now the animals are back on Earth, the algae are rapidly dying off, but before we lost them all, we managed to isolate the algae and collect some of this oily substance."

"When I took the blood samples, I noticed the blood was red," said Marjorie. "Does it have haemoglobin as the oxygen carrier, the same as our blood?"

Trands nodded. "We were surprised at that, secretly we were

hoping for some exotic blood, especially as it was taken from and extraterrestrial animal." He spread his hands. "Why even on Earth, we have animals with a copper base blood."

George and Marjorie sat up.

"Have we?" asked Marjorie, "We didn't know that," she looked at George for support.

George shook his head. "News to us," he said.

"Oh yes," continued Trands, "The horseshoe crab, for instance, used hemocyanin, a copper based pigment. That's why its blood is blue. Lobsters and octopuses also have blue blood. We were expecting your animals to have something of the same when we saw they had blue tongues. Of course, that doesn't always follow, giraffes have purple black tongues, but their blood is red, like all other animals."

"Talking of blood, It's obvious your animals can open and constrict the veins in the frill so the whole or part of the frill changes colour," said Foster. "It's likely the frill is used as a signal to other animals We think one of the dinosaurs, the triceratops, you know, the one with the big bony frill on its head, used the same technique. So it's likely your animals use these features for identification, courtship and dominance displays.

"Not only that," said Marjorie. "When we're stroking them, the frill sometimes flashes red. I think they use it to show pleasure as well."

Trands smiled. "Well let's just say the frill can be used to show emotion, that covers all the conditions." He paused and looked at Hall. "I'll let Patrick carry on from here, what he found out has a certain relevance to part of your story."

Hall picked up the tube. "What we have here is basically a high powered torch. At the end is a lens with a focusing ring that can be adjusted to project either a narrow or wide beam of light."

George swung the tube round in Hall's hand to he could study the lens. "We never noticed that, did we?" he said to Marjorie.

Marjorie shook her head. "We only used it a couple of times when

we were being chased, after that we virtually forgot about it."

Hall nodded with understanding. "When the algae was being studied and they noticed it giving off a substance, the fact it only happened under a green light made them think of this tube. They asked me to check the wavelength of the light being projected. Now visible light goes from about four hundred nanometers to about seven hundred and fifty nanometers. Green light covers a range from about five hundred and twenty to five hundred and seventy nanometers. The light from this tube is set at exactly five hundred and fifty two nanometers. When light at this wavelength was shone onto the algae, the production of the oily substance dramatically increased. Even when the light was turned off, the levels stayed high for about two hours before slowly reverting back to zero."

"I can see where you're going with this," said George. "You think Ruff and Ruffy are sensitive to the oily substance. We know Ruff was knocked out when struck by the green light, we saw it happen on the Tweedles planet."

Trands and Foster both nodded their heads. "We think that oily substance is a powerful narcotic that affects anything with this type of algae in their blood stream," said Foster.

"Of course the only way to prove the theory is to try it on one of your animals," said Hall.

George stood up, leaned over the table and stared at Hall.

"Forget it," he said abruptly. "There'll be no experimenting on our animals."

Hall shrank slightly back in his seat. George in full battle cry could be quite intimidating. Hall held up his hands.

"No, no, I wasn't suggesting it, just a theory that's all."

"We couldn't allow any experimentation on the animals," interrupted Trands. "These are the only two examples of extraterrestrial animals and as such, virtually priceless,"

"We hadn't thought of that," said Marjorie. "What are our chances of keeping them?"

"Quite good," said Trands. "You own them at the moment, I think it would mean a change of law to allow the government to take them from you."

"That's something we need to watch out for," said George to Marjorie.

She nodded reflectively, as the group round the table fell silent. Then she looked up.

"I've just thought, if the Tweedles are affected by the green light, that must mean the Tweedles must have the same algae in their blood."

"And probably every living thing on that planet," said Trands, relieved to get back to less controversial matters. "What puzzles us is you said you picked up the first animal on a totally different planet."

George nodded. "And we saw the same sort of animal on yet another planet. That's where we got Ruffy from."

"Ruffy being the female," said Hall.

George nodded.

"So that implies contact between at least three of the planets you visited," said Hall, rather relieved that George was talking normally to him.

George nodded again. He held up his hands. "Don't ask us for an explanation for that, we saw nothing that would tie the three planets together, they were totally different."

Hall tapped the tube. "You say this was being used by what you thought of as the equivalent of a police force."

"Police or army, we couldn't tell which. Whatever, they had organization and weapons," replied George.

"This could be used for taking out an individual or if the adjusting ring was turned to give a wide beam, a whole group of individuals," said Hall.

George gave a short laugh. "I wouldn't want to face a hostile crowd with one of those things. For a start, there's no way of telling when it's going to run out of steam."

"The battery inside the tube would last for a long time," said Hall. "It's a very advanced battery, similar to what we're working on now, a lithium-air type. This sort of battery has the potential of storing five to ten times as much energy as what we're using at present. We're studying it very carefully before we take it apart, hopefully, we can back engineer it so we can make copies. Confidentially, Professor Standing was most disappointed when he read the results of my tests. I think he was hoping for some sort of death ray" He grinned. "It was almost a pleasure to disappoint him."

George and Marjorie laughed.

"Oh so you've had a run in with him too," said George.

Hall raised his eyebrows and shook his head in mock despair. He carefully put the tube back in the case and zipped it up.

"That's about all I need to talk to you about the tube, I'll see you later with some of my colleagues when we go over the remains of the van you came back in."

He stood up and nodding goodbye, left the room.

"We've one more item to discuss," said Trands. "The food you brought back for the animals."

Marjorie made a face. "That stuff. It made me really sick. It might be all right for Ruff and Ruffy, but not for us."

"That's what we wanted to talk about," said Foster. "When we examined it, we found nothing that could have the effect you described. In fact, it's a perfect complete food with all the roughage, vitamins and minerals a body could need."

"So why was I so sick," asked Marjorie, "It really happened, I wasn't imagining it."

"Just think of the situation you and Mr. Meaking were in," said Trands. "First you were transported to Morocco, then to a strange planet, with no sure way of getting home. You were both under a lot of stress. I think you might have been expecting to be ill from eating it and so you were."

"You think I was suffering from a temporary psychosomatic

disorder?" said Marjorie.

Trands nodded. "We do. Perfectly normal behaviour under the circumstances."

"It felt pretty real to me," replied Marjorie.

Foster smiled. "I'm sure it did, but we have proof that the food is harmless."

Marjorie's head came up. "You do, what's that?"

"I ate some," said Foster with a grin. "We tested it again and again and could find nothing harmful in it. So we tossed for it to see who would take the ultimate test. I lost the toss."

"And you had no ill effects?" asked George.

Foster shook his head. "I must confess I passed an anxious half hour after eating a piece, but after an hour, we realised, nothing was going to happen."

Marjorie smiled. "Rather you than me. Still, all power to you even if I think it was a brave if foolhardy thing to do."

Foster gave a mock bow from his seat. "There is one last thing we'd like to try. When Paul and I first examined your animals we noticed the only sound they made was a sort of hissing."

"It got us thinking," continued Trands. "With such a quiet sound, the animas could only communicate over a very short distance. How can they communicate over longer distances?" He reached into his bag and brought out a small instrument. "We'd like to try this."

"What is it?" asked Marjorie.

"It's a bat detector," replied Trands. "We like to see if your animals vocalise in a frequency we can't hear."

"But bats have big ears to hear the echo of their sound," said George. "I've seen film of them, sometimes their ears are almost as big as their heads."

"Dolphins don't have external ears and they do pretty well," said Trands. He held up the detector. "Would you let us try this on Ruff and Ruffy."

"It's worth a try," said Marjorie, rising from her seat. She walked

over to the dog nest and sat down next to it. Both animals raised their heads as she reached out to stroke them.

"Hello, darlings, how are you," she said quietly as the animals pushed their heads into her hands.

Trands flicked a switch on his detector and a loud clicking came from the speaker, every now and then rising to a high pitched buzz. Trands looked at Foster, and grinned.

"We were right, they do use ultrasound," Trand's grin grew broader. "It's nice to have a theory confirmed," he said.

Marjorie rejoined them at the table. "Well, that was a turn up for the book," she said with a smile. "Is it unusual for a land animal to use ultrasound. I know about dolphins and bats but that's about all."

"There are a few land animal that use ultrasound," replied Foster. "Rats for instance and I believe there is a species of frog that uses it. Later on maybe, we can come to your house and do some more tests to find out the frequency range, if you have no objections."

"No problem," said George, "You'd be more than welcome."

Foster nodded his thanks and looked at Trands. "I think that's about it for now, unless you've something else."

Trands shook his head and they both stood, gathering up their papers.

"We'll call this meeting to a close now," said Trands. "We'll give you a call in a couple of days. If both animals show no adverse effects, we'll do a full scan."

When they arrived home, they just had time to warm up a pizza and eat it, when their doorbell rang. George opened the door to find Mark Freeman on the doorstep with a package under his arm. He led him into the kitchen as Marjorie was putting on the kettle.

“Cup of tea?” she asked.

Freeman nodded. “That would be nice,” he said.

When they were comfortably settled in the lounge, Freeman took a sip of his tea and put his cup down.

“Right, to business. First of all we attached stick-on thermometers on the suit. We took temperature readings and then had Anton walking round the university grounds for a couple of hours. When we re-measured the temperature, we found a significant increase, mainly confined to the areas round the knees, arms and chest. This test confirmed movement of the wearer will generate a significant amount of heat. I finally managed to get time on the electron microscope. What we found was microscopic fibres about five hundred nanometres thick woven into the fibres of the material.”

“Could you explain nanometre,” asked George. “I’m used to working in hundredths of a millimetre or even microns, but a nanometre is a bit hard to visualise.”

“One nanometre is one billionth of a metre, about one hundredth the width of one of the hairs on your head,” said Freeman.

George rubbed his hand over his bald head. “Not one of my hairs,” he said with a grin.

“So what do these fibres do?” asked Marjorie.

"That's the difficult part to work out," replied Freeman. "We think the fibres use piezoelectricity to produce energy through something called applied stress. This is like the heat generated when rubbing your hands together for example."

"Can we duplicate it?" asked George, "Could we make a suit like that?"

Freeman slowly shook his head. "Not at the moment, I'm afraid. There are universities in America working on the same thing, but as far as I know, they're nowhere near to producing anything."

He passed the package over to George. "Here's your suit back, I've included the sample cut from the sock as well. I've also included copies of all our notes and results. They may come in useful sometime in the future."

George sighed. "Oh well, it was worth a shot, we'll just have to keep the suits as a memento of our adventures."

"I'm sorry we couldn't help," said Freeman, "It would've been nice to be rich."

"We've another thing to ask you," said Marjorie. "Advice really. It's to do with something one of the biologists said to us about our animals."

Freeman leaned forwards in his seat. "Oh yes? go on."

"They told us they were priceless because they are the only examples of extraterrestrial animals. We wondered where we'd stand if the Government tried to take them from us," explained Marjorie. "As soon as Professor Standing saw us he wanted to take the animals away. He only backed down when we threatened not to tell him what happened to us if he did take the animals. Now we've told the scientists our full story, we don't have that hold over him anymore. We wondered if you could recommend a lawyer, someone you met at university perhaps."

"Funnily enough, I do know a lawyer," replied Freeman.

"Would this person advise us, and more to the point, are they trustworthy," said Marjorie.

"I would trust this person implicitly," said Freeman. He grinned, "She's my older sister."

"That should be a pretty good recommendation," said George. "Could you have a chat with her and see if she'd be willing to talk to us?"

"I'll do it this evening when I get home," said Freeman. "By the way, we were talking about getting rich earlier. I don't think it's hit home yet just how much money you two could make." He held up his hand, counting off on his fingers. "For a start, there's the book you'll write about your adventures, then there's the documentary makers who'll be queuing at your door for permission to film you. Then there's your animals. You already have three young ones, it remains to be seen how often your animals mate, but it could be at least once a year. Can you imagine how much you could charge for one of the babies?"

George and Marjorie looked at each other.

"That's something to think about," said George. "I don't know about writing a book though, neither of us have any skill at that."

"You wouldn't have to write a word," replied Freeman. "You'd tell your story to a ghost writer and he'd write it all down for you. Celebrities who can hardly string a coherent sentence together do it all the time."

"George, we need to speak to Mark's sister double quick," said Marjorie. She turned to Freeman. "Please tell your sister what you've just told us. I think she'll see we need some advice fast."

"One thing," said George, holding up his hand. "We don't expect your sister to do this for nothing. We can pay for advice. And if you're correct and we do make money, we'd be glad to share some of it with you. You've been very helpful to both of us since we came back and we appreciate it."

"That's very nice of you to say so," said Freeman. "I was just doing my job really."

"So was Professor Standing," said Marjorie, "It's the way you did it, a lot different from Standing. We said at the time, you treated us like

responsible adults, not like samples on a slide."

"Well, thank you for that," began Freeman. He stopped and stared.

Ruff and Ruffy entered the lounge. Ruff jumped onto the settee next to George, but Ruffy stayed in the doorway making short hissing noises like a miniature boiler venting steam. After a few seconds she turned and walked out of the doorway. She stopped and looked back at Marjorie.

"She wants the usual," said George.

Marjorie got up. "I'll get it," she said.

She returned a few minutes later carrying the dog nest, closely followed by Ruffy. She placed it on the floor in the centre of the lounge and sat back down on the settee. Ruffy jumped up next to her.

"She wanted to join us, but didn't want to leave the pups behind," explained Marjorie. "When I went into the kitchen, she was dragging the nest towards the door."

"Do they do this a lot?" asked Freeman.

George shook his head. "A couple of times, its only just started. I think now the pups are older, they don't feel the need to sit with them all the time. They still like them near though."

"Where do they sleep then?" asked Freeman.

"Ah, that's like the old joke about a bloke who had a twenty stone gorilla for a pet," said George.

"Go on," said Freeman.

"When asked where it sleeps," said George, "The answer was anywhere it wants."

Freeman gave a short laugh.

George waved his hand. "No, it's not like that. They spend the night in the dog nest with the pups. We don't mind them on the settee, they don't strop their claws on the furniture and they keep their claws in when they're on the settee."

Freeman looked at the two animals, laying languidly on the cushions.

"They remind me of a couple of big cats," he said.

Marjorie nodded. "I've thought that too," she said. "There are similarities. They bury their faeces and they do like to be petted. They seem very human orientated which is queer, seeing they've only known us for just over a couple of weeks."

"Can I stroke one?" asked Freeman.

George nodded. "Sure, only stroke from head to tail not the other way, those bristles are sharp as needles."

Freeman knelt next to the settee and gently stroked Ruff's back. Ruff arched his back under his hand.

"There you are," smiled Marjorie, "You've made a friend."

Freeman looked up. "If you are going to sell those pups, I'd like first refusal on one."

"That might be a little while yet," replied George, "We're not sure how fast they grow. But when they're big enough we'd be glad to give you a pup."

"That would be great," said Freeman standing up. "I'll make a move now, and leave you good people in peace. I'll call you tomorrow and let you know what my sister says."

After he'd gone, George sat back down and rested his hand on Ruff's back. "He seems a good lad," he said. "I think we were lucky to meet him."

Marjorie nodded. "We are lucky, we might need someone like him to help us with anything Standing thinks up. I've got a funny feeling about that man."

The next day it was their turn to meet the electronic experts, the physicists and the metallurgists. After the introductions, they left the office and moved to the main hall where the van body was sitting on supports. The floor had been cut out and was sitting on a hydraulic lift next to the body. Beekman waved his hand at the van body and the floor assembly. "As soon as we received the vehicle, the biologists took swabs to check for foreign or alien organisms. Only organisms common to Earth were found, so they assure us it's quite safe to handle the various items."

"How do they account for that?" asked Marjorie, "After all, we visited about six different planets, surely the vehicle would show some evidence of that. I was a nurse, I know how easily contamination can spread."

Beekman shrugged. "They speculate it might be some effect of your transition from place to place. To be honest, I don't think they know. However, as I said, they have assured us we're safe to handle the items."

He moved to the van body. "The body is made from sheet mild steel sections, welded together. The average thickness of the steel is one millimetre. The steel is a type that is commonly found on Earth, which has pleased the physicists no end."

He turned to George and Marjorie, "I explained the reason they were pleased at our previous meeting, if you remember."

They both nodded.

Beekman continued, "The steel is protected by a type of epoxy

paint, which is still undergoing analysis.”

He turned to the floor and pointed out the various components with a long stick.

“As you can see, there are a series of wheels arranged down each side of the floor, each driven by an DC electric motor.

These motors can be overdriven for short periods which is useful for quick acceleration. We believe this is why they were chosen for this application. However, they have their disadvantages. Too much overdriving can result in the motor heating up to the extent where it could self destruct. Our car makers tend to favour AC motors, which when the vehicle brakes, in effect turns the motor into a generator, delivering power back to the batteries. We couldn't find any batteries on this vehicle, although there might have been some in the missing rear part.”

He turned to George.

Mr Meaking, you say you have driven this, can you describe how you did it?”

George nodded. “There are two handles in front of the seat. I presume each handle feeds power to the wheels on each side of the van. There wasn't a steering wheel, what you have here is basically complete, except for the last ten feet or so.”

Beekman smiled. “It's nice to have that confirmed. Unfortunately, a lot of the circuitry has been lost, however, the opinion we formed of the control method ties in nicely with your explanation. The vehicle is turned by increasing the speed of the wheels on one side or the other.”

“Like a tank,” said George, “Only a tank uses tracks instead of wheels. I guessed it was powered by electric motors. When I pressed the yellow button between the handles, I could hear them start up. I presume it was battery powered?”

Beekman shook his head. He nodded to Patrick Hall who pulled a lever on the lift. As the floor raised, Beekman ducked underneath and invited George to join him. He tapped a housing projecting from the

underside of the floor.

"What we had in here was a rather advanced hydrogen cell. It provided power to the wheel motors. If you would come with me, we have it in the adjacent workshop."

George and Marjorie followed Beekman's group to a side workshop.

"I don't know why they want us here," whispered Marjorie, "They seem to know all about it anyway, what do they need us for? In fact for most of the meetings it's just the scientists telling us what they've found, they hardly need us at all."

"Probably just in case we give them a tiny bit of info that they hadn't found out about," said George quietly. "Anyway, I find it quite interesting, I know it must be a bit of a bore for you, though."

Marjorie waved her hand, "Oh don't worry about me, I just listen to the interesting bits and blank out the rest."

Beekman's group stopped in front of a metal box on a stand. "This is the fuel cell stack we removed from the floor of the van," said Beekman. "As you can see, it is quite compact."

"It's just a box," whispered Marjorie,

George shushed her, "I'm trying to listen," he whispered back.

Beekman gestured to the man on his left. "I'll let Doctor Parker explain the details."

Parker turned to George and Marjorie. "Hello, my name's Joel, I'm please to meet the people who've given us the best present of our lives."

George grinned. "Think nothing of it," he said airily.

Parker nodded to four technicians who carefully lifted the case from the fuel cell. Parker briefly touched the side of the cell. "What we have here is a type of proton exchange membrane fuel cell. On this side is where the hydrogen is diffused to the anode catalyst and on the other is where oxygen from the air is channelled to the cathode. As a matter of interest, what was the air like on the planet where you took this vehicle?"

"How do you mean," asked George.

"Did you find you could breathe more easily for instance, or was it like being up a mountain where you had to fight for breath."

"I don't think we noticed any difference," said George, turning to Marjorie.

"It was just air," agreed Marjorie, "We've never been up a mountain, so we can't really comment on that."

"It's just this fuel cell stack appears to be designed to work in an atmosphere with a very similar composition to ours," said Parker. "For instance if there was very little oxygen in the atmosphere, this type would not work unless an alternative supply of oxygen was supplied."

"This one still works then?" asked George.

Parker nodded. "Oh yes, before we examined it, we supplied it with hydrogen and measured the output. The maximum output we measured was about one hundred and seventy kilowatts."

"We have fuel cells, how does that compare?" asked George.

Parker thought for a second or two. "Well some car makers are trialling fuel cell powered cars that produce nearly one hundred kilowatts. So this cell is more advanced compared to what we can produce, but not that advanced. I think we're only five to ten years behind. I may be rather pessimistic about that, car makers and universities are improving the technology all the time. This cell will help us a great deal. We're going to back engineer this and see if we can reproduce one of our own."

While they were talking, Marjorie was looking at the back of the floor.

"This might be a daft question," she began, "But was this van rocket powered?" She pointed to four tubes fitted to the underside of the floor.

Parker followed her gaze. "They aren't rockets Mrs. Meaking, although I must confess, at first glance that's what they do look like." He rested his hand on one of the tubes. "These are the remains of

cylinders to store hydrogen. I remember you saying you were fired on when you were escaping in the van, is that correct?"

Marjorie nodded.

"We've found small holes in the bodywork, indicating the projectiles fired at you were similar to bullets. The damage seems to be confined to the rear of the vehicle, which suggests they were trying to disable the vehicle rather than destroy it. However, this attack must have severely damaged the ends of the hydrogen cylinders. The released hydrogen would have escaped under considerable pressure and would have ignited spontaneously as soon as it mixed with the oxygen in the air. That accounts for the damage to the van and your injuries. I imagine you left behind a huge fireball when you moved to a new location."

"We were lucky to get away then," said George.

"Very lucky," agreed Parker. "I believe if you'd delayed a microsecond longer, you would have been consumed in the hydrogen explosion."

He moved to a bench and picked up the leads George had made from the plastic printed circuits.

"Nothing very advanced here," he said. "Car manufacturers have been using printed circuits on plastic sheet as far back as the nineteen seventies I believe."

He dropped the plastic back onto the bench. "I think that's all we have for you for the moment, they'll be no need to attend the university again unless some of our specialists ask for further interviews. There's still the matter of the silver ball, but the tests haven't been completed yet. Professor Standing is coordinating those, he'll no doubt see you when he has something to report."

"Thank you, it's been most interesting," said George, ignoring the subtle dig in his ribs from Marjorie.

"We'll take you back to the office where you can pick up your pets, then we can all have the rest of the day off," said Beekman.

"That would be nice," said Marjorie, straight faced.

When they arrived home, they phoned Freeman to let him know they were finished at the university for the time being. He arrived at their door later that day with a woman on his arm. George ushered them in and led them to the lounge.

"This is Samantha Cornwall, my sister," said Freeman.

"Call me Sam, every one does, except for him," she said, smiling at Freeman.

"Pleased to meet you Mrs. Cornwall," said George, "What does your husband think of all this?"

"No husband," replied Cornwall, "Divorced for two years now."

"Sorry," said George, "I really put my foot in it."

Cornwall waved her hand. "Think nothing of it, I have a different second name, it was an obvious conclusion to come to. Forget the Mrs. please call me Sam."

"OK, Sam it is," said Marjorie giving George a look, "Would you like a cup of tea?"

Sam nodded. "That would be nice. I'm also dying to see your famous pets, Mark has told me all about them."

"George gestured to an armchair. "Take a seat, they'll soon be in here. Have any trouble getting in?"

Freeman shook his head. "I just flashed my ID and they let both of us through. The police at the gate know me anyway, so there was no problem."

Marjorie came back into the lounge with mugs of tea on a tray. She put them down on a coffee table.

"You talking about the police outside?" she asked.

Freeman nodded.

"We're on pretty good terms with them," she said. "We keep them supplied with coffee and hot sausage rolls." She turned, "Back in a minute."

She went back into the kitchen and returned a moment later with the dog nest.

Sam sat up in her chair.

"Are those the pups?" she asked.

George nodded. Don't go near them just yet," he said, as Cornwall was about to rise out of her chair. "Let the parents check you out first."

"Check me out?"

George smiled. "Don't worry, it's not painful." He turned as Ruff and Ruffy came into the lounge. "Here they come. Just put your hand out and let them sniff you. The may lick you as well, which can be a bit off-putting as they have blue tongues."

Cornwall lent forwards in her chair and extended her arm. Ruff moved up to her hand and after touching and sniffing, made way for Ruffy, who did the same.

"They're not what I expected," said Cornwall, after the two animals moved to sit on the settee next to George and Marjorie. "Even after Mark described them to me, it's still a bit of a shock meeting them in real life. The fact they come from another planet is mind-boggling." She drank her tea and put her cup down. "Now, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"It's about those two," said George, gesturing at the animals now completely crashed out on the settee. "We want to know what are our legal rights of ownership."

Cornwall bit her lip. "Hmm, how did you come to get them in the first place?"

"Are you familiar with our story Sam?" asked George.

Cornwall nodded. "I know the basics," she replied.

"Well, the first one, that's Ruff, had been abandoned, he was on the point of death when we found him. Ruffy came from another planet. She seemed to mate up with Ruff and came with us when we left the planet. The natives didn't object when she came with us."

"I just love the way you say another planet with such airy abandon," smiled Cornwall.

George nodded. "Yeah, seasoned travellers, us," he lent forwards, "What can you tell us about our rights?"

"There's no legal precedent for this," replied Cornwall. "No one has ever imported an alien species to Earth before. If it came to it, we'd have to argue you came to own them because one had been abandoned and therefore any previous owner had relinquished all claim to it and the other was a present."

"If there was a dispute, would you represent us?" asked Marjorie.

"I couldn't represent you myself," replied Cornwall, "But I could certainly brief a barrister to do so."

"How much would that cost," asked George. "I've heard these legal fees can cost thousands of pounds."

Cornwall smiled. "There are barristers I know that would take the case for free. The publicity would be tremendous and really put their names in the spotlight."

"That sounds better," grinned George.

"Are you expecting something like an ownership challenge in the near future?" asked Cornwall.

Marjorie shook her head. "Nothing at the moment, but this Professor Standing did want to take them away as soon as he saw them. Only our threat of refusing to tell what happened to us made him back off. Now we've told our story to the various scientist at the university, we no longer have that hold over him. We just want to be prepared."

Cornwall nodded. "OK, I'll make a few discrete enquires and see what response I get. As I said, I'm sure I can find a barrister who would jump at the chance." She opened her handbag and took out a

card which she passed to George. "Give me a call if you feel there could be a problem on the horizon,"

"We're taking up a lot of your time," said George, "How are you juggling your other work?"

"When I told the head of my law firm who I was representing, he said this was to be my only case," replied Cornwall. "I told you, any firm that represents you will get so much publicity, they would jump at the chance. My firm is no different."

She looked up smiling. "Now, if there's no more business to discuss, can I have a look at the pups?"

Professor Paul Trands phoned them the next morning.

"He'd like us to bring Ruff and Ruffy to the university to see if their tails are all right," said George. "If they find no damage, they'd like to do a full scan of both of them"

"I thought we were finished with the university," said Marjorie, "I'd forgotten about the full scan. When do they want us?"

"They'll be sending a car in the next hour," replied George, "We'd better get ready," said Marjorie. "I don't want to get undressed again, I'll put my exercise joggers on, they don't have any zips." She hurried into the bedroom to change.

Carstairs arrived an hour later and after George, Marjorie, the animals and the dog nest were safely aboard the car, he set off to the university. Dr. Ian Foster and Professor Paul Trands were waiting in the side office when they arrived.

"How are your pets," asked Trands, "Any bad effects on the tails?"

George shook his head. "Nothing that we could see," he replied.

Trands bent down next to Ruff. "Let me have a look." He held the tail and examined it closely. "No swelling or change on the skin," he murmured to himself. He checked Ruffy's tail and stood up. "I can't see any adverse effects on either animal, I think it will be safe to carry out a full scan" He looked at George and Marjorie. "What about the pups, are you happy for us to scan them as well?"

George drew in a sharp breath. "I don't know about them, they're awfully young."

"Very young babies have been scanned," said Foster, "Babies with

heart conditions for instance. They come to no harm."

George looked at Marjorie. "What do you think?" he asked.

Marjorie paused before answering. "I think it would be all right. I think the main problem will be keeping them still."

"Let's see what they're like when we get there," said Trands. "If they're sleepy we'll give it a go."

At the hospital, they took the usual back corridors to reach the scanning department. Marjorie climbed onto the table as George removed Ruff's collar.

"Come on boy, up," said Marjorie. She shuffled along the table to make room for Ruff as he jumped up next to her. She looked at Trands. "How do you want him?" she asked.

"If you can lay him on his side, that would be fine," replied Trands.

Marjorie gently moved Ruff until he was at the end of the table nearest the scanner. She laid him on his side and drew her legs up until she was clear of him. "Ready," she said.

When the scan was completed, George brought in Ruffy and put her on the table in place of Ruff. Because she was slightly smaller than Ruff, George placed the three pups next to her. He nodded at Marjorie and left the room with Ruff.

After Ruffy was scanned, Marjorie came into the control room carrying the dog nest with Ruffy following her. As she entered, she could feel the atmosphere in the room had subtly altered.

"What?" she said.

Trands pointed to one of the screens. "Did you know about the teeth?" he asked.

Marjorie looked at the screen. There in sharp detail were the four dagger like teeth in Ruff's mouth.

She nodded, "Yes, of course we did," she answered.

"Mrs. Meaking, those teeth are over seven centimeters long above the gum line and at least four centimeters below. As I was telling Mr. Meaking, teeth like that are not just for show, they suggests these animals are not as passive as we first thought. Teeth that size could

make them a serious and effective predator.”

Marjorie bristled. “What, just because they have teeth, dogs have teeth, you don’t label them predatory.”

“Yes but we know dogs, these are unknown animals,” replied Trands, “But the fact you kept these facts from us, could indicate you were both bothered it might make us think twice about allowing you to keep them.”

“Enough,” shouted George. He turned on Trands. “Professor Trands, you do not talk to my wife like that, do you understand,”

Trands was at least four inches taller than George, but he still backed away from him. He held up his hands. “Sorry, Mr. Meaking, I wasn’t being disrespectful, I’m just trying to point out how this will look to the head of this investigation.”

“You mean Professor Standing,” said George.

Trands nodded.

“Well it’s not up to him either if we keep them or not,” growled George. “They’re our animals and we’ll fight to keep them. Right, we’re finished here, I think you should take us home.”

In the car, Trands was conciliatory, “I’m not going to suggest the animals are taken from you, but I will have to make my findings known. Others might have a different viewpoint.” He paused for a moment. “You can see my position, I can’t conceal my findings and the size of those teeth do alter things, you must agree.”

George nodded slowly. “Yeah, I can sort of understand your position. Still, you can phrase your findings in a way that won’t automatically label the animals a danger.”

Trands nodded. “I’m not going to make any recommendations at all, that’s not my job. All I’m going to do is report what I have found. In the control room, I was just trying to warn you that others might come to their own conclusions.” He sighed. “I suppose I could have worded it better, for that I apologize. No hard feelings, I hope.”

George could see that Trands was trying hard to make amends. He stuck out his hand and Trands shook it.

"No, no hard feelings," said George.

As soon as they were home, George rang Samantha Cornwall and gave her a quick outline of the day's events.

"She's going to get in touch with her tame barrister," he said to Marjorie, "Just to be on the safe side."

Marjorie nodded and sat back on the settee. "It'll be nice to have a few days off," she said, "The last week has been a bit hectic."

George stood by the window, looking out.

"I wonder how long the police are going to be out there," he said. "When they finally go, we're going to be virtually under siege."

"We are now," replied Marjorie, "If it wasn't for Judith and Anton bringing our shopping, we'd be starving."

George slumped into his chair and pursed his lips. "Hmm, I wonder how long all this fuss is going on for, I'm getting fed up with it already."

The phone rang. George levered himself out of his chair. "Bloody phone," he grumbled.

It was Ian Foster on the line.

"Mr. Meaking, a word on the quiet, Professor Standing is about to serve notice on you so he can confiscate your animals. Expect him some time tomorrow."

"What," exclaimed George.

"It's true. Once he'd seen the your animals canine teeth on the MRI scan, he thought they gave him a perfect reason to confiscate the animals I don't like the way he conducts business, so I thought it only fair to warn you. By the way, you didn't hear this from me."

George put the phone down and stood thinking for a moment. Then

he rang Cornwall.

"Can you come over," he said, "We've just heard Professor Standing is going to try and take the animals from us tomorrow."

He listened intently, nodding his head at intervals. Finally, he put the phone down and walked back into the lounge. He quickly told Marjorie about Foster's call and his call to Cornwall. He was interrupted by the front door bell. George opened the door to find a policeman on the doorstep.

"We have a man at the police line claiming to be your son, a Peter Meaking,"

George nodded, "Yes, that's my son, has he got his wife and daughter with him?"

The policeman clicked his radio on. "I'll check sir" After a short conversation, he turned to George. "Yes sir, Amy and Christine Meaking."

"That's them," said George.

The policeman turned on his radio again. "Yeah, let them through." He smiled at George. "We have to be careful, you wouldn't believe the tricks the press get up to so they can get closer to you."

Peter's car drew up a moment later. As he stopped, the back door flew open and Christine ran up the garden path.

"Can I see the babies, granddad?" she asked.

George picked her up. "Hold your horses, you've only just got here," he grinned.

Peter and Amy arrived at the door and George put Christine down and waved them inside.

"How are you Dad," asked Peter. "It must be like living under siege, you wouldn't believe the amount of press and TV at the end of the road. The police wouldn't let us through at first."

George nodded. "Yeah, it's a bit rough on the neighbours too, they have to show passes to get to their own homes."

"We've seen you on TV," said Amy. "Fuzzy pictures, but we could just make you out when you answered the door yesterday."

Peter nodded. "You should see the cameras they are using, I've never seen such long lenses."

By the time they reached the lounge, Christine was sitting next to the dog nest with the pups on her lap. She picked up one that was intent on climbing to her shoulder and put it back on her lap. She looked up at Peter, smiling.

"They like me daddy, they want to get on my head."

"Be careful dear," said Amy, "You don't want to hurt them."

Christine nodded seriously. "I won't," she said.

"She didn't waste much time," said Amy, "It was all she could talk about on the way here."

"When she came in, she ran straight to the dog nest," said Marjorie. "Ruffy followed her and once she'd given Christine a good sniffing, she went back to the settee. She must have remembered Christine from the last time you came here."

"They don't seem worried about you two either," said George to Peter and Amy. "It seems to me, once they meet someone, they remember them."

When they were settled with tea and biscuits, George and Marjorie brought them up to date with events.

"You think they'll try and take the animals away?" asked Amy.

George nodded. "We've got a lawyer coming over later today to give us some advice, hopefully, she'll be able to put a stop to it."

Marjorie cooked a large omelette stuffed with bacon, chopped potatoes, tomatoes and mushrooms, while George made tea. As they all sat at the table, Christine, at Amy's insistence, reluctantly left the pups to sit with the grownups. After gulping down her food, she asked and received permission to leave the table and sat back down with them. They'd just about finished when the door bell rang. It was Samantha Cornwall. George showed Cornwall into the lounge and made introductions.

"How did you get past the police line?" asked George, "Mark got you through last time."

"Mark lent me his pass," replied Cornwall, "I just flashed it at them and they let me through, they hardly looked at it."

She accepted a cup of tea from Marjorie and nodded her thanks.

"You didn't say when they would be coming tomorrow," she said, "So I took the liberty of bringing a few things with me. I thought it best if I stayed the night, if that's all right with you. I've got a sleeping bag in the car."

"No need for that," replied Marjorie, "We have a bed in the spare room, it'll only take me a minute to make it up."

"I've had a chat with a QC I know, Sir John Barrington," said Cornwall, "He expressed a great deal of interest and will be pleased to represent you if the case comes to court."

George grinned at Marjorie. "A Sir eh, things are looking up."

"Let's hope it won't come to that, but if it does, we should try and work out the arguments that would be used for taking the animals from you," said Cornwall.

"Standing said they were dangerous animals the first time he saw them," replied Marjorie. "The fact they are the only extraterrestrial animals on Earth could be another reason."

"We can't alter the fact they are extraterrestrial animals, but we might be able to change opinion about them being dangerous," mused Cornwall.

"How can we do that?" asked George.

"Publicity," replied Cornwall. "At the end of your road, there are representatives of the worlds press and TV. What if we took the two animals to meet them."

George and Marjorie looked at each other. "It's worth a try," said George.

Cornwall looked across the room at Christine sitting with the pups, then at Peter and Amy. "Would you be agreeable to Christine walking the animals down the road. I think nothing would be better to prove they're not dangerous than having a child in charge of them. The fact the child is a little girl is a bonus."

Peter looked at George. "What do you think dad, would Christine be safe?"

George gestured at the pups asleep on Christine's lap. "I don't think a dangerous animal would let anyone play with its pups. It seems to me, Ruff and Ruffy have accepted her and trust her."

"Would they let Christine lead them, she's never done anything like that before," said Amy.

"Let's try," said George. "We've got leads for them, Christine could try walking them round the back garden."

Peter looked at Amy. "What do you think love?"

"I'm not sure I like the idea of Christine taking the animals on her own," said Amy.

"She wouldn't," said Cornwall. "Mrs. Meaking would be with her." She turned to George. "I think it would be best if your wife rather than you went with Christine. If you don't mind me saying so, you do look rather like one of the wrestlers we see on TV. Mrs. Meaking will project a better, softer image."

George flushed slightly and ran his hand over his head in embarrassment. "Never been called a wrestler before," he said with a grin. He spread his hands. "OK, I get what you mean. I'll get the leads and we'll see if Christine can lead them round the garden."

George put the leads on Ruff and Ruffy and they all moved to the back garden. George handed the leads to Christine.

"Now, sweetheart, do you think you can walk round the garden with Ruff and Ruffy."

Christine looked indignant. "Course I can granddad, I'm nearly seven you know."

George held back a grin that was threatening to break out and nodded to her. "Off you go then, and mind the big hole."

Christine took a step forwards. "Come on Ruff and Ruffy," she piped and slowly led the animals in a circle round the garden.

George stood back and watched with a smile on his face. He turned to Cornwall. "There you are, no trouble at all, they'll go

wherever she wants them to."

The press and TV crews were slowly dying of boredom. They'd only been able to snatch a few fuzzy pictures with their long lenses that no amount of digital enhancing could much improve. When the front door opened and two figures with what looked like large dogs came out and started walking towards them, a ripple of excitement ran through the crowd. As Marjorie and Christine drew nearer, the whirr of cameras grew louder.

Marjorie and Christine stopped at the police tape and held up her hands to silence the barrage of questions shouted at her.

"You've all know part of our story," she said, "We've heard the Government is going to try and take our animals away from us." She bent down to Christine. "Introduce Ruff and Ruffy to the people," she whispered.

Christine raised the lead in her left hand. "This is Ruffy," she said loudly. Then she raised the lead in her right hand. "And this is Ruff. Nan and Granddad brought them back. "

"The Government want to label Ruff and Ruffy as dangerous animals, we'd like to prove they are not," said Marjorie. She pointed to two of the reporters in the front row. "If you'd like to come forwards, you can introduce yourselves to them. Just hold your hand out and let them sniff you. They might lick your hands, don't be put off by the blue tongue."

"Speak nicely to them, they can understand you" added Christine, much to the amusement of the crowd.

The two reporters slowly stepped forwards. They bent down and extended their arms. Marjorie gave an inward sigh of relief as the two animals sniffed and licked the reporters hands and then sat down either side of Christine. The first part had gone well. Then the questions started.

Marjorie led Christine and the two animals down the garden path to the front door where George, Samantha Cornwall, Peter and Amy were waiting.

"How did it go?" asked George, "You were much longer than we thought you'd be."

"Lead me to the teapot and I'll tell you," said Marjorie as he walked through the door. "Questions, questions, we could hardly keep up."

"I answered a lot, didn't I Nan?" said Christine.

Marjorie bent down and kissed her on her cheek. "You did my love you answered lots of questions very well." She took a mobile phone out of her pocket and passed it to Cornwall. "There's your phone back, I hope it didn't run out before we finished, I could hardly get it out to check."

Cornwall put the phone in her handbag. "Just as well to have a record in case you're miss-reported."

"It's funny," said George, "We didn't realise you could voice record on a mobile phone until we saw Mark doing it."

"The wonders of modern technology," said Peter with a grin. He reached for his coat. "I think it's time to take Madam here home," he said nodding at Christine.

George saw them to their car and after many goodbyes, they drove off. George shut the front door and walked back to the lounge. He looked at Marjorie and Cornwall.

"Right, now for tomorrow," he said.

The ring of the doorbell came midmorning. George opened the door to find Professor Standing and a stranger standing on his doorstep. Two uniformed policemen that usually stood by his front gate accompanied them. Professor Standing turned to his companion.

"This is Mr. Sheerman from DEFRA. In view of the importance of this operation, we requested his presence." He flourished a piece of paper. "I have here a warrant for the confiscation of the two animals in your possession."

"You'd better come in then," said George.

As he led them into the lounge, Cornwall rose out of her chair to meet them.

"This is our lawyer," said George. "I think you better speak to her."

Standing took a step back. "A lawyer, I see, you knew we were coming," he accused. "Where are the animals?"

Cornwall ignored his request and held out her hand. "May I see the warrant please," she said.

With a look of exasperation on his face, Standing passed the paper to her. Cornwall sat down and started reading, her finger tracing along the paper. George and Marjorie sat down and stared at the four men. They didn't invite Standing or his companions to sit so they stood at the edge of the room shuffling their feet like a bunch of naughty school boys. Cornwall finally put the paper down on her lap and looked up, shaking her head.

"I'm afraid the magistrate that signed this warrant didn't do his

homework. This refers to the dangerous dogs act of 1991 amended in 1997. Now it so happens I have a copy of the act with me." She bent down and opened a briefcase at the side of her chair and pulled out a folder. She opened the folder and looked up at Standing.

"The act covers certain cross breeds of dog, namely the Pit Bull Terrier, the Japanese Tosa, the Dogo Argentine and the Fila Brasileiro. What breed would you say Mr. and Mrs. Meaking's animals are, if they are dogs at all."

Sheerman stepped forwards. "The courts will have to decide if those animals fall within one of the stipulated types. The burden of proof will fall upon Mr. and Mrs. Meaking to show they are not of such a type."

"I'm afraid that just won't do," replied Cornwall. "The animals do not belong to any known breed of dog. I have a report from Professor Paul Trands and Doctor Ian Foster that these animals are extraterrestrial and do not come from Earth at all. So the dangerous dog act cannot be applied in this case."

Standing set his mouth. "Nevertheless, the animals must be taken."

Cornwall turned to the two policemen. "I hope you are taking notes gentlemen. It appears Professor Standing and Mr. Sheerman are about to attempt an unlawful seizure of my clients animals using an act that doesn't apply. I think that would qualify as theft, don't you. If they insist on this we will sue both of them personally in the courts for the return of the animals and will expect to receive a substantial sum in damages."

The two policemen looked uncomfortable and went into a huddle, talking quietly to each other. Finally, they turned to Standing.

"I'm sorry sir, I don't think we can proceed with this at the moment."

"What?" yelled Standing. "We brought you along to enforce the law, can't you even do that."

"There's no need for that attitude sir," said the one of the policemen, "I think we should leave. The lawyer may, or may not be

correct, but if there is a chance that the law does not apply in this case, we have no choice but to refer this to higher authority.”

He put his hand on Standing’s back, “The front door is this way sir.”

Standing and Sheerman reluctantly allowed themselves to be shepherded out of the house. As they stepped off the front door step, Standing turned.

“You haven’t heard the last of this, we’ll be back and this time we will have the animals.”

“Come along sir, let’s go,” said one of the policemen. As he walked down the path, he hung back to let Standing and Sheerman to go ahead. He turned and winked at George.

“I saw the little girl on TV with your animals, they didn’t look that dangerous to me.”

George smiled and gave him the thumbs up. “The coffee and hot sausage rolls seem to have done the trick,” he whispered to Marjorie.

Back inside, Cornwall said, “That’s not the end of it, next I think they’ll take you to court to try and decide what law they can use to remove the animals from you.”

“Out of curiosity, just what does DEFRA stand for?” asked George.

“Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs,” replied Cornwall. “Part of their brief is to deal with dangerous animals.”

“I can’t understand why they tried to use the dangerous dogs act to take the animals,” said Marjorie, “We had this out with Standing when he first saw the animals, we told him then the dangerous dogs act wouldn’t apply.”

Cornwall nodded. “I think because they had a warrant, they were relying on your ignorance of the law to bulldoze you into giving them up. Now they know they can’t. Next they’ll probably try the dangerous wild animals act.”

“But until then, the animal will stay with us?” asked George.

Cornwall nodded.

“You did very well,” said Marjorie. “But one thing puzzles me. Where did you get a report from Professor Trands and Doctor

Foster?"

Cornwall smiled. "I haven't got a report. I was just repeating what you told me last night about your time at the university."

"You devil," said George admiringly. He smiled at Marjorie. "She's just what we need to deal with Standing. A dodgy lawyer."

Marjorie slapped his arm. "George, now you apologise to Sam you can't say things like that."

Cornwall laughed. "No need to apologise, Mr. Meaking is right, it was a bit dodgy." She paused. "It worked though didn't it." She collected her coat and bag. "I'll be off now. I'll contact Sir John tonight and if he's free, maybe we'll both come and see you tomorrow. You can give him the full story and let him see Ruff and Ruffy. I'll call you tomorrow morning if we're coming."

"You think he'll be free then," asked Marjorie.

Cornwall smiled. "When I tell him of today's events, I imagine he'll cancel all his other appointments so he can be here. I will brief him, but he'll want to get the full story from you, so if we are called to court, he'll be well armed."

George and Marjorie saw her to the door and waved her off.

George shut the door. "We'll that's one battle won," he said quietly, "Let's hope we can win the war,".

They spent the evening watching TV. The news was full of Marjorie and Christine meeting the press to the exclusion of nearly every thing else. Ruff and Ruffy were now referred to as space dogs and the Government's attempt to confiscate the animals was given full coverage. Various lawyers were trotted out to give their opinions on the legality of the Government's attempts, but the consensus was there was no legal precedent, so it would be up to the courts to decide.

George switched off the TV. "Well on the whole, it seems they're on our side," he said, "That was a good idea of Sam's to get publicity."

Marjorie yawned and stretched. "Let's hope her QC is up to the job," she said. "Time for bed, we could have a long day tomorrow."

Never having had any dealings with the upper echelons of the law, if the word barrister was mentioned, a mental image of such a man appeared in George's mind. When Samantha Cornwall introduced Sir John Barrington QC, George found he fitted that image exactly. Barrington was middle aged, tall, silver haired and immaculately dressed in a dark blue suit. If he talks as good as he looks, we're on to a winner, George thought as he shook Barrington's hand. When they were seated in the lounge, Marjorie addressed Barrington.

"Before we start, would you like a cup of tea?"

Barrington smiled. "I would, let's start with the important things first eh."

Tea served and drunk, Barrington got down to business.

"Sam has given me a comprehensive briefing. As I see it, the dangerous dog act is a non starter. Your animals are obviously not dogs. However, what has to be determined is if are they dangerous. The Government obviously want to confiscate the animals for study, but as long as you are the owners, that cannot happen. They could argue that the animals are so rare that they cannot be left in the charge of ordinary people, but a verdict like that could put at risk the rights of ownership of any rare breed of animal."

He relaxed back in his seat.

"There are two ways they may try to confiscate your animals. The first is to use parts of the dangerous dog act to argue the animals are dangerous and should be confined. Now the act covers four cross breeds of dogs. The Pit Bull Terrier, the Japanese Tosa, the Dogo

Argentine and the Fila Brasileiro. The act also covers cross breeds of those dogs. Dangerous dogs are classified by type not by breed. This means that whether a dog is to be considered dangerous will depend on a judgement about its physical characteristics and if those characteristics match a description of a prohibited type.”

He paused and looked round the room.

“This comes to the nub of the matter. The assessment of physical characteristics will be made by the court. The Government will no doubt bring experts who will say in their judgment, your animals do match the description of a prohibited type. The second string to their bow is the dangerous wild animals act of 1976. This can cover any animal and I’m betting they’ll try for a ruling that your animals should be covered by that act.”

George spread his hands. “So what can we do about that?”

Barrington smiled. “We’ll put our own experts on the stand to refute the allegation the animals are dangerous.”

George looked perplexed. “Who would that be?” he asked.

“Why you and your wife of course,” replied Barrington. “Who on Earth knows more about the animals than you two. The so called experts will be talking theoretically, you on the other hand, have practical experience.”

“They’ll bring up the teeth,” said Marjorie. “When we first saw them, it gave us a bit of a fright, I can tell you.”

Barrington raised his eyebrows. “You didn’t know your animals had large canine teeth when you first got them?”

Marjorie shook her head and proceeded to tell Barrington about how Ruff had saved them from the pack of wild animals.

“Does any one else know about this?” asked Barrington.

Marjorie shook her head. “We did tell them how both animals brought back a dead animal.”

“Do you know for sure your animals killed that other animal? It could be they found a carcass.” said Barrington.

“Well it was dead when they brought it back,” replied George.

They let us take some of it for ourselves to eat and it seemed pretty fresh, I think it was a fresh kill, don't think it had been dead for any length of time."

Barrington nodded with understanding. "Even so, whether they killed it or not is still open to question. We'll keep quiet about your animal saving you from the pack." He smiled. "They won't know to ask and we won't volunteer information."

"So you think we have a chance," said George.

"There are no legal precedents for a case like this," said Barrington, "Essentially, we'll be making up the law as we go along. All we have to prove is your animals are your property, freely given to you and not dangerous and the Government have no right to take them rare or not."

He nodded at the TV.

"I saw the footage of your granddaughter sitting with her arms round the necks of both animals. That should go some way to help our case."

"So you think that was a good idea then?" asked Marjorie.

"Oh yes," replied Barrington. "Publicity always helps. Judges like to think they are not swayed by public opinion, but we in the profession know they are, some times to a great extent. One last thing, can I see the animals?"

Marjorie rose from her seat. "Just a minute," she said.

She left the room and returned carrying the dog nest. Ruff and Ruffy were close behind her.

"They've not long been fed, they tend to stay in the dog nest after a meal," she explained. "Just put your hand out and let them smell you and you'll be accepted."

Smiling broadly, Barrington followed her instructions. His smile grew broader as each animal sniffed and licked his hand.

"That is really something," he said. "Extraterrestrial animals in a suburban living room. If it does come to court, you must bring the young ones with you. The young of any species have a particular

appeal.”

“So what do you think will happen next?” asked George.

“If the Government decides to go ahead, you and your wife will be issued with a summons to attend court at a specific date and time,” replied Barrington. Noting the looks on the faces of George and Marjorie, he spread his hands and smiled. “Don’t panic, I think we have a good solid defence, the Government are going to have their work cut out to present a convincing case for confiscation.”

“Thanks for that,” said Marjorie. “It’s funny, I had preconceived ideas about how a QC would talk to us, you’ve been very normal,” she paused. “If that’s not a insult.”

Barrington laughed. “Mrs. Meaking, As a child, I was brought up on an East London council estate, I can do normal, but in court I can do posh. With me, locations determine language, but I’d rather you keep that to yourself.”

Marjorie smiled. “Another cup of tea?” she asked.

The summons came two days later. George immediately phoned Samantha Downing.

“Get Sir John primed and ready,” he said, “The summons has come, we’ve got to attend court in three days time.”

He sat down with Marjorie and together they studied the summons.

“It says here we have to attend the Central Criminal Court, that’s the Old Bailey, isn’t it?” asked Marjorie.

George nodded. “I think so,” he said.

“Damn,” exclaimed Marjorie, “That’s right down in London, pity they couldn’t hold it at St, Albans crown court, that’s just up the road from us.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said George. “Sam said a car will pick us up and drive us there and back again. All we’ll have to do is sit back and enjoy the ride. She’ll be over in about an hour to explain everything to us.”

Samantha Downing nodded her head. "Yes that's right, the Central Criminal Court is the Old Bailey."

"So we'll have to go before a judge and convince a jury at this court?" asked George.

"Fraid so," replied Downing.

George made a face. "Hmm, is that good or bad?"

"It could work in our favour," replied Downing. "Juries can be a mixed bunch with all sorts of prejudices and to be frank, some of them are thick as two planks. On the other hand, they can be swayed by their emotions. Seeing Ruff and Ruffy and the pups could swing it for us and I can't believe anyone picked for jury duty will have missed seeing your granddaughter on TV. That should do us no end of good. Sir John will represent you, the Government will have their own representative. We'll find out who he is later."

The next two days were spent with George and Marjorie passing on as much information as they could remember. Barrington made pages of notes, only pausing when Marjorie made tea for them all.

As their mini bus drew up outside the entrance to the Old Bailey, Marjorie craned her neck through the window to see the top of the dome. To her disappointment, she could hardly make out the statue of the woman with the sword and scales. She turned to George.

"Posh place," she said.

George was wearing a dark suit and, as he thought the occasion demanded, he was wearing a tie, an article of clothing he usually reserved for weddings and funerals. Marjorie wore her dark trouser

suit, which she thought more suitable for climbing out of the car holding onto the dog nest.

"I don't want to flash my knickers at the press," she had said as they were getting dressed before the car arrived.

Getting the animals and the dog nest out of the car gave the waiting press plenty of time to take their pictures. George and Marjorie were led across the pavement accompanied by an eruption of flashes and shouted questions from the press gathered by the front entrance. Inside, to their relief, the tumult was cut off as the doors closed behind them. Barrington met them inside and escorted them down a corridor to court number one.

"Because of the unique particulars of this case, arrangements have been made for the animals to sit on our table in front of us so they are on full view of the judge and jury," said Barrington. "Originally, the DEFRA team wanted your animals in cages, but I successfully argued that would prejudice the case against them, in effect judging them to be dangerous animals before our case could be heard."

Marjorie nodded and led the animals to the councils table.

"Up," she said and the animals promptly jumped onto the table. George put the dog nest between them and Ruff and Ruffy promptly climbed into it and fell asleep.

"There are certain formalities to go through," said Barrington, "When the judge enters the chamber, just follow my lead and stand when I stand and sit when I sit, all right?" George and Marjorie nodded nervously and sat next to Barrington by the council's tables.

"The DEFRA team representing the crown, will sit over there," said Barrington, waving his hand at the other tables. "We'll be appealing against the order to surrender the animals. Try not to look at the public gallery where the public and press are, it will look better if you concentrate on what the judge or witnesses are saying."

George nodded, wondering if he was going to remember all of this.

"I'm telling you this so you'll have some idea of what's going on," said Barrington. Don't worry about anything, I will guide you through

any problems you might have."

"Thanks," replied George. "All this stuff is a bit new to me."

"Ah," interrupted Barrington, "The man from the ministry has arrived," he nodded at the man taking position at the other bench. "That is Ronald Stacey, he'll be putting the DEFRA case for confiscation."

George eyed the man up and down. "So he's the bloke we've got to beat," he said.

Barrington's eyes twinkled. "I think we've got the measure of him," he said.

I bloody well hope you're right, thought George.

A be-wigged clerk of the court shouted. "All rise," as the judge entered the chamber. When the judge was settled in his seat, they all sat down. The judge peered over his bench and stared at the animals. He raised his eyebrows in restrained fascination.

After a seemingly interminable wait, the jury was finally led in to their seats and sworn in. During this time George looked round the courtroom with its dark wood panels and its row of chairs for the judges. His eyes were drawn upwards to a long sword on the wall above the senior judges chair. If that fell down it would make a nasty mess of the judge, he thought. Finally it seemed they were ready to start.

At a nod from the judge, Barrington stood and lent forwards.

"Sir John Barrington QC, my lord, representing George and Marjorie Meaking." He sat down as Stacey rose to his feet.

"Ronald Stacey QC, my lord, representing DEFRA.

The judge consulted his notes.

"This case is of such unusual character that some of the norms of procedure will be relaxed. However, I must remind the court that any decision will have the full force of the law and will be binding on both parties. This case concerns the Mr. and Mrs. Meaking contesting the confiscation of two extraterrestrial animals brought back to Earth by themselves and whether they are to be considered to be dangerous

as listed in a schedule to the dangerous wild animals act of 1976.”

The judge paused to take a breath.

“A further motion by the crown is the animals are of such rarity and scientific importance, they should not remain in the possession of private individuals.” He looked at Stacey. “Please proceed.”

Stacey stood up and faced the jury.

“DEFRA will attempt to show that these animals are an unknown quantity and as such, because of their characteristics, should be considered dangerous under the 1976 act as a precautionary measure,” he said. “Those species that are considered to be dangerous are listed in a Schedule to the dangerous wild animals act 1976 and require a licence. Such licences are only granted when certain criteria are met and following an inspection of the animal’s proposed accommodation. The Meaking’s dwelling is in a suburban setting with low fences and cannot in any way be considered secure.” He paused for a second and consulted the notes in his hand. “DEFRA also contend that these animals are the first and only animals that are incontestably of extraterrestrial origin and as such are so rare that they should not be left in the possession of private individuals.”

Stacey turned to the judge.

“My first witness is Prof. Paul Trands.”

After Trands had taken the oath, he turned to face Stacey.

“You and Doctor Foster have examined these animals, is that correct?”

“Doctor Foster and I carried out the initial examination, yes,” began Trands. “We have a whole team of people evaluating the results.”

You carried out MRI scans of the animals in question,” said Stacey, “What were your conclusions?”

“The full evaluation is by no means finished,” said Trands. “However, the animals skeleton and musculature have a complicated mix of characteristics, rather like a cat and dog combined.”

Stacey pointed to a large plasma screen hanging on the wall. He

picked up a remote control and pressed a button. The screen lit up with a MRI picture of Ruff's head

"Can you explain to the court what this MRI scan shows. I am particularly interested in the large canine teeth, teeth at least seven centimetres long," said Stacey."

Trands nodded. "The picture shows the head of the male animal but both animal's heads are very similar. The canine teeth are clearly visible. The jaw has a double hinge which enables the teeth to be retracted below the lips so they're not ordinarily on view when the animals open their mouths."

Stacey used a laser pointer to highlight the teeth.

"These are the teeth in question."

Trands looked at the laser dot on the screen. "Yes those are the teeth," he agreed.

"As a matter of interest what length are the teeth of tiger for instance?" asked Stacey.

"It depends which breed you are talking about," replied Trands, "On average they measure about five to seven centimeters. A Bengal tiger's teeth are maybe a centimeter or so longer."

"So the animals the Meakings brought back with them have teeth on a par with one of our largest carnivores," said Stacey.

Trands nodded.

"And what purpose do you think the animals used these teeth for?"

Trands shrugged. "I can't say, I've never seen the animals in their natural environment. The Meakings said they saw the animals on two different planets, so even they don't know what their natural environment is."

"The animals are also equipped with rather long claws, could you explain this to the court," said Stacey.

"The animals have large pad shaped feet. They can extend and retract the claws on all four feet, like a cat," replied Trands.

"Combined with the over large canine teeth could these claws be used to bring down prey, rather like a lion. And would that make the

animals rather efficient predators?" asked Stacey.

"I'm sorry, I've no way of knowing," said Trands, refusing to be drawn. "As I said, I've never seen the animals in their natural environment."

Stacey was hoping for more, but realising he would get no further with this witness, he nodded and sat down.

Barrington stood up and faced Trands.

"Would you consider any animal with such teeth dangerous?" he asked.

Trands thought for a moment. "It would depend on the nature of the animal," he finally said.

"As a biologist, you are familiar with various animals and their nature. What is your opinion of the nature of these animals?" asked Barrington.

"I must emphasize, I've only seen them a few times, but during those times the animals seemed quite placid. They let Mrs. Meaking take blood from them and allowed themselves to be scanned with no trouble."

"Is it true the examinations were taken when the female had just given birth to the young ones we can see in court?"

"Yes, that's correct," replied Trands.

"I suggest that has the hallmarks of a domesticated animal, I further suggest a wild animal would be nervous and aggressive if an attempt was made to handle it so soon after giving birth."

Trands nodded. "I can't argue with that," he said.

"Thank you, I've finished with this witness, my lord," said Barrington.

The judge leaned over to Trands. "You may stand down. Please remember you are still under oath if you are called again."

Trands nodded and left the witness box, a look of relief on his face. He liked the Meaking's and their animals and had attended the court with the greatest reluctance.

Stacey faced the judge. "My next witness is Doctor Julia Enborge,

and animal behaviourist.”

Enborge was a middle aged women with grey hair pulled to a bun at the back of her neck. She lifted her head as Stacey faced her.

“Doctor Enborge, can you tell us what is an animal behaviourist and what are your qualifications?”

Enborge cleared her throat.

“Animal behaviourists investigate the relationship of animals to their physical environment. This can include how animals choose mates and reproduce, how they care for their young, avoid predators and defend resources necessary for their survival.”

Stacey nodded encouragingly. “And your qualifications?”

“I practice as a behavioural ecologists. I have a PhD in zoology, biology and ecology. At the moment I am working with a government environmental agency to examine the effects of habitat change on animal foraging patterns in the Scottish highlands.”

“You’ve had the chance to examine the findings of Professor Trands and his team, have you come to any sort of conclusion about the two animals?” asked Stacey.

“The MRI scans show the animals are powerfully built with large muscles in the legs and hind quarters. The large canine teeth and the retractable claws are indications of a carnivorous animal.”

Stacey jumped at the term carnivorous. “So you would agree that these animals have all the characteristics of a carnivore?” he asked.

Enborge nodded. “Yes,” she said.

“And as an animal behaviourists, what would be your conclusions about the nature of an animal with such characteristics?”

“Carnivores as a species hunt and kill their prey. Without knowing more of the environment from which they came and a long term examination of the animals, I cannot say if these characteristics are still strongly present in the animals.”

“So would you say it would be prudent to treat these animals as potentially dangerous until we know more about them?” asked Stacey.

Enborge nodded slowly. "Reluctantly I would say yes," she said.

"Thank you," said Stacey, sitting down.

Barrington stood up.

"Am I correct in that you haven't actually seen or examined the animals, you've only seen the MRI images."

"That's correct," replied Enborge.

"So your conclusions are based on theory, not actual examination," said Barrington.

"It's also based on forty years of experience," replied Enborge. "Animals with the characteristics of a carnivore can become dangerous, hence the reports which regularly appear in the press of people being attacked by dogs."

"But are most of those attacks by animals often specially bred to be aggressive, such as the Pit Bull. And is it more often than not, the owners of such dogs encourage this aggressive nature, is this not true?" countered Barrington.

Enborge slowly nodded. "That can be true in some cases. Nevertheless, the animals do have the characteristics of a carnivore and I believe they should be treated as such and viewed with caution."

"But body shape is not a reliable indicator of an animals temperament," said Barrington. "The modern dog can have the same body shape of its distant ancestor, the wolf, but in most cases, this does not lead to an aggressive animal,"

"That is true," said Enborge. Before she could go further, Barrington cut her off.

"Thank you, I have no more questions for this witness."

Stacey called four more witness to the stand. Three of them were biologists and one was a big cat keeper from London Zoo. All of them came to the same general conclusions as Enborge. Barrington countered the judgments they offered by suggesting that for all their expertise, they hadn't actually seen or examined the animals and were talking theoretically. After some pushing by Barrington, they

rather reluctantly had to concede his point. Finally the judge called a halt.

"We'll adjourn for today," he said. He faced the jury. "Please be back here by nine o'clock. And please remember, you are still all under oath."

On the drive home, Barrington said. "Tomorrow I'll put you on the stand Marjorie. You can repeat to the jury what you have told me about how you came to have the two animals Don't call them your animals, use the names Ruff and Ruffy whenever possible. It will make them sound more like pets than animals in the minds of the jury."

He turned to George. "I've chosen Marjorie because I think the jury will be more sympathetic to her than you," he smiled. "No offence intended."

George smiled back. "None taken I'm sure," he said.

The next day, once the court was settled and the formalities over, Barrington called Marjorie to the stand.

Mrs. Meaking please tell the court how you came to have the two animals we see in court.”

Marjorie looked at Ruff and Ruffy, laying with their heads in the dog nest, seemingly asleep.

“How much detail do you want,” she asked. “I mean how familiar are the people in the court with our story. I don’t want to go over stuff people already know about.”

The judge leaned forwards.

“Go into as much or as little detail as you think fit, Mrs Meaking. I’m sure the court will find it fascinating whatever you have to say.”

Marjorie nodded and turned to face the jury following Barrington’s careful coaching of the previous evenings.

“We found Ruff on the first planet we visited,” she began. “We called him that because of the ruff like frill round his neck. He was with a number of other animals, not like him, laying round a dried up pond. He crawled towards us and my husband gave him some water. There was this big tower, George, my husband that is, thought it might be a water tower, so we walked towards it. Ruff leaned on a lever on the tower and when my husband opened the lever, water came out and filled up the pond.”

Barrington nodded encouragingly. “So Ruff actually leaned on the lever that would produce the water, indicating he knew what was required to fill the pond?”

"It seemed so to us," replied Marjorie. "He led us straight to it."

"Please go on, what happened next?" asked Barrington.

"The animals drank from the pond and so did Ruff. I thought at the time, they were like the sheep and Ruff was the sheepdog." She smiled. "My husband thought it a bit far fetched at the time, but he did agree the actions of the animals fitted that description. After that, he came with us wherever we went, he wouldn't leave us alone."

"Now please tell the court how you came to have the second animal," said Barrington.

"It was the fourth planet we visited," said Marjorie. "There was a sort of village with animals like Ruff playing with the children."

The judge interrupted the exchange.

"Mrs. Meaking, do your animals understand English? The reason I'm asking, I've been watching them and every time you say the name Ruff, one of the animals lifts its head and looks at you."

Marjorie turned to the judge.

"I know a lot of people say this about their pets, and I know we've only had them for less than a month, but both my husband and I feel they do understand us," said Marjorie. "They seem very quick learners."

The judge nodded. "Please carry on."

"Well, while we were in this village, Ruff played with the other animals and children. When we left the village, Ruff brought the animal we called Ruffy with him. So we adopted her. I say her, we only found out Ruffy was female when she had the pups."

"How old were these children, Mrs. Meaking?" asked Barrington.

Marjorie thought for a moment. "The children's ages ranged from about three years old upwards."

"Were these human children, I mean if they were not, how could you estimate their ages."

Marjorie nodded. "Oh yes they were the most human like people we met. On other planets, the inhabitants were not human at all."

Up to now, the court had been silent as Marjorie told her story. At

this revelation, a gasp came from the jury."

The judge looked at the jury. "Please be silent. I know some of the facts you are hearing are extraordinary but we must have silence so the witness statement can be heard." He turned to Marjorie. "Please carry on with your statement."

"Both Ruff and Ruffy stayed with us until we returned to Earth where Ruffy gave birth to the pups. Both Ruff and Ruffy had various tests and were examined by experts. That's about it really," said Marjorie.

"I'd just like to clarify one point, Mrs. Meaking," said Barrington. "You said animals like the ones sitting on the table in front of me were playing with young children. And you saw this with your own eyes."

"Oh yes," replied Marjorie. "The animals were all over the place, I even remarked on that fact to my husband."

"So in your opinion, the animals you saw were pets," said Barrington.

"That's what it looked like to us," replied Marjorie.

"And the first animal you found, the one you named Ruff, you think that was guarding a small herd of animals."

Marjorie nodded.

"Could you say your answer out loud, Mrs. Meaking, for the benefit of the jury," said Barrington.

"Yes, we thought Ruff was looking after the other animals," said Marjorie loudly.

"So to sum up, in your opinion, the animals you brought back are not wild but are either domesticated pets or working animals."

"Yes, that's what we think," replied Marjorie.

"Thank you," said Barrington, as he sat down.

Stacey stood up and stared at Marjorie.

"Mrs. Meaking, you have heard the testimony of experts saying the animals could be dangerous, what qualifications do you have to counter their opinion."

Marjorie was ready for this after extensive coaching from

Barrington.

"None of your experts have been to the places we've been to or seen the things we've seen. Ruff has been with us to all those places and Ruffy to some of them. In all that time they stayed with us, they acted just like pet dogs. We've had Ruff and Ruffy for over two weeks now and they've never shown any aggressive behaviour towards us. We've seen them running around and playing with young children. We've also owned dogs for over thirty years so we're quite used to how they behave. Ruff and Ruffy act in ways very similar to the various dogs we've owned over the years. They're not wild and dangerous, but domesticated animals."

Almost on cue, Ruff rolled over on his back and laid with his legs in the air. He yawned and pushed his head against the pups.

The judge let the jury's laughter go on for a minute before silencing them with a look.

Marjorie put her hand up. "Excuse me please, but could we give them some water. We've been here for some time and they're probably thirsty."

"You have water with you?" asked the judge.

Marjorie nodded.

"The court will recess for five minutes so the animals can be given water," said the judge. "Please remain in your seats."

George took two bowls from a bag he'd brought with him. He walked round to the front of the table and put them on the floor. He poured water from a bottle into the bowls and clicked his tongue at the animals. Ruff and Ruffy jumped down from the table and noisily lapped up the water. This was all part of Barrington's plan. He hoped this demonstration would show the jury how the animals behaved just like pets. When the bowls were empty, George gestured to the table and Ruff and Ruffy jumped back next to the dog nest, laid down and fell asleep.

Stacey realised this was all part of a pantomime for the benefit of the jury, but he could hardly say so out loud.

"I have no further questions for this witness," he said and sat down.

The judge nodded and adjourned the hearing for the day with the usual instructions to return tomorrow.

Barrington did not come home with them this time.

As they'd left the court, in answer to his request, George and Marjorie had recommended Professor Trands and Doctor Foster as the most likely people to give Barrington the information he wanted.

"Out of all the scientists, they're the one's that know the animals best," said George. "All the others were concerned with the other stuff we brought back with us."

Barrington shut the mini bus door and looked at George and Marjorie through the open window.

"You good people go home, I'll get a taxi. I'm seeing the biologists at seven o'clock this evening. It looks like I could be in for a long night, you'll have to excuse the bags under my eyes tomorrow in court."

At home that evening, George and Marjorie sat and watched the news after they'd eaten their dinner. The main story was of course the hearing with the usual drawings of the main participants. George was not impressed.

"Look how they've drawn me," he grumbled. "According to them, I've got hardly any hair at all and look how they've done my nose, it isn't as big as that."

Marjorie patted his arm. "Never mind dear," she said with a smile. "The press seem to be on our side of the argument, that's the main thing."

After the experience of attending the two previous days in court, George and Marjorie felt almost like old hands when they entered the court for the third day of the hearing. Ruff and Ruffy also knew the drill and jumped onto the table without any coaxing.

When the courtroom was silent, the judge cleared his throat and leaned forwards.

"As both parties are agreed, we now move to the second part of this hearing, namely, the animals known as Ruff and Ruffy and their pups are of such scientific value and interest, they should not be left in the care of private individuals, namely Mr and Mrs Meaking."

Stacey called his first witness. "I'd like to call Professor Sir Aubrey Standing,"

George and Marjorie felt like booing as Standing took the oath, but restrained themselves.

"It wouldn't look good for our case," whispered George in Marjorie's ear.

Marjorie noticed that Standing would not look at them as he took his place. She felt even more like booing at him.

Stacey stood up. "Professor Standing please tell us your interest in this case."

"I'm the head of a multi-disciplinary team investigating the animals and artefacts brought back to Earth by the Meakings," replied Standing.

"You say brought back to Earth, you have no doubt then, that the items you are investigating are not from Earth,"

"The animals there," said Standing pointing at Ruff and Ruffy asleep by the dog nest, "Are the most obvious examples of an extraterrestrial origin. The other artefacts also have properties that indicate they did not originate on Earth."

"So these animals and the other artefacts are extremely rare and therefore of great scientific interest," said Stacey.

"Their value is immeasurable," said Standing, "Nothing like this has ever happened before. The silver ball the Meakings say they used to go from planet to planet does not seem to work anymore, so it is highly likely the animals and artefacts we currently have are all we'll ever have."

"And for that reason, you believe the animals should not remain with the Meakings, but be made available for scientific investigation."

"I do," replied Standing. "However attached to the animals the Meakings are, this should not stand in the way of the most important scientific investigation of the century."

"You think it is that important?" asked Stacey.

Standing nodded. "It's that important," he said with emphasis.

"Thank you," said Stacey.

Barrington stood up.

"Is it true you previously tried to confiscate the animals under the provisions of the dangerous dogs act, Professor Standing?"

Standing's face coloured slightly.

"Yes, that's true. I freely admit that was a mistake."

"So when that failed, you are now trying again to take the animals."

"The whole scientific community need to examine the animals," Said Standing. "The animals should not have been left with the Meakings, they should have been removed immediately."

"You say the whole scientific community, does that mean moving them from country to country to various scientific facilities?"

"It may," replied Standing.

"So you want to remove these animals from a safe and loving environment to be subjected to scientific tests maybe for the rest of

their lives. They should be taken to satisfy the curiosities of scientists is that correct?"

"Saying it like that is putting it in the worst light," said Standing.

"How else would you like me to put it," said Barrington. "The Meakings own these animals, you are proposing to take them and subject them to scientific examination, those are the facts are the not?"

"There is some doubt as to the ownership of the animals," countered Standing.

Barrington studied his notes.

"According to the Meakings, the first animal, Ruff, was abandoned along with the animals he was guarding on a desolate planet, therefore any previous owner had relinquished any claim to it. The second animal, Ruffy, attached itself to the Meakings when they left the village they described. None of the inhabitants objected, there were many other animals of the same type, so we could call that consent to take the animal. In view of this, who would you say owns the animals? And who would have a better claim, the Meakings or DEFRA?"

Standing backtracked a little. "Even if we can't take them, a Government pathologist will still need to carry out a more detailed investigation. It's imperative we carry out further tests on the animals."

Barrington consulted his notes again.

"So far, blood and mouth swabs has been taken. The animals were put through an MRI scanner. From these procedures, a great deal of information has been obtained. What further tests would you say you need?"

Standing hesitated for a second. "Biopsy samples may need to be taken."

Barrington turned to face the jury. "Just to make clear to the jury, a biopsy is a sample of flesh or an internal organ taken with various instruments. There is fine needle aspiration where a thin needle is inserted to draw out fluid with a syringe. Alternatively, core needle

biopsy uses a needle with a cutting tip to cut a tissue sample, or vacuum assisted biopsy where a vacuum is applied to a needle to suck out a sample. Which method do you envisage using?" asked Barrington.

"One or all could be used," answered Standing. "I can't be specific, it would depend on the circumstances."

"A biopsy could be painful, what anaesthetic would be used?" queried Barrington.

Standing looked more relaxed. "There would be no pain. The tube the Meakings brought back, emits green light at five hundred and fifty two nanometers. We know that would put the animals to sleep, so we'd use that."

Barrington shook his head. "I have a report here from Professor Trands. He notes the anesthetic effect was caused by algae reacting to light of that frequency and giving off a narcotic substance. Now the animals are on Earth, the algae has died off in the animal's blood, so the anesthetic effect would no longer work. So I ask you again, how would you anesthetise the animals."

Standing was taken aback. Because of his work investigating the silver ball, he'd only read the preliminary report about the algae, he hadn't realised it had subsequently died.

"We have a range of anaesthetics, we'd try these."

"These anaesthetics were developed for use on humans and animals of terrestrial origin. Suppose none of them worked on these animals."

Standing hesitated. Finally he spoke slowly as if the words were being dragged out of him. "If none of anaesthetics worked, the biopsy would have to be carried out while the animal was conscious."

"Causing pain to animals," said Barrington.

"Some pain, yes," admitted Standing, looking more uncomfortable. He could see from the way the members of the jury were looking at each other, that his admission had not gone down too well.

Barrington went in for the kill. "You say further tests, could this

include dissection?"

Standing reluctantly nodded. "It may,"

This brought gasps from the jury.

"So you are saying that these animals that are so rare and valuable, would be sacrificed to satisfy your curiosity."

"Not only me," protested Standing, "I say again, the whole scientific community needs to study these animals. If dissection was deemed necessary, it would only be carried out on one, we wouldn't loose all the animals, there is the other adult and the young ones."

Barrington knew he'd discredited Standing in the eyes of the jury so he turned to the judge. "No further questions for this witness, my lord," he said.

The judge leaned forwards. "Are there any more witness to call?" he asked.

Both Barrington and Stacey said, "No, my lord."

"Very well, I think that's enough for today. We'll resume tomorrow for councils final briefing to the jury and summing up. Court adjourned."

In the mini bus on the way home, Barrington turned to George and Marjorie. "I knew we were on to a winner when Standing took the stand," he said smiling. "He should have let one of the biologists take his place, but I think he didn't want to give up his role as head of research into the animals, his mistake," added Barrington. "Tomorrow Stacey will put his arguments and then it'll be my turn to put your case to the jury. After that, the judge will sum up." He slapped his knee. "Then it's up to the jury."

In spite of the importance of the occasion, George felt his eyes closing as Stacey made his final address to the jury. He shook himself awake and tried to look alert. He's going over the same stuff as before, he thought, even the jury are looking rather glassy eyed. Finally Stacey sat down and Barrington stood up.

"This case hinges on two considerations," began Barrington. "The first is whether the animals are to be considered dangerous under the dangerous wild animals act of 1976, the second is whether the animals are so rare, they should not be left in the possession of private individuals." He waved his hand at Ruff and Ruffy asleep in the dog nest with their heads against the pups. "You will note these animals are perfectly relaxed in what, must be to them, a completely strange situation. They are taking it in their stride. You have heard testimony that Mr. and Mrs. Meaking saw with their own eyes, young children playing with the same type of animal, and just recently, a child of only six years old led both animals to meet the media. I suggest this is not the behaviour of a dangerous wild animal, but a domesticated pet."

He turned a page on a note pad on his table. This was mainly for effect, he knew exactly what he was going to say, but the brief pause gave the jury time to absorb his previous remarks.

"And now we come to the question of ownership and whether the animals should stay with their present owners despite their rarity and the interest of the scientific community. The question of ownership does not only apply to the animals. Among the artefacts brought back

is an advanced fuel cell. The government scientists have taken that for testing and examination. But who owns it? Certainly not the government, it was never in their possession. The Meakings are quite happy for the government scientists to take the artefacts for examination, which shows they have fully co-operated. But the artefacts are things, Ruff and Ruffy are living breathing animals. Already a number of tests have been carried out on them and the Meakings are quite happy to allow further tests. However, they wish to have the final say on what tests are carried out. They do not wish the animals to be put through the trauma of the kind of tests outlined by Professor Standing. Members of the jury, think carefully about this before you come to a decision. If the government succeed in confiscating the animals it will set a precedent. It could possibly lead to owners of any rare object facing confiscation on the whim of some government department. I strongly suggest the government have no claim on the animals, no matter how rare they are, thank you."

Barrington sat down and waited for the judge to speak.

The judge leaned forwards, facing the jury.

"Members of the jury, this case has two aspects. The first is whether or not the dangerous wild animals act of 1976 applies to the animals in question, the second is because of the special circumstances and the rarity of the animals, they should not remain in private hands, namely, Mr. and Mrs. Meaking. You may think that because the animals are not from Earth and therefore an unknown quantity, they should be designated dangerous as a precautionary measure, or alternatively, you may give more weight to the Meaking's testimony that the animals are domesticated, tame animals and are no threat. Then there is the case for confiscation. You will first have to decide who owns the animals. The Meakings state one animal was rescued from near death and the other was taken with consent. If you believe the Meakings, you may think this gives them the right of ownership of both animals."

The judge paused and looked at the various members of the jury

as if trying to establish if they were taking in what he was saying. After a second or two, he carried on.

"You may agree with the government case for confiscation because of the special circumstances and the rarity of the animals, scientific research outweighing any right of ownership. Alternatively, you may think this is going too far and the government cannot take powers to arbitrarily confiscate private property. It is up to you to evaluate the ramifications of either proposition. Members of the jury, please retire and consider your verdict."

The clerk called out "All rise," as the jury filed out of the courtroom. George noticed many of them turned their heads as they went through the door to take one last look at Ruff and Ruffy asleep on the table.

"Now what?" asked George.

"Now we wait," said Barrington. "Don't look so glum. While I was questioning Standing, I had a quick look at the jury. From the look on their faces, I don't think many of them took kindly to his remarks, especially the one about dissection. Another thing in our favour is the news broadcast on TV of your granddaughter with the animals. I can't believe any members of that jury missed seeing that. It should definitely work in our favour."

George nodded, "Sam said the very same thing a couple of days ago."

They were called back into court two hours later.

"Is this a good sign?" asked George.

"It could mean there hasn't been much discussion or argument," said Barrington, "The jury members are all agreed on a verdict. On the other hand, it could mean the jury are hopelessly deadlocked and are unable to come to a verdict."

"What happens then," asked Marjorie.

"The judge will recall the jury and ask if they can reach a majority verdict. If not, it could mean a new trial."

George looked alarmed. "What, go through all that again?"

"Don't worry," soothed Barrington, "Deadlocked juries are rare, it's more likely the jury have come to a verdict without much discussion."

"Yeah, for us or against us," said George.

"This is where we find out," replied Barrington.

The filed into the court room and took their seats. Barrington watched closely as the jury members took their places. He lent over to George.

"They're looking at us, that's a good sign," he whispered.

The jury foreman stood up.

"Members of the jury, have you reached a verdict?" asked the judge.

"We have," said the foreman.

"And how do you find on the first part, that the animals should be covered by the dangerous wild animals act."

George and Marjorie both realised they were holding their breath. George felt Marjorie's fingers clutching his hand.

"We find the dangerous wild animals act should not apply in this case," said the foreman.

And on the second part, the animals should be confiscated, how do you find," said the judge.

"We find the animals should not be confiscated," said the foreman.

"And that is the verdict of you all?" queried the judge.

The foreman nodded. "It is," he said.

The judge nodded. "I'd like to thank you for your deliberations on a most unusual case, the jury is dismissed."

George let out his breath with a whoosh. He turned to Barrington and held out his hand.

"Thanks a lot, you've done us proud," he said.

Outside the court, Barrington read a prepared statement to the press.

"My clients are obviously very relieved at the verdict and would like to say thank you for the support shown by the press and public.

They will be making a further statement at a later date, but for now,

they would like to go home to relax after what has been a rather traumatic experience for them both.”

They stood on the pavement with the animals while the photographers and TV took their pictures and then got into the sanctuary of the mini bus.

“Boy, am I glad that’s over,” said George, relaxing back in the seat. Marjorie nodded. “Let’s get home, I’m dying for a cup of tea.”

Home had never looked so good to George and Marjorie as they shut the front door. After they'd eaten their evening meal, they sat on the settee with Ruff and Ruffy between them. After the day they'd had, all they wanted to do was sit and watch a bit of TV

"The news will be on in a minute," said George. "Might as well see what they made of our court case."

Marjorie nodded and rested her head back on the cushion. "If I can stay awake, the stress of today has really taken it out of me."

"It's over now, love," replied George, "Now we can relax a bit." He thumbed the remote, turning on the television set.

They had been watching for about ten minutes when the news reader's face suddenly sagged.

Marjorie sat up in her seat with a start. "My God, I think he's having a stroke," she exclaimed. The news reader's face went through a series of contortions for several minutes.

"What are they doing?" cried Marjorie. "Why doesn't someone help him, or at least take his picture off the air."

The both watched fascinated as the news reader's face finally composed itself. Then he spoke.

"We wish to speak to George and Marjorie Meaking," he said.

George and Marjorie looked at each other.

"Did you hear what I heard?" asked George.

"Are we speaking to George and Marjorie Meaking," the face said, this time with a trace of annoyance in his voice.

"What do we do?" whispered Marjorie.

"Let's answer and see what happens," whispered George. He cleared his throat.

"Yes, you are speaking to George and Marjorie Meaking," he said to the TV, thinking this is the sort of wind-up his mates at work would do.

The face on the TV stared at them. "Good, at last. We've had great difficulty finding you. You have caused us a lot of trouble."

"This is bollocks," growled George, getting up from his seat. He prowled round the room, looking in corners and the shelves of the TV cabinet.

"What are you looking for?" asked Marjorie, twisting her head as she followed his progress round the room.

"Cameras," said George. "This is some sort of set up or practical joke. Someone's doing this to see our reaction."

He picked up the remote for his recorder and switched it on. Now I'll have proof of this, he thought, I'll show the buggers I'm not to be made a fool of.

The face on the TV shouted. "George Meaking, this is not, as you called it, a set up. We're speaking to you about the unauthorised use of the transporter you found on your property."

"Transporter," mouthed Marjorie. She turned to George. "He's talking about the silver ball."

"That is exactly what we're talking about," said the face, "That is not it's correct name, we're using a term we think you would understand. You had no right to use it. You have caused us a lot of expense and trouble."

George didn't like being shouted at. In spite of the bizarre situation, he shouted back at the TV. "You shouldn't have left it there for us to find if you didn't want it used, anyway, we didn't want to use it, it was a mistake."

"We realise that, therefore there will be no action taken against you," said the face. "But to prevent any further unauthorised use, the power cell in the field next to your dwelling and all power cells

remaining on Earth will be decommissioned and remotely dismantled. This will take place in the next few days. Unfortunately, we cannot do it straight away due to technological constraints.”

George smiled to himself. Technological constraints, that probably meant they were bound up in red tape just like trying to get anything done on Earth. He looked at Marjorie.

“Looks like they dug that bloody great hole in our garden for nothing if the power cell is in the next field. I don’t think we’ll tell Standing that, he can go and stuff himself.” He turned back to the TV.

“If you’re going to shut down the power, that’s the end of it, why go to all the trouble to take over our TV and lecture us.”

“That is not the end of it,” said the face. “We’re very concerned at you bringing new technology back to your planet.”

“What new technology?” asked George. “Nothing we brought back was that new.” Before the face could reply, George ploughed on. “The hydrogen cell isn’t new, we’ve got them in our cars already. The tube with the green light is just a fancy torch and the bar is just a steel bar. Nothing new in any of it.”

The face on the TV was silent for a second or two. Finally it spoke again.

“We were not aware you have those things already. However, the food you referred to a sprouts are genetically modified, they certainly should not have been brought back.”

“You should check your facts before you sound off,” retorted George. “We’ve had genetically modified food for years, like I said, we brought back nothing we haven’t got already.”

The face paused for a moment, as if taking time to absorb what George had just said. Then it spoke again.

“There is the question of upsetting the experiment studying primitive communities, your presence nearly brought that study to an end. It was very expensive to set up and would take years to do it again.”

“Not our fault,” retorted George. “We didn’t want to go there, it was

pure chance.”

“Your presence among the beings you called the Tweedles and the Beetles was very upsetting to their communities. They will spend needless time and effort trying to evaluate how and why you appeared and where you came from, time that should be spent on investigations that would be more fruitful.”

“As I said, not our fault,” replied George, “We arrived on those planets by pure chance. We didn’t plan to go there.”

“So you say,” said the face. “One thing that was not pure chance, was when you took away two very valuable genetically modified animals. These animals are bred to read emotions and are highly valued.”

“They can’t be that valuable,” retorted Marjorie, “You left one to die on the first planet we visited.”

“That is not possible,” said the face.

“It’s true,” said Marjorie. “We found it and a load more other animals round a dried up pond. If George hadn’t opened the water tap and filled the pond, they’d have all died of thirst.”

The face looked down again. “We’ve have the records of your travels. The first planet you say?”

“That’s right,” said Marjorie.

“And they had no water?”

“That’s right,” said Marjorie again.

“Very well, instructions will be sent out to remove the remaining animals to a more suitable environment.”

“What about our animals,” asked Marjorie. “You’re not going to take them away as well are you.”

“They are the animals between you on your reclining apparatus?” said the face.

Marjorie wasn’t used to having her settee called a reclining apparatus but she nodded anyway. “Yes, those are the animals.” She had a thought. “You had to ask if they are the animals, can’t you see them?”

"We have some sort of picture but your viewing device is rather primitive, so to receive any sort of picture from it is pushing our apparatus to it's limit," admitted the face.

Bloody cheek, thought George, that's the latest plasma we've got there and he calls it primitive.

"You haven't answered my question," said Marjorie. "Are you going to take away our animals?"

"The one you saved will by now be imprinted on you so we will not take it," said the face.

"What about the female," said George, "Now she's had pups, we want to keep her."

"If the animals have bred and had young, the female will be imprinted on the male and also on you as her carer, we will not take them."

Marjorie collapsed back on her seat with relief. "Thank goodness for that," she said.

"Your thanks are not required, we are doing this in the best interests of the animals," replied the face.

"You said the animals can read emotions," began Marjorie.

"Correct," said the face. "If a person is friendly to the animal, it will respond accordingly."

"So what would happen if an unsuitable person acquired one," continued Marjorie. "We know the animals can be very fierce if needed, one of ours saved us from an attack by wild animals. I wonder if an owner instructed it to attack another person for instance, would it obey?"

"Why do you ask," said the face. "Do you have such persons on your planet?"

"Oh no," said Marjorie, lying through her teeth. "It's just a hypothetical question."

"The animals are more intelligent than you realise," said the face, "In those circumstances, they would be more likely to turn against their owner and abandon them."

"I have a question about the pups," said George. "We'd like some advice on how to care for them and when they would be old enough to leave their parents."

"The hatchlings should stay with the mother for at least three of your months," said the face. "The fact they are still alive indicates the female is looking after them correctly."

"When can we feed them solid food, and what would be best for them?" asked Marjorie.

"We have detected you have a computer. We will send instructions to it, this will take several days to accomplish. The instructions will not remain for long on your computer. If you have the means, print the diagrams and instructions because the information will disappear within two days."

"OK, thanks for that," said George. "Is that it, no more lectures?"

"No we have nothing further to say to you," said the face.

"Well, I'm glad that's the end of it," said George. He wagged his finger at the TV. "I'm sorry we ever found that ball. Apart from slinging us half way round the galaxy, that wire loop on the ball cut my bloody finger off."

"Because you were not using it correctly," replied the face in a more normal tone of voice. "It is usually worn under the clothes attached to one of our chest spines."

"Your chest spines," exclaimed Marjorie, "So you use the ball." Then the thought came to her. "Are you are the people that made the ball."

"That is correct," said the face.

George and Marjorie sat in silence for a moment with the realisation they were finally talking to the beings that had been responsible for their unplanned jaunts to other worlds.

"Before you go, can you show us what you look like. We saw a variety of beings, but none of them seemed to know anything about the silver ball."

The face looked downwards off camera and the picture wavered

full of static for a moment. As the static cleared, a different picture appeared. George and Marjorie found themselves looking at a likeness of the lizards they had seen on the jungle planet. The picture faded and the face returned to their screen.

George and Marjorie looked at each other. "The lizards," said Marjorie.

"You have seen us before?" asked the face.

"On the fifth planet we visited, we found three beings, two were dead and one died shortly after. Were they your people?" asked Marjorie.

"Describe the people you found and the planet you found them on," said the face.

"The part we could see was covered in jungle," said George. "There had been some sort of earthquake and we found these people at the bottom of a deep gorge. They were dressed in what looked like work clothes, with body armour round the chest, so we could only see their hands and faces. Their skin reminded us of a lizard. They looked very similar to the picture you showed us."

"If they were wearing body armour, it would be to protect the chest spines," said the face. "Please explain the circumstances,"

George explained how they had found the lizards half buried under debris and tree trunks and how they'd try to help the lizard that was still alive.

"Please describe the assistance you gave," asked the face.

"Marjorie brushed the dirt from its face and eyes so it could see," said George "We just handed it things it wanted from its pouch, we didn't know what it was going to do with them. One was a drink of some sort, the second was a pain relief. Well, that's what we thought at first. As it turned out, it was something that killed it. It was probably for the best. We couldn't move the tree it was buried under and shortly after it died, there was an avalanche which would have buried it alive."

The face rippled through a series of changes as if the thing

controlling it was trying to find the most appropriate emotion.

"You gave assistance to this being even though it was not of your species?" asked the face.

"Of course," said Marjorie in a shocked voice. "It was in pain, how could we not help it."

"For that, we thank you," said the face. "For your information, we have received a communication from their bio indicators that three of our technicians have died. Arrangements are in place to recover the bodies."

"So you knew about them," said Marjorie.

"We wanted to assure ourselves we were referring to the same individuals. Now we know we are."

George and Marjorie were silent for a moment, reliving the last moments of the death of the lizard. The George had a thought.

"How did you know it was us using the silver ball?"

"We knew someone on your planet had used the transporter. We determined it was you because your names have been prominent in your television broadcasts over the last three days."

The face started fading from the screen. "This transmission is ended now. It will not return."

"Wait," shouted George, "We want to know why the power cells were on Earth and how long have they've been here,"

It was no use. The picture rippled and the news announcer resumed his broadcast of the news as if nothing had happened.

"Damn," exclaimed George, "Now we'll never know." He dived for the recorder remote. "Let's see if we've got anything," he said

The recording was not as good as the picture on the TV, but it was good enough. The TV sound had been recorded, but not their questions and answers, but they could be easily inferred. George turned off the recorder and headed for the phone.

"I'll call Mark and invite him over tomorrow to see that," he said with a smile. "It'll knock his socks off."

Mark Freeman arrived just as they were finishing their breakfast. They had overslept, rather worn out from the tension of the previous day.

"Come in," said Marjorie, "Would you like a cup of tea?"

Freeman smiled and nodded. He was now used to Marjorie's offer, it was almost the first thing she would say to visitors as they entered her home.

"You sounded very mysterious over the phone," said Freeman, "I gather I'm about to get my socks knocked off."

George smiled. "Let's go into the lounge and prepare yourself for the experience of a lifetime."

When they were all seated, George turned on the TV and picked up the recorder remote control.

"We were watching the news last night and the news reader's face starting changing," said George.

"We thought he was having a stroke or something," said Marjorie. "But it wasn't as stroke," she said, subtly building up the tension, "It was this." She nodded at George who thumbed a button on the remote.

Freeman watched open mouthed as the recorder footage unwound. When it ended, he turned to George and Marjorie.

"Can I see it again, this time try to remember what you were saying to get the response we see on the screen," he asked.

George ran the recording again. This time, he and Marjorie attempting to fill in the silences between the statements on the

screen. Finally Freeman sat back in his seat and shook his head.

"Consider my socks comprehensively blown off," he said with a grin.

George put down the remote. "First thing, do you think that is genuine, or could it be somebody playing a game with us."

Freeman shook his head. "I don't know of any technology that could take over your TV and turn it into a two way communication device, not without modification."

He got up and examined the front and back of the TV.

"No extra wires at the back and there's no sign of a web cam or anything like it on the front," He ran his hands over the shelves and top of the cabinet supporting the TV. "Nothing here either, I think it was a genuine communication." He sat back down. "There's also the content. I know you've described the three lizards to various people, but no-one has actually seen them except you. The fact you were shown a picture of a lizard, a picture you recognised, indicates to me this is not a hoax." He paused. "I tell you what most impressed me was the language skills of the lizard, but I suppose that would be no trouble to a species that could invent the silver ball. And did you notice the face on the TV referred to we all the time, never I."

"Is that relevant?" asked Marjorie.

"It could suggest a hive mentality," replied Freeman, "Maybe they don't think of themselves as individuals, but just part of a group."

"I don't see how we could ever get on with a society like that," mused George. "Not that it matters, I don't think we'll be hearing from them again."

"You should have seen George's face when we heard from them the first time," said Marjorie. "George went all round the room looking for cameras. He thought we were being set up for a joke or something."

"I think that would've been my reaction," replied Freeman. He looked at George. "Do you think you could make me a copy of that," he said, nodding at the TV.

"There is a way of copying recordings on to a disk," said George. "I'll have to get the book out to find out how, we've never done it before."

"I'll be glad to help," said Freeman. "And if you've got time, I'd like to go over the recording and make notes of your responses to the gaps, that way I'll have a complete transcription of the whole conversation. I can use the time marker to put what you said in the correct position."

"That could take a little while," said Marjorie. "Time for another cup of tea and something to eat, I think." She turned to Freeman, "Do you like pizza?"

They had been working for some time, stopping and starting the recording, while George and Marjorie gave Freeman their side of the conversation as accurately as they could remember. Freeman had compiled a sheaf of notes when Marjorie suggested they stop for tea break. When George turned off the TV, they became aware of noises from their back garden.

George looked out of the window. "What the hell," he said under his breath.

His back garden seemed full of people. He recognised Professor Standing and Carstairs, his assistant, but the others were all strangers. Carstairs was walking backwards and forwards over his lawn with a bunch of leads trailing behind him. The leads led to instruments on a trolley pushed by two men who closely followed him. From the wheel tracks in the grass, it looked like they'd been at it for some time.

"What are they doing?" wondered Marjorie.

"Let's go and look," said George.

Standing jumped when he saw George and Marjorie emerge through the kitchen door, closely followed by Freeman.

"Ah, Mr. Meaking, I hope you won't hold it against us for the recent unpleasantness."

"Well as a matter of fact we do," replied George. "What are you

doing in my garden?"

"We are investigating the silver ball you gave us," replied Standing.

"Why in my garden?" asked George.

Standing shrugged and tried to be more conciliatory. "We've tried every thing else, this is our last try to understand how the ball works. I hope you'll allow us to carry on."

Marjorie gestured at Carstairs. "What on earth is he doing?"

Standing spread his hands. "We're trying to see if we can pick up any reaction from the ball when it passes over the spot where you vanished. We remember you said you thought there must be a power source under the ground, so far we've found nothing, but if there is a power source, maybe the ball will react if it comes near to it."

George felt a dig in his ribs from Marjorie. He could see she was trying to hold back a grin as she watched with amusement as Carstairs doggedly tramped up and down. They both knew Standing was wasting his time, the power cell was not in their garden, but in the field next door. Almost without thinking, they both came to the same mischievous decision. They would not tell Standing, even if he did find the power source, it would be gone in the next few days, according to the face on the TV.

Standing called to Carstairs, "I think that's enough, stop for a moment, we'll take a break to collect our results."

Carstairs stopped and put the silver ball on the trolley. George walked over to him and looked closely.

"Would you like to see?" asked Carstairs.

George nodded.

"We've stuck a number of electrodes to the ball," said Carstairs. "The ball and the wires from the electrodes are stuck on this sheet of plastic for support," He raised a piece of plastic shaped like a table tennis bat. "I hold the handle end and the wires go to the instruments on the trolley pushed by our colleagues over there. Unfortunately, so far we've had no results."

Marjorie had by this time joined George. "How long have you been

at this?" she asked.

"We've been in your garden for a couple of hours," replied Carstairs. He waved his arm towards the men huddled over their instruments. "They're Professor Standing's team, they're the ones investigating the silver ball you gave us."

George nudged Marjorie on her arm and guided her back to the kitchen door.

"What?" she asked.

"Didn't you notice," whispered George. The dot's got a black segment on it. It was red when we came back to Earth. Standing took it away from the power cell, so it must have stayed red until he brought it back here. It must be charging again."

Marjorie suppressed a giggle. "Do we tell them?" she asked.

George shook his head. "No I don't feel like doing Standing any favours right now, sod him."

Standing walked up to them. "I think we've done all we can, we'll be going soon. Just give us time to pack our equipment and we'll be on our way."

"Still no results?" asked Marjorie innocently.

Standing shook his head, frustration giving him the urge to talk. "We've tried every electronic test we can think of short of sawing the ball in half. We've tried x-rays and CT scanning, with no results. We've even tried firing radio waves at it to see if we could get a response. We eventually took the ball to the USA where they have a very high power scanner. We could just see a faint shadow inside the ball, but no detail. This trial was our last chance, we thought we might get some response from the ball if we passed it over the place where you disappeared." He pursed his lips. "When we first got here, Carstairs even volunteered to rub the ball to see if we could make it work, but still nothing."

Yeah, I bet he volunteered, thought George, poor old Carstairs, lucky for him the ball hadn't had time to charge up.

Standing walked over to the trolley, unstuck the silver ball from the

plastic and detached the electrodes. He walked back to George and Marjorie holding the silver ball.

"I have got it right," said Standing, "You did say you circled the ball three times and then touched the dot in the middle."

George nodded.

"Just like this?" asked Standing, rubbing the ball.

"Don't do that," shouted George in alarm. It was too late, Standing vanished in a haze of blue light.

"I'm not sure what happened there," said Freeman, "But it couldn't have happened to a better man."

George grinned and turned to Carstairs. "You better phone the Moroccan embassy. "Tell them to look for him on the road to Marrakech."

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