

A STRANGE CAPABILITY

by

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(a sci-fi ghost thriller)

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Part 1: Consequences of a Visit

Not so long ago, in the days when hardly anyone used the word "app", there was a youngster called Felix, who lived in Swancote which is a small town near the city of Banchester on Trent. One warm early-June Tuesday he invited his girlfriend to lunch on the next Thursday. Her name was Aliec.

(When she was born her dad went to the Registry Office and meant to write *Alice* but there was a mix-up. Whether it was a typo by the registrar's assistant or caused by Aliec's father's poor handwriting has never been established. In those days people often wrote things on paper by hand. When Aliec was 15 her mum suggested she could change her name, but by then she'd grown used to it, so didn't bother.)

Anyway, she turned up that Thursday on Felix's doorstep, looking forward to a nice meal. He had said he'd cook something special for her. As soon as she entered, he asked her to sit at the dining table, and poured a glass of low-alcohol cider for her. Then he went off into the kitchen to fetch lunch.

"The cider's very nice, thanks," she said when he returned.

"This will be even better," replied Felix, putting two portions of his special dish on the table. "It's my secret recipe."

Aliec made a puzzled face as she looked down. "What is it?" she asked.

"Peanut and pineapple pizza," said Felix, with a big smile on his face.

Aliec wasn't smiling. In fact, she frowned. She stood up abruptly. "Didn't you remember that I'm allergic to peanuts?"

"Oh dear," said Felix. "I forgot. But there's only one. It's really just a decoration. I'll remove it."

"It still won't be safe for me," said Aliec. "What kind of treat is that for my birthday?"

"Oh dear," said Felix again, "I forgot that too." He hadn't bought a birthday present for her. He looked glum, but not as glum as Aliec, who was walking towards the front door.

"That does it," she said.

"Where are you going?" enquired Felix.

"Away, and not coming back," said Aliec. She was really cross now.

"You haven't finished your cider."

"Never mind that," said Aliec and slammed the door as she left.

"Oh dear," said Felix for the third time. He didn't know what to do. After a while he sat down and ate his peanut, then he nibbled his pizza, but it was burnt, so he didn't feel like finishing it. "Perhaps she'll feel a bit better in a few days," he said to himself.

Later that day he went out shopping and bought a box of chocolates (peanut-free of course) and a packet of 60 Vitamin E tablets, because he had a plan to go and see Aliec again after some days with a late birthday present. He'd read that the ancient Aztecs called chocolate the food of the gods and he knew that Vitamin E was very good for people's health, so he hoped that might put her into a forgiving mood.

Some days later, Felix took the bus into Banchester. He was going to Aliec's house, with a chocolate box and 60 Vitamin E tablets, gift-wrapped. He walked two miles from the central bus station to the road where she lived, and knocked on the door of number 19. A bearded man came to the door. Felix didn't recognize him.

"Is Aliec in?" he asked.

"Who?" asked the man.

"Aliec," repeated Felix.

"There's no Aliec here," said the man.

"Oh," was all Felix could say.

"We just moved in on Saturday," said the man. "We bought this house from the Wastons. Was she called Aliec Weston?"

"That's right," said Felix.

"They've moved to somewhere in Bedwold, but they didn't leave a forwarding address, so I'm afraid I can't help you." The bearded man shut the door.

Bedwold was more than fifty miles away, between Sheffield and Doncaster, and even if he went there, Felix didn't know her address. "At least I have her phone number," he said to himself as he walked back to the bus station.

When Felix got home, his mother said to him, "Felix, you still haven't cleared those plates from the dining table after all this time. Please do it right now. I'm going to need it tonight as I'm cooking for some friends." (Unless they had guests, they usually ate in the kitchen, you see.)

He went into the dining room, where Aliec's plate was still on the table, peanut and all. As he picked up the plate, he noticed there was something on the chair as well. It looked like a flattish stone, a little over two inches long and wide, though not quite square. It was fairly thin, with rounded edges, slightly less wide at one end than the other. It was mostly jade green, with streaks of turquoise blue, and a yellow bump on one side that he first thought might be some sort of button. When he picked it up it felt more like metal than stone, but also a bit like some sort of fabric. He tried pressing the button, but nothing happened. He put it in his pocket.

As soon as he'd cleared away the plates and wiped the dining table, Felix went to his room and phoned Aliec's number. He was sure that she'd be glad to hear that her keyring, or pendant, or whatever it was, wasn't lost. He supposed she'd tell him her address in Bedwold so he could send it back. He also intended to apologize for the disappointing birthday meal and tell her he had a gift for her, hoping that she might invite him to visit her to deliver it.

"Number not recognized," flashed up on his phone's screen.

"Help!" cried Felix. "She's changed her phone number as well." Now he was really stuck. In those days, phones were just for phoning and sending texts. Some people used email but Felix didn't know Aliec's email address nor whether she actually had one. He couldn't think how to contact her.

Another week later, Felix was still depressed about what had happened. He hadn't yet figured out a way to get back in touch with Aliec. He picked up the local paper and flicked through it, not paying much attention until his eye fell on an advert.

LOCKWOOD PARK MIDSUMMER GUIDED GHOST TOUR. 9:30P.M. FRIDAY.
ALL WELCOME. ADULTS: £5; UNDER 18S: £2.50.

It sounded like the sort of thing that would take his mind off breaking up with Aliec. It was just a question of persuading his mother.

He took the paper down to the study, where his mother was busy marking some homework scripts.

"Mum, there's a guided ghost walk at Lockwood Park tomorrow. Can we go?"

"A ghost walk? What's that about?"

He put the paper on her desk with the advert showing.

"9:30 p.m. Sorry, darling, I may not even be home by then. We're having a bloody Ofsted inspection next week, and we'll all have to stay late tomorrow evening to make sure all the loose ends are tidied up ready before the Scholastic Stasi arrive."

Felix looked crestfallen.

"You could try your dad," she said; then went on, "oh, wait a minute. I think he's rostered for a late shift on Friday. Nottingham police have asked for assistance. He'll have to be out till midnight dealing with drunken rowdies in Slab Square." (Felix's father was a policeman, you see. I expect you can guess his mother's job.)

Felix picked up the newspaper and headed towards the door.

As he reached the door, his mother said: "Felix."

"Yes."

"Are you thinking of cycling over there?"

"Not really," he said, although he was.

"Well, don't. It's at least ten miles there and ten back. It doesn't start till after nine p.m. You'll never be home before midnight. I don't want you out at that time. Understood?"

"Right," replied Felix and went up to his bedroom.

Back in his room, Felix pondered whether "right" was a promise or not. Probably not, he decided, because mum had asked if he'd understood. "Right" just meant that he did understand, not that he agreed.

So Saturday evening found him alone in his house with both parents absent at work. He hurriedly ate the meal his mother had left for him, then let himself out, closing the side door quietly behind him. Pretty soon he was pedalling along the A6096. It was still light when he came to the drive that led into Lockwood Park. The tall iron gates were open, with a sign attached that read: GHOST TOUR THIS WAY.



He cycled through the gates and up the drive. The lake appeared on his left; then he saw the big house. Soon he was in the car park beside Lockwood House, padlocking his bike to a railing. It was almost twenty-five past nine. About 15 people were gathered near the main door. As Felix approached them, a tall man with grey hair wearing a black cape emerged from the door.



"Welcome, Ladies and Gentlemen, to the Lockwood Park Midsummer Ghost Tour!" announced the tall caped figure. "I am Gaspard Black, your host for tonight's exploration of what is regarded as one of the most haunted locations in all England, if not the entire world. We will shortly depart. As is our annual custom, we will first enter the West Wing, where many people have reported witnessing the Grey Lady wandering the corridors as dusk falls on midsummer's night. It is thought that this apparition must be the ghost of Lady Blanche de Murville, falsely accused of treason and put to death during the reign of King Edward III; but more of her later. After our tour of the West Wing, we shall proceed to the beautiful Lockwood Lake. If we are lucky, we may glimpse the ghost of Mad Jack Murville, grandson of Lady Blanche, who drowned during the War of the Roses attempting to retrieve a treasure chest that he had earlier hidden among the rushes to prevent marauding Yorkist troops from getting hold of his wealth. They say that his unquiet spirit can be seen, hovering over the waters of the lake, on midsummer's night. Or if we are unlucky, we may hear him. Hearing his agonized groans is said to turn even the hottest blood to ice." He swirled his cape. "Now let us wait a couple more minutes in case any late-comers arrive. Meanwhile, Melanie, my assistant, will circulate among you. Please give her your attendance fees. Cash only, tonight, I'm afraid. Our payment terminal is out of order. Thank you."

When Melanie reached him, Felix gave a five pound note to her.

"How old are you?" She asked.

"Sixteen."

"Sorry, dear, we don't allow unaccompanied minors. Under 18s must be accompanied by an adult."

"It didn't say that in the advert."

"Terms & conditions, dear. Didn't you read the sign at the entrance gates?" Seeing the frown on Felix's face, she added: "Well, actually there is a possibility. You could accompany me. I could do with an assistant for this one. D'you think you could lend me a hand?"

"I, er, I suppose so."

"Good. Just stay close to me when we're in the West Wing. You'll have to pay the adult price, though, I'm afraid. Okay?"

"Er... okay," said Felix, hesitantly.

"Right, you're on the team. By the way, what's your name?"

"Felix."

"Pleased to meet you, Felix. I'm called Melanie."

"Yes, I heard."

"Oh, and please don't mention our little arrangement to Gaspard."

"All right."

Just then, Gaspard held up a glowing stick that looked a bit like a light sabre. "Your attention please, ladies and gentlemen! Let us begin our peregrinations. Kindly follow me. The light is starting to fade, so I will hold my luminous baton aloft. If you lose sight of me, follow the baton. On no account allow yourself to be separated from the party."

The group snaked its way slowly round the house to a garden gate.

"On our right," announced Gaspard in a booming voice, "notice the entrance to a very fine example of an English Italianate garden. In Victorian times such things were the height of fashion. This one was designed by the third Countess de Murville, grandmother of the present Earl. It is well worth a visit during the daytime, but, as far as we know, it isn't haunted, so we shall pass on directly towards the West Wing. This way please." He waved his baton in the air, pointing towards an archway at the corner of the Italianate garden.



They walked along a gravel path and through an archway that turned out to be more of a short tunnel. When they emerged, the West Wing stood before them.



Gaspard held up his baton and they came to a halt. "The West Wing contains the oldest surviving portions of the house," he said, "dating back to Plantagenet times, although parts have been renovated over the years. Let us enter by the central door, which you see ahead. We will need to walk in single file."

Melanie moved to the back of the line and motioned Felix to follow her. As Gaspard led the head of the line into the low door, saying "mind your heads, please", Felix turned round to have a look back at the garden.

"There she is!" he cried. "I've seen her, the Grey Lady!"

"Shhh! Quiet!" hissed Melanie. "Don't be silly."

"Look," said Felix, pointing to the arch they had just passed through.



"Look at what?" Melanie replied. "There's nothing to see. If you're going to get spooked, you'll be no use as my assistant." She took hold of his arm and pulled him to catch up with the last of the group, who were entering the ancient oaken door.

When Felix got inside he found himself at the bottom of a rather narrow wooden staircase. Melanie stood on the lowest step and the other members of the party were lined up along the staircase. Gaspard was leaning over a bannister at the top landing.

"Before we enter the Long Gallery," Gaspard was saying, "let me add a few more words concerning Lady Blanche de Murville. She was the widow of Baron Geoffrey de Murville, one of Edward III's privy councillors, who had been endowed with this estate in reward for his service in the French wars. When her husband died, in 1375, she became one of the wealthiest women in England. Although she was no longer in the first blush of youth, she attracted a number of suitors. Among them was Sir Ranulf Willoughby, a landowner in Nottinghamshire who, according to local archives, had run up many debts. She rejected several proposals of marriage, including Sir Ranulf's, which didn't please him; and he managed to convince the ageing King Edward III that Lady Blanche was plotting with some of his courtiers to take his crown and put the Duke of Gloucester on the throne. Even though Lady Blanche was Edward's second cousin, and despite the fact that historians have found no evidence that any such plot existed, he had her beheaded and awarded her property to Sir Ranulf. When Edward III died, however, in 1377, Blanche's son, Henry de Murville, petitioned Richard II, the new king, to reclaim his inheritance. The case was never decided because Sir Ranulf died the next year in a hunting accident in Sherwood Forest; although some say that it was no accident, indeed that Henry de Murville had a hand in the matter. In any event, since Sir Ranulf had no surviving heirs, Richard II granted the land to the de Murvilles, whose property it has remained to this day. If we are to catch a vision tonight of Lady Blanche's departed spirit, it will be there, in the Long Gallery, one of the finest rooms in the whole house". He pointed his baton towards the door on his right.

"Please everybody switch off your mobile phones," he continued, "if you haven't already done so. I do mean off. This is a delicate operation: we don't want vibration mode or that sort of thing; and certainly no flash photography. Now follow me as quietly as ..."

At this point Melanie tugged at Felix's arm and whispered in his ear: "Time to slip away. Follow me!"

She led him away from the stairs to a corridor under the Long Gallery. They could hear the muffled footsteps of the other members of the group overhead.

"In here," commanded Melanie, when they neared the far end of the passageway. She slid a wooden panel aside, revealing a stone circular staircase. She pushed him in first and followed him up the narrow stairs, whispering "hurry up" as they went.

At the top of the stairs was a tiny windowless room, almost completely dark. Melanie pushed past Felix and a few moments later, before his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, pressed a small electric torch into his hand. "Your job," she said, "will be to light me up, but not too much. Look: here in the wall are a couple of spyholes. Can you feel them?"

Felix, moved his hand along the inner wall. "I feel one."

"The other is below it." she said. "Turn on the torch but don't point it at the hole."

When he switched the torch on, it gave a faint beam of greenish light. He was able to see both spyholes.

"You look through the top one, to see me gliding along the Long Gallery, and you use the other to shine that light on me as I glide past, but only in bursts, not too long," she told him, while flinging off her jacket and pulling a pale poncho-style garment over her head. "Now, time for me to join the spirit realm." She slid another panel slowly open and squeezed through the narrow gap.

Felix crouched down by the spyholes. He was looking into the Long Gallery, which did have windows, letting in the fading twilight. At first he could see nothing moving. Then he heard a faint low moan. That led his eye to the sight of a shadowy shape, moving very slowly, silhouetted against one of the windows to his far left. He put his torch to the lower spyhole and tried to focus its beam on the moving shape. His first attempt missed, but then the shape took another step and was briefly illuminated as it passed through the soft light. From then on, he was able to follow it, turning the torch on and off in time with the moans, casting a gloomy green glow on the apparition as it flitted slowly along the chamber.

It was all over in a minute. Felix had hardly got used to his task when Melanie slid back into the darkened room, closed the wall-panel behind her and threw off her white cloak. "You did well," she said, donning her jacket again. "Now we rejoin the party. Let's hope none of them noticed our absence, or at least that they're too polite to mention it. Quick, down the stairs!"

They hurried back, as silently as possible, to the foot of the stairway where Gaspard had recounted the story of Lady Blanche, arriving just as the other guests were congregating by the main door.

"Now ladies and gentlemen," said Gaspard, "after our remarkable good fortune in witnessing the spectacle we have just observed, we shall proceed to the lake, where we hope to be lucky again. Follow me."

He led them out of the door, with Melanie and Felix at the end of the line. Once again, as they crossed the threshold, Felix turned backwards for a last glance at the scene of their strange adventure.

"I've seen her again!" he cried out.

"Oh stop it!" said Melanie.

"Look! There!" he said, pointing at a shadow grey figure on the stairs. "It's the Grey Lady!"

Melanie looked where he was pointing. "Oh my God!" she exclaimed hoarsely, in a strange sort of whispered shout, "she's real!"



A confusion of voices could be heard from the guests outside. Some turned round. A man and a woman came back in. "We saw her on the stairs," Felix explained to them excitedly, "up there."

They looked up. "Can't see anything," said the man.

Gaspard joined them. "What's going on?" he asked.

"She was on the stairs," replied Melanie, "the Grey Lady."

Gaspard looked at the empty staircase. His brow furrowed. He motioned Melanie aside and spoke to her in an undertone. Felix couldn't make out what they were saying, except for one phrase of Gaspard's, "don't go off script," uttered in a tone of irritation.

Most of the party was now crowding around the doorway. Gaspard recovered his composure. "We've already had an even more exceptional night than I thought," he said to the group. "Some of our guests caught a second sight of the phantom, but she has disappeared again; so let us continue with our tour. Our next stop is the lake." The group filed out again.

They walked round the back of the West Wing and took a left turn onto a path that led down to Lockwood lake, Felix and Melanie at the rear as usual.

"It is not widely known," said Gaspard in his booming voice, "that this lake was initially an impact crater. Approximately 4000 years ago a meteorite fell down there." As he said this, he waved his fluorescent baton towards the lake, whose surface they could see faintly shimmering below them in the incomplete darkness of the still summer night. "What we see today was landscaped in the eighteenth century by none other than the famous Lancelot Capability Brown, but he merely enlarged and beautified a depression that already existed, courtesy of a prehistoric visitor from outer space. Indeed there are records of Capability Brown's workmen taking home peculiar shiny rock splinters that may well have come from that celestial visitor."

At that point Melanie pulled Felix into a little copse beside the path. "This is where we take a detour," she whispered.

They waited a few moments till the party was out of earshot, then hastened back up towards the main house. When they came to the stable block, Melanie unlocked both parts of a half-split door and they entered what must have once been a horse's stall.

"Have you still got the torch?" she enquired.

"Yes," replied Felix.

"I'd better have that now."

Felix gave her the torch and she used its faint light to indicate a pair of oars, lying on the ground, alongside a black rucksack. "We have to carry some equipment down to the water," she said, unpacking a ghetto blaster from the rucksack. "Could you take the sound system? It's not heavy. I'll carry the oars."

She handed him the ghetto blaster. "Careful not to drop it."

She balanced the oars on her shoulders.

They set off at right angles to the route taken by Gaspard's party. "Better get a move on. We have to go round the other way," Melanie explained. "We go clockwise; they're going anti-clockwise."

It didn't take long to trot round to the far side of the lake. They halted by a patch of rushes, where Felix saw a small boat, rather like a coracle, moored to a jetty that projected a short distance into the reedbed.

"We don't need to go far," said Melanie. "We just launch into the rushes, which fortunately are nice and tall, and stay there floating out of sight. When Gaspard gives the sign with his baton, I play the sound system."

Melanie untied the mooring rope. "Can you swim?" she asked.

"Yes."

"That's a relief. Sorry, I should have asked before I dragged you down here."

"Why did you drag me down here?" asked Felix. "I could have stayed with the party."

"You helped by carrying the boom box, and you're in the know now. I don't want you revealing our secrets to the paying customers."

"I am a paying customer." Felix hadn't forgotten his fiver.

"True. You got more than your money's worth, though, eh? Anyway, you get in first, I'll push off."

She pushed the boat gently into the water, holding it with the rope. Felix stepped in, and Melanie pushed it further into the rushes and jumped inside all in one swift movement. The boat floated a few metres into the reedbed and stopped.

They could hear Gaspard's voice from across the lake, though Felix couldn't hear what he was saying. Melanie peered cautiously over the tall reeds. Then she bent down and fiddled with the ghetto blaster for a moment and then pressed a button. The machine emitted a blood-curdling shriek.

"Aaaaaaaaargh! Aieeeeeeeeeee!"

Felix leapt back in shock. His left leg caught the plank that was the seat of the boat and he lost his balance. Tottering sideways, he too emitted a shriek, then fell into the water. The boat lurched in the opposite direction, pitching the sound system overboard on the other side.

"Oh hell!" cried Melanie. She managed to steady the rocking boat.

"Felix?" she called in a low voice. There was no response.

She propelled the boat back to the lakeside, stepped out and pulled it up onto the grass. Then she went back to the water's edge and called softly: "Felix, are you there?"

No reply.

Melanie stood by the lake side for a few seconds, considering her options. They were all bad. Eventually she pulled her phone out of her pocket. She'd decided to call 999.

She switched it on. Moments later, the screen lit up. "No signal!" She started running up towards Lockwood House, to get better reception.

Part 2: A Series of Lucky Escapes

Meanwhile, Felix was at the bottom of the lake, struggling to free himself. It wasn't very deep and he was a fairly strong swimmer, but something seemed to have caught him by his hip. He reached down and tried to scrabble the mud away from whatever was holding him down. He kept digging more and more frantically. He also tried to kick, but his foot just slid through the mud. How much longer could he hold his breath? In desperation he dug away another handful of mud from his side, but his fingers were weakening.

Just as he was about to give up hope, he felt a painful thump on his right thigh. Fortunately he managed to stop himself gasping with pain. At last he was free. Thrusting the rushes apart, he rose to the surface, spluttered like a misfiring engine, and took a deep gulp of air. Then he swam towards the water's edge. His progress was slow. He felt weak and the rushes obstructed him, but a couple of minutes later he climbed out onto dry land.

He shook himself. He was wet, muddy and cold, and his thigh was sore. He felt his side to discover what had caused the problem. There was something attached to the outside of the pocket where he'd put the stone that Aliec had left behind. He tried to pull it off, but it was stuck.

"It's some sort of magnet," he thought, "that must be what held me down."

He felt inside his pocket. Yes, Aliec's stone on the inside was clamped to the thing from the lake on the outside. He tried pulling the outer block again, harder, but it started to tear his trousers. Eventually, by using both hands, twisting and dragging, he was able to yank both parts up together and detach them from his trousers. He made an attempt to pull them apart, but they were firmly stuck together. He put the joined block back into his right-hand pocket. Oddly enough, the two bits joined together actually felt lighter than Aliec's stone had on its own.

He began walking up towards Lockwood House. He couldn't think of what to do except get his bike and ride home, although he knew he'd be in big trouble when he got there.

When he was about half-way, he saw two figures marching briskly towards him. They were Gaspard and Melanie. Gaspard was shouting at her.

"How could you be such an idiot? What were you thinking of? You know we aren't insured for unaccompanied under 18s."

"I took pity on the boy."

"Pity!" he bellowed. "You've bumped him off! It's a pity all right! We're ruined."

Melanie interrupted: "Look: there he is."

Gaspard strode angrily towards Felix. "You, young man, have caused a heap of trouble. What do you think you were playing at?"

"I was assisting Melanie," Felix replied.

Gaspard stepped closer looking as if he was about to strike Felix with his baton, but instead he smiled. "An excellent idea," he said, "your help is much appreciated."

"He was actually a very good assistant," said Melanie.

"Splendid!" said Gaspard, beaming amiably. "How can we repay you for your inconvenience. I notice that your clothes are muddy, but I'm afraid we can't wake the household at this time of night. However, we can offer you a lift home in my car. Where do you live?"

"Swancote. But I have a bike. I can't leave that behind."

"No problem. We'll attach that to the roof rack." So saying, Gaspard led them back to the car park.

After unlocking his bicycle, Melanie helped Felix to tie it onto the roof rack with two elastic ropes. She then got into the back seat and Gaspard opened the front passenger door and waved Felix to enter.

Felix hesitated. "I'll make your seat all muddy, I'm afraid," he said.

"Nothing to worry about," replied Gaspard. "Hop in, and off we go."

When they reached Swancote, Felix said "I live on Garkirk Road, I can guide you there. From here we need to take the second on the left."

Gaspard slowed the car down, and pulled in to the side of the road. "On reflection," he said, "it might be best if you finished your journey on your bicycle. How far is it from here?"

"I don't know exactly," Felix replied, "a few hundred metres."

"I'm sure it would be delightful to meet your parents. However, it would be somewhat awkward at this stage, and we're in a bit of a hurry," said Gaspard. "You do have parents at home, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"I think it might be best then for our taxi service to let you pedal home from here," said Gaspard.

They got out and removed Felix's bike from the roof. Melanie tucked a folded five-pound note into his shirt pocket. "This is yours, I believe. Good thing you gave it to me to keep dry," she said with a wink.

"Bon voyage," said Gaspard as he and Melanie got back into the car.

Felix waved as they drove off. Then he rode home.

As he opened the front door, he saw his mother in the hallway. She was on the phone.

"Wait!" she said into the phone, "he's just walked in."

Felix was sure it was his father's voice replying.

"Right," said his mother after a pause. "Yes, thank goodness, no need to call them out now. Okay, see you later. Sure. I will. Bye."

She hung up the phone and turned to Felix. "Look at you!" she shouted. "You're covered in mud. What on earth have you been doing? I told you not to go out! Do you realize what time it is? I called you hundreds of times. Why didn't you answer your phone?"

"I left it switched off."

"I told you not to do that! You practically caused a disaster. I've just been talking to your dad. He nearly had half the police forces of Nottingham and Derby out looking for you. Imagine how bad that would look for his career. Why can't you show the slightest bit of common sense?"

Felix couldn't think of an answer.

"You're filthy. Go up and have a shower," she said angrily. "We'll talk about this later." But as he went past her, she leaned over and gave him a hug, saying "thank heaven you're safe, darling" in a completely different tone.

Felix went upstairs and took a shower. Then he got ready for bed. He put his new acquisition, the two-part block, on his bedside table, once again puzzling over how light it was.

No sooner had Felix got into bed and turned off the light than he heard his father coming in. His mum and dad had a short conversation downstairs and then Felix heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. His father burst in and put on the light without even knocking.

"What do you think you've been playing at, you silly fool?" he asked. His face looked like the fiercest thunderstorm you've ever seen.

Felix edged back in bed nervously as he approached, but as his father reached the bedside, his expression changed. He leaned over and gave Felix a kiss on the forehead. "So glad to see you're okay, son."

Then his father turned round and went back to the door. As he switched the light off again, he said: "Good night, sleep tight, see you in the morning."

"Good night, dad," replied Felix as the door was closing.

As you can imagine, it took quite a long while for Felix to fall asleep that night, and when he did, his dreams were pretty weird -- though not half as weird as the events he had just lived through.

* * * *

The next morning, as Felix got out of bed, he accidentally brushed against the cube that wasn't exactly a cube. It fell off the bedside table. Or rather it wafted gently downwards like a leaf on a windless day. Felix picked it up from the floor. It felt even lighter than he remembered. He couldn't figure out how it could weigh so little. It obviously wasn't made of metal or stone, though it was quite solid. He couldn't squeeze it in any way, and he couldn't pull apart the two pieces that it was made of. He gave it a little flick and it floated up, tapped against the ceiling and drifted gently down again.

"Cool," he muttered to himself. He was already thinking of it as his property, and intended to hang onto it. After all, the piece from the lake was bigger than the piece which Aliec had left behind; and it had tried to drown him, which gave him the idea that he deserved it, as a kind of compensation.

The morning light gave him his first clear view of it. The piece from the lake was very similar to Aliec's piece, mostly jade-coloured with streaks of turquoise, but also a few small black blotches. After brushing his teeth and getting dressed, he pocketed it and went down to breakfast.

His parents were already sitting at the kitchen table.

"Morning," said Felix and went to pour himself a bowl of cornflakes. His parents didn't reply.

When Felix sat down and began to eat his cornflakes, his mother asked: "Do you have a story for us?"

Felix looked up from his plate.

"About last night," added his father.

"I saw a ghost," Felix blurted out.

His mother and father exchanged a worried glance.

"Actually I saw her twice. The Grey Lady of Lockwood House. Her name is Blanche de Murville. She was executed by King Edward the something. The Third. But she was innocent. So she haunts Lockwood Park."

His parents were looking more worried now.

"Why were you in Lockwood Park?" his father asked.

"Well, I was working. A bit like you, Dad. A late shift, sort of."

"Go on," said his father.

"I mean I didn't exactly get paid; I just got free entry..." Then a thought suddenly occurred to him.

"Mum," he exclaimed anxiously, "you haven't done the washing, have you?"

"I was kept up late last night, you may recall," said his mother, "and I have only just started breakfast."

But Felix had already dashed out of the room and upstairs to the laundry basket. He rummaged about and fished out his dirty shirt. There in the top pocket was his precious five-pound note. He breathed a sigh of relief, and took it into his bedroom. As he put it into his work-desk drawer, he noticed something wrapped inside. It was a business card.

Gaspard Black and Melanie White, Performance Artists. Contact 07990 321886.

On the back was a scribbled a different number with the message: "Phone me if you want to discuss future events -- Melanie."

"Felix," called his mother from below. "You haven't finished your breakfast."

He returned to the breakfast table.

"You were saying," prompted his father.

"It's crazy really," Felix began.

"I can believe that," said his father.

"Well," Felix went on, "there are these two performance artists. They're called Gaspard and Melanie. You remember that ghost tour I showed you in the paper, Mum? They arrange things like that for paying customers. They kind of hired me for the night to assist with the performance. The funny thing is, they take loads of trouble to fake a ghost -- but there's a real one! I saw her. Twice. Once in the garden and once on the stairs leading to the Long Gallery."

There was a period of silence.

After a while, his mother spoke: "Felix, I want you to promise me something. Don't ever again go out without telling me or your dad where you're going, and when you do go out, make sure you keep your phone switched on. Promise?"

There was a pause.

"Promise?"

"All right," said Felix, reluctantly.

"Is that a promise?"

"Yes."

His father got up and clapped Felix on the back. "Thank you, son," he said, and left the room to get ready for work. He had another shift coming up.

The rest of the weekend was uneventful, although it didn't exactly feel normal. Felix spent quite a lot of the time investigating the properties of his strange acquisition. He even gave it a name, Capability, at least in his own mind, after the person who designed the lake where he found it. One thing he soon learned about Capability was that it was risky to play with it outdoors. He'd taken it to the playing field near his house and since there was nobody on the football pitch, he decided to see if he could kick it into goal from the half-way line.

Not only did it go shooting through the goal, it flew at least 40 metres further and would have kept going if it hadn't hit a tree trunk at the edge of the field. It bounced back obliquely towards a woman walking her dog. Felix sprinted over at top speed to prevent the dog grabbing it in its jaws, which it

would have done if it hadn't been on an extensible lead which its owner stopped from extending further. He thanked her breathlessly, as he caught it in mid-air.



Clearly a single throw or kick could send it out of sight and even a strong wind might carry it away for ever. He would have to be very watchful to keep possession of it. Capability wasn't an outdoor plaything.

When Monday came, Felix rode off to school with Capability in his pocket. It stuck out a little but he didn't want to leave it at home or put it in his school bag. He wanted to make sure he always had it with him. Fortunately they didn't have PE on Mondays, when he might have to leave it in the changing room, which wouldn't really be secure. That was a problem he would still have to solve.

His last lesson that day was chemistry. When it ended, he hung around after most of the pupils had left. He wanted to do some tests on Capability. He asked the chemistry teacher, Miss Levi, whether he could stay behind for a short while to do an experiment.

"Sorry, Felix," she said. "I have to leave in half an hour and it takes 15 minutes to clear up here."

He moved towards the door to leave, but as he walked past her, she enquired: "What sort of experiment?"

"I won a prize in a swimming competition on Friday," he said. "It's some sort of ornament, but I don't know what it's made of. It isn't metal or stone, and I don't think it's plastic."

"Can I see it?"

Felix held it out.

"Very pretty. That's a striking design. I wonder if it's ceramic. Can I hold it?"

Felix handed it to her. She turned it over in her hand. "It's extremely lightweight," she said. "Maybe it's hollow." She picked up a glass rod and tapped it. "Hmmm. Doesn't sound hollow. I wonder how they did that. Okay, I'll give you 10 minutes. Let's start by seeing if it conducts electricity."

They moved to a workbench and she placed an electrode on either side of the object. "What's the current reading?" she asked.

"Zero," said Felix.

"So it's an insulator," she concluded. "Felix, could you please fetch the infra-red temperature gauge."

Felix came back with the temperature gauge and pointed it at Capability. "It's about 17.6," he said, "varying between 17.6 and 17.5."

"Curious," she replied. "That's cooler than the room. However, we don't have time to investigate that properly. What if I just tickled it with a Bunsen flame? Then we could note if it gave a distinctive colour."

"But it might catch fire."

"It doesn't look flammable to me," she said, "but all right, let's just try a little drop of acid, and see what that reveals."

"Won't that damage it?"

"I'll use a tiny amount. Come with me to the fume-extractor cupboard and put your protective specs back on."

Felix followed her and watched as she released a single drop of hydrochloric acid from a pipette onto Capability.

"No visible effect," she said, wiping the corner where she'd dropped the acid. She moved sideways to another bench and took a Geiger counter out of a drawer. As she held it over Capability, it started clicking.

"Well," she said, "we have learned something. It's radioactive."

"Is that dangerous?" Felix asked.

"No more than a chunk of granite. I wouldn't try to eat it, though." She handed it back to him. "It's an interesting piece you have there, Felix. It's too late to do things thoroughly tonight, but if you want to bring it back next week, I might have had time to set up some more informative tests."

"Right. Thanks," said Felix.

She went back to her lab-shutdown routine and Felix made for the door.

"See you next week," said Miss Levi as he opened the door.

"Bye," replied Felix.

As Felix was riding home that evening, he heard a slight grating from his back wheel. It had punctured. He was just approaching the village of Grimley, still more than a mile from home. He hadn't a repair kit with him, so he would have to walk home the rest of the way.

Frowning, he got off to walk, wheeling his bike beside him. Soon he was passing the village pub, The Three Lions. He glanced into the beer garden. At one of the tables four lads were drinking what looked like lager from pint glasses. They hardly looked any older than him.

One of the lads caught sight of Felix. "What are you staring at?" he asked aggressively.

"Under-age drinkers," replied Felix. It was a mistake.

The tallest of the four stood up. "Oh so you're some kind of booze inspector, are you? Come on boys, let's teach this stuck-up snot a lesson."

All four of them headed for the exit in the garden wall. Felix kept walking. He was wondering whether he could use his bike as a weapon or a shield. At that moment he wished he had paid more attention to the basic self-defence techniques that his father had taught him last year. But with one against four he didn't stand much of a chance.

He heard them running up behind him. They quickly caught up and surrounded him, one at each corner.

"So you think you have a right to tell people what they can drink?" said the tallest of the boys, who seemed the leader.

"Not really."

"Exactly. You don't. So you owe us an apology."

"I'm sorry."

"Is that good enough, boys?" The leader looked around.

"No," they chorused.

"Not good enough, you see. You better come up with something better than that. Why aren't you riding your bike?"

"I have a puncture."

"He has a puncture, poor chap," said the leader to his fellows. "So it's no use to him. We might as well take it off him."

"You can't have it," said Felix.

The leader pulled out a knife. "This says we can," he replied.

Felix felt a cold chill in his stomach. They started closing in on him,

"Okay, it's yours," Felix said. The leader approached as if to take it, but then put his knife back in its sheath. "Nah! Just kidding, mate," he said. "Why don't you join us for a drink? It's my round. If you don't fancy beer, have a soft drink. They serve all sorts of fruit juices here."

"Thanks, but I have to get home."

"Where's that?"

"Swancote."

"Not a problem. We'll take in in turns to carry your bike. We'll be there in no time."

So they jogged along, passing Felix's bike between them, cracking jokes as they went, and before long were at his garden gate.

"My friends call me Dino," said the leader, slapping Felix on the back. "It's been fun to meet you. Any time you feel like watching the footie on TV, come along down to The Three Lions. They have a nice wide screen. We'll make a night of it. Or you could come to my nineteenth birthday party. We celebrate that most weekends, know what I mean?" said Dino, grinning.

"Great," said Felix, though it didn't sound like an appealing prospect.

"See you, then," said Dino.

"Bye, see you later" said the other boys.

"Take care," said Felix and went into his front garden.

His father came out before he reached the front door. "Everything okay?"

"More or less," said Felix, "except my back wheel has a puncture."

"Let's fix that," said his father, and helped him wheel the bicycle to the garage, where they kept a repair kit.

While they were mending the punctured tyre, his father said: "I wouldn't advise mixing with those boys. How come you were with them? They don't go to your school, do they?"

"I bumped into them in Grimley, on the way home. Dino said he was going to take my bike."

"Dino, eh? So that's what he calls himself. That's Andy Dean. I recognized him. We've had dealings with him."

"He pulled a knife on me."

"A knife! What have I told you? What is rule number one if someone threatens you with a knife?"

"Run away. Fast."

"Did you?"

"There were four of them. They surrounded me. I had nowhere to go."

"But they looked all best of mates just now. How come?"

"They decided to be nice."

"Really? I've been defusing dodgy situations for a dozen years or more. An assailant with a knife turning into a friend doesn't happen of its own accord. You'd better tell me the whole story."

"Actually, dad, I think it must be Capability."

"What capability?"

So Felix took out Capability and showed it to his father. He explained how it had come into his possession and told him about all the occasions when people had been angry or hostile towards him but had suddenly turned friendly and helpful as soon as they got close.

His father still looked sceptical. "That doesn't make any sense," he said. "Let me have a look."

Felix handed it over, saying: "Don't drop it or throw it or anything. It could easily blow away. It's extremely light."

"It certainly is," said his father, turning it over in his hands. "It must be filled with helium."

"But it's solid. I found that out today in the science lab."

His father handed it back, looking thoughtful. As they were walking to the house, he said: "You know, Felix, I think I should check this out."

"How?"

"If you're right about your block thingie..."

"Capability," interrupted Felix.

"If you're right about Capability, it could prove invaluable in my line of work. I have another late shift coming up. I'd like to borrow it for Saturday night."

They were standing at the foot of the stairs. Felix didn't reply immediately. He was already starting to wish he'd kept Capability a secret.

"If it does what you think, it could save someone's life," his father added. "Mine, for example."

"Okay, dad," said Felix.

"Thank you, son. I'll take good care of it."

So the next Saturday Felix gave Capability, rather reluctantly, to his father as he prepared to go on duty. Because he'd been out late, his father didn't get up until nearly lunchtime on Sunday. When he did, Felix was waiting downstairs.

"Can I have Capability back, please?" Felix asked.

"Sure," said his father, and went back up to get it.

"Lunch is ready," said his mother, so Felix went into the kitchen. His father soon followed.

"It was just as you said. It worked a treat," said his father to Felix, as he put Capability on the table in front of him. "Amazing!"

"What's amazing?" asked Felix's mother.

"Our son," said Felix's father, "has discovered something amazing, Haze." (Haze was a nickname that he gave to his wife, who was actually called Hazel.)

Felix had already pocketed Capability. "Show your mum," said his father. (His name was Neil, by the way.)

Felix put it on the table again.

"It's pretty," said Hazel, "but why amazing?"

"We had to break up five fights in Derby central last night. One on Morledge, two in Market Place, one on Iron Gate and another on Macklin Street. It was like magic! Drunken louts swinging their fists one minute, quiet as lambs the next. Practically spoiled all my fun."

Felix and Hazel didn't get the joke, so he went on: "You'd better explain it to your mum, Felix."

Felix recounted pretty much the whole story to his mother, including Lady Blanche again, though he forgot to mention the meteorite crater. By the time he'd finished, lunch had gone cold, so Hazel reheated it in the microwave.

As they were eating, his father said: "Honestly, Felix, I think we're going to have to share this thing."

It was what Felix had been fearing. He could almost feel Capability slipping away from him. He pushed it deeper into his pocket.

"If only there were more of them," Neil went on, "we could get rid of tasers. We wouldn't even need handcuffs."

From then on, Neil regularly took Capability to work whenever he reckoned he had a difficult assignment coming up. On other days Felix took it to school, except when he had PE. He always took a detour to avoid Grimley. It was a longer route, but he didn't want to meet Dino, even with Capability in his pocket. Fortunately, his chemistry teacher appeared to have forgotten about their

little experiment. Felix realized that the fewer people who knew about his gift from outer space, by way of Lockwood Lake, the longer he might be able to hang on to it.

But it couldn't last. One day in September, his father called him into the sitting room when he came home from school.

"Felix," said his father, "I've been nominated for a commendation."

"Well done, dad!"

"Yes but it isn't exactly good news. We have this annual award called Peacemaker of the Year and the Superintendent nominated me for it. The award is open to all officers in the East Midlands. I've always been pretty good at de-escalating conflicts, but recently, as you know, I've gone off the scale. So our Chief Constable called me in to congratulate me and let me know my name was going forward. I had to come clean. He didn't believe me at first. At one point it looked like he was thinking of putting me on a disciplinary charge. But eventually I convinced him. The evidence is in the duty logs. The problem is, he believes that if Capability does what I told him, then it is a public asset and should be taken into safekeeping by the Derbyshire Force until its legal ownership is settled."

"But I found it!" protested Felix.

"I know. But according to our Chief, the law of Treasure Trove may apply to this case. That would make it royal property, which basically means the whole country owns it. Or possibly the de Murville family could have a claim. Anyway, there's a big operation, an organized crime bust, coming up this week and he wants to put your pacifier to the test by letting the officers doing our part of the operation have it. I couldn't really refuse. And once they prove that it works, I just don't see how we can keep it to ourselves."

Felix went up to his room and retrieved Capability from under his bed, where he now kept it.

"Goodbye," he said to the little cuboid. "It's been nice knowing you." Then he took it down and gave it to his father.

The crime bust operation went smoothly: no injuries and no need to use firearms. The trouble was, that confirmed to his superior officers what Neil had said about Capability's capability. That meant that the Chief Constable insisted that it had to be kept in a safe at police headquarters, and issued to officers for dangerous operations. Neil rarely saw it and Felix had to get used to life without any special protection.

One evening shortly before Christmas, Neil called out to Felix: "Hey, son! Come and look at this. We're on television."

Felix went into the sitting room. The local news programme was on. A reporter was interviewing Derbyshire's Chief Constable.

"The latest statistics show," said the interviewer, "that violent crime is down by 78% this year in our region. These are the best results in the whole country. To what do you attribute this remarkable success?"

"We've improved our training programmes and we've adopted the latest psychological methods for dealing with confrontational situations," replied the police chief, "and there are various new technologies coming in that we have benefitted from. And of course, a lot of it comes down to old-fashioned neighbourhood policing and good community relations."

Felix couldn't resist shouting "Rubbish!" at the TV.

"Yeah," his father chuckled, "that's the official story line. The Chief's afraid that if we tell everyone what's going on, the Metropolitan Police will want to take it away from us. If the London Force wants something, they nearly always get it. Then our statistics will go down the drain again."

But in fact it wasn't the Metropolitan Police who came to take Capability away. It was inevitable after it had been in regular use for several months by many different people that news would leak out. Some officers told their families; their families mentioned it to their close friends; eventually it came to the notice of government officials.

One day in January, shortly after Derbyshire police had recorded the least-violent Christmas and New Year celebrations ever in the county's history, a team from the Barston Down Defence Research Establishment turned up at the Chief Constable's office and requisitioned Capability. Felix heard about that from his father and assumed that would be the last he would hear of the little cuboid which, in a sense, he'd regarded as a friend.

It wasn't long before that assumption was proved wrong. One afternoon, just after he had returned from a mock exam at school, Felix was alone in the house when there was a knock on the door. It was too late to be the postman. He wondered if it might be his mother, having forgotten her keys. He hoped it wasn't Dino and his gang. He went into the sitting room and peeped out through the corner of the window.

Standing by the door step were two men and a woman. One of the men was wearing a soldier's uniform.

Part 3: Military Manoeuvres

Felix opened the door.

"May we come in?" said the woman.

"I guess so." He let them into the hallway.

"I presume you are Felix Dyce," said the woman.

"That's right," Felix replied.

"We'd like to have a word with you," she said. "Is there somewhere we could sit down?"

Felix led them into the dining room and they sat around the table. When they were seated, the woman introduced herself.

"I'm Doctor Bula Lertulo, and these are my colleagues, Colonel Banford and Sergeant Lute. We're from the Ministry of Defence. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

"I see."

"Sergeant Lute will record our conversation," she continued. The sergeant put a recording device on the table and switched it on.

"Right."

"We've already spoken with your father and we understand from him that you discovered an unusual object nearby, in Lockwood Park."

"Capability. Yes."

"I beg your pardon."

"I call it Capability. I found it in Lockwood Lake. Or rather it found me."

"Could you tell us a bit more about it?"

"Well, actually I only found part of it. The first bit was left behind by my girlfriend."

"Who's that?"

"Her name is Aliec Vitcoria Waston. I don't know how she got it. She lives in Bedwold, but I don't have her address. She isn't my girlfriend any more."

"We'll find her," said the colonel.

"I had Aliec's stone in my pocket, only it isn't a stone, when I fell into the lake and it sort of magnetically attracted the other part which was buried in the mud at the bottom and it nearly drowned me. That part is bigger, by the way."

Just then they heard the front door opening. It was Hazel, back from work. She walked into the dining room.

"Excuse me, who are you?" she asked, looking around.

Dr Lertulo stood up. "Good afternoon. I'm Doctor Lertulo from the Barston Down Defence Research Establishment, and these are my colleagues. We've come to interview your son."

"He's only 17. You have no right to question him alone. He should have an adult present," said Felix's mother.

"We have a special warrant," said Dr Lertulo, and took a document from her handbag to show Hazel. "But of course you're welcome to sit in on our interview. Just please don't interrupt unless we ask you to speak."

"Are you all right?" Hazel asked Felix.

"Yes, it's okay, mum. They just want to know about Capability."

Hazel sat down and the interview continued.

Dr Lertulo went on: "When did the incident at Lockwood Lake occur?"

"It was midsummer's night, last year."

"And can you tell us who else, apart from Aliec Waston, may have come across or handled the object concerned?"

"Well, there's my dad. You say you've talked to him."

"Yes."

"I held it too, briefly," interjected Hazel. They didn't seem to mind her interruption.

"I also showed it to my chemistry teacher, Miss Levi. She did some tests on it, but there wasn't time to find out much. She seemed to forget about it after that."

"What school do you attend?"

"Ibworth Sixth Form College."

"Thank you. Anybody else who had contact with the object?"

Felix paused to think. "Lots of police officers at dad's work."

"Yes, we know about them. Anyone else?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Is there anything else that you can tell us about it?"

"Well, it's mostly greenish with turquoise streaks and a few little black blobs. It's virtually weightless and it stops fights. But I suppose you know that."

"Indeed."

"That's about it."

"Where did you keep the object, when it was in your possession?"

"In my bedroom, under my bed."

"Would you kindly show Sergeant Lute that location?"

"All right." Felix got up. Sergeant Lute turned off the recording device and followed Felix up the stairs.

Once in Felix's room, the sergeant asked: "Whereabouts under your bed did you keep the thing?"

"Roughly in the middle."

Lute took out what looked like a miniature vacuum cleaner and got down on his knees. He vacuumed a load of dust from under the middle part of the bed. Standing up, he asked, "anywhere else?"

"The first few days, I put it in the top drawer of my bedside table," Felix replied, rather too helpfully as he soon realized.

"We'll have to take that in," said the sergeant, sliding out the drawer.

"But it's got my MP3 player in it. And all my hankies and my underpants!" protested Felix.

"We'll send the contents back by courier when we've finished our investigations."

"When will that be?"

"Can't be sure, I'm afraid. A week or so. A fortnight at most."

Felix grunted, but before he could complain further, the sergeant was on his way down the stairs, where Dr Lertulo and the colonel were preparing to leave.

"So," said Dr Lertulo, looking at Felix, "that will be all for the moment. Thank you for your cooperation. If any further points occur to you, telephone this number at any time of day or night." She handed him a card. "And I must tell you that if you talk further about this matter with anyone else outside your family, you will be committing an offence and may be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act."

"What are you going to do with Capability?" asked Felix.

"Our job is to ask questions," said Dr Lertulo with a slight smile, "not necessarily to answer them."

Hazel led them to the door. She was frowning.

"Goodbye, and thank you for your hospitality," said Dr Lertulo as they left.

"Bye," said Felix.

The trio walked a little way down the road to where a black car was parked, got in and drove off.

* * * *

It was actually five weeks before Felix got his underwear and handkerchiefs back, not a fortnight as Sergeant Lute had said, and the MP3 player enclosed in the package was a new one, not the one they had taken away. The drawer itself never came back.

For months after that there was no news of Capability. By summertime Felix's memories of his strange companion were beginning to fade. At times it seemed like a daydream. He didn't expect to hear any more about it. But one day during the summer holidays he was at home, when he got a text message on his mobile phone.

I'm sitting at the bottom of your road in a green Toyota hybrid. Please join me asap.
Urgent, Aliec. (No peanuts! ;)

Felix didn't recognize the number. It wasn't Aliec's old number. Could it be a trick, an imposter?

He went upstairs. From the boxroom window he could just about see a green car down the road. He decided that the bit about peanuts was a kind of password, so the message probably was genuine.

He went out, locking the door behind him, and walked towards the green Toyota. When he got close enough, he could see that in the driver's seat was indeed Aliec. There was a man in the passenger seat who got out, opened the rear door and said: "jump in!"

Felix got into the back seat.

"Hi," said Aliec, "glad you could make it."

"Hi," said Felix.

"You two know each other, I believe," she added, nodding towards her front-seat passenger.

Felix took a closer look at him. It was Sergeant Lute.

"Why didn't you send me my own MP3 player back?" enquired Felix, saying the first thing that came into his head.

"Our computer hotshots found too much interesting data in it. So we sent you an upgrade instead," replied the sergeant. "It should be an improvement."

"You never sent the drawer either," Felix continued.

"Destructive testing, I'm afraid," replied Lute. "But I could probably get you reimbursed if you tell us what it cost to replace."

"There are things we need to discuss," cut in Aliec. "We'd better move off. Do you fancy The Three Lions at Grimley? It isn't far. They have a nice large beer garden where we could talk."

"I'd rather not," replied Felix.

So they drove to a pub at the edge of Lockwood Park, and sat at a wooden table in the corner of the outdoor seating area.

When Sergeant Lute had gone to get the drinks, Felix asked Aliec: "Is he your new boyfriend?"

"That's for you to work out. Since we're on the subject, you've presumably worked out that you aren't."

"I guessed."

"Good. Glad to have that out of the way. No hard feelings, eh?"

"Soft feelings then," said Felix.

Aliec looked at him quizzically, then continued: "This meeting is about something else, though it is something that concerns us both."

"Capability?"

"Yes, I heard you gave it that name. I called mine Nick."

"Why Nick?"

"Because our dog dug it up when we were having a family picnic, quite near here in fact," she said, pointing over his shoulder towards Lockwood Park.

"So you know that you left your part behind in my house?"

"I know now. For a long time I thought it must have got lost during our house move."

"Did your Nick have any special properties?"

"Not as much as when joined to the part you found, I gather, but I did think of it as a lucky charm. I never had hay fever again after I found it, and one time I had a take-away meal which I'm pretty sure must have contained peanuts but I was carrying Nick and my reaction was extremely mild. So I would have kept it with me if I could."

Sergeant Lute returned with their drinks.

"Paul will explain why we've invited you here," said Aliec.

"Yes, please do call me Paul," said the sergeant.

"Cheers, Paul!" said Felix, raising his glass.

"Cheers!" said Aliec and Paul, who continued: "You'll remember that when we spoke with you earlier this year you gave us Aliec's name. Well, we tracked her down and went to interview her about her part in the discovery. It turned out that our research centre already had a connection with where she was working, so she and I have had several more meetings since then."

Felix emitted a little snort, which he thought wasn't audible, but the others noticed.

"Perhaps I'd better fill in a bit of background," put in Aliec. She was only four months older than Felix but had jumped a year ahead in schooling. "I've done my A-levels this summer..."

"And learned to drive," interrupted Felix. "Pretty well, from what I can see."

"Thanks. Anyway I have an offer from Leicester University to study Astrobiology and I'll be starting my course in a couple of months. Meanwhile I've been doing some intern work since the Christmas vacation in the university's Space Science laboratory. Professor Buckshaw, who's the director of that lab, has links with the Barston Down centre and two of our postgraduate students have been seconded to work down there on the hovercube."

"That's what we call your Capability," said Paul, "because it's so easy to keep in the air. I'm involved with Colonel Banford's group, which has been investigating it. Among other things, I have been ferrying those postgrads between Barston Down and Leicester. As a result, I have learned a lot about the hovercube and what we plan to do with it, some of which is extremely disturbing. I have shared most of this with Aliec, because I came to the conclusion that there were only two people I could discuss it with openly. The other, as you'll realize, is you. There is a problem, however."

"What's that?" asked Felix, though he had more than a vague idea.

"What I've said already could get me into deep trouble, and if I tell you more, it will be, to put it bluntly, illegal. As is the project we propose to recruit you on."

"I see."

"So," he went on, "at this point we offer you the chance to back out. If you don't like the idea of getting involved, which could put us in danger -- including you -- then you can say so. You finish your drink, we drive you home, end of story."

"On the other hand," said Aliec, "I know what Paul has to say and can assure you that it's an incredibly important matter -- to the whole world, not just to us."

"What's it to be?" asked Paul.

"I'm in," said Felix.

"Good for you," said Paul. "So the situation is that we've been putting your little magic cuboid through all the tests we can think of. It's been X-rayed; it's been analyzed by several sorts of spectrometer; it's been through an NMR scanner; we've shone lasers of many frequencies at it; it's been stress-tested ... you name it, we've done everything to it. Fortunately it's very robust. And our

computing whizzkids together with the bright bods from Leicester University have made a computer model of its structure. We now know a lot about its chemical composition, but we still have practically no idea how it works. The problem is that the high-ups in the Ministry of Defence boasted about it to their pals in the USA. In fact, I'm pretty certain it was the Minister himself. So then we had a visit from our American allies. They saw some demonstrations and now the Pentagon is demanding that we hand it over so they can weaponize it. It's clear how they mean to use it. We've seen their plans. They're going to attach it to a drone -- exceedingly light and manoeuvrable -- either remote-controlled or robot-controlled, send it over to Zaghistan and buzz it over the villages where they think the insurgents are holed up. Then everybody will come out smiling and waving, including the militants, who'll have left their guns and grenades behind. Sounds all right so far, does it?"

"I suppose so."

"Maybe it could be, but the reality is that they'll just shoot them. The whole lot."

"That's unfair!"

"Exactly. What could have been absolutely invaluable for peace-keeping is going to facilitate war crimes."

"Don't let them have it, then."

"I wish. But the world doesn't work like that. They offer the minister a deep discount on a dozen 100-million-dollar military jets and he says 'Yessir!'. He knows that if he had the guts to say 'no sir!' (which he doesn't) suddenly lots of big-name British companies would find it very difficult to sell their exports to the USA."

Felix sighed. "So we can't stop them."

"Well there is a chance. Although our government is happy to let it go for whatever promises they have received, Colonel Banford isn't, and for the next couple of weeks, he's in charge of it. He has his own fiendish plan to retain it in this green and pleasant land, or rather a copy of it. And I'm part of the team to execute that plan."

Paul paused as some customers of the pub walked past, then leaned forward, speaking very quietly. "To cut a long story short, the Colonel has some buddies in the Rolls-Royce aero factory in Derby. Very few people know that they have a high-energy quantum replicator on site."

"A what?"

"Think of it like the most super-sophisticated 3D printer ever. It's the only one in this country. It basically clones things. Perfect in this case since we haven't been able to manufacture anything with similar effects even though we have a high-fidelity mapping of its composition at the atomic level. So the colonel's idea is to make a copy to keep in GB. Or more likely keep the original and give the copy to the Yanks."

"But it might not work the same way."

"That would scupper Banford's best-laid plans, but for our purposes it wouldn't matter, because we have our own plan, and that is to take it off him before it gets to the replicator."

"How?"

"That's where you come in," said Paul, "but I could do with another drink first. Anyone else?"

"Pineapple juice," said Aliec. "I'm driving."

"A low-alcohol cider for me, please," said Felix.

Paul got up to go inside. "Perhaps you could fill him in, Aliec, while I'm at the bar. Discreetly, mind."

Aliec looked around to make sure nobody else was within earshot. "Well," she began, "the reason it just might work is that Colonel Banford's plan is unofficial too, so he can't use all the resources they have at Barston Down without attracting suspicion. There will only be four people involved: Paul, Banford, a Lieutenant Keen and one of the Barston Down scientists called Tony Chen. Actually, make that seven. There's Banford's contact at Rolls-Royce and two assistants, but if all goes well we won't meet them. On September 1st they plan to drive up at night from Barston Down to Derby, make the copy, and return before anyone notices anything missing. They'll only have one car, plus Lieutenant Keen on a motorbike to ride ahead and warn them by walkie-talkie if there's an obstacle or obstruction. They don't want to approach on a main road like the A38 or A514, in order to keep a low profile, so they're going to drive up a minor road called Lowes Lane onto Sinfin Moor which is on the south side of the factory, and actually complete the last few hundred metres on foot. Our plan is to intercept them just south of Sinfin Moor. There's a perfect location at Lowes Bridge where the road crosses the Trent and Mersey canal. We can wait right after the bridge where there's a lay-by."



"But how will you stop them?" Felix asked.

At that point Paul returned and placed their drinks on the table.

"I've got up to where we're waiting at Lowes Bridge," said Aliec. "Perhaps you could continue from there."

"Right," said Paul. "I will be in the car with Colonel Banford and the hovercube, approaching the ambush spot. The tricky part is making sure I'm in charge of the hovercube. Banford will want to keep hold of it. Fortunately we've developed focusing devices while we've been playing with it. So I should be able to direct its influence in his direction. At the bridge there will be a figure looking like a policeman waving us down. If I'm driving I stop the car. If Banford is driving I direct the hovercube's effect at him and he stops at my request. Then we get out and hand it over."

"What about Tony Chen?" asked Felix.

"As long as I have the hovercube, he goes along with the programme."

"Then what?"

"That's where you come in."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"What you should know," explained Paul, "is that seven years ago I served in a United Nations peace-keeping mission in Neniejo. I got quite friendly with my commanding officer, Major Masimba, as he then was. Since that time he has risen fast. Now he works for the UN. He is deputy secretary-general of the Peacebuilding Affairs Secretariat. Their headquarters are in New York, but he works from their office in Geneva. We've kept in touch and last month he was over in Oxford at a conference, where I was able to meet him face to face. Luckily he trusts me, so he believed, eventually, what I told him about the hovercube. He's part of our plan. He'll be waiting, with his driver, about a kilometre away at a quiet junction with the A514 by Cuttle Bridge, ready to dash down to East Midlands Airport and catch a flight to Geneva. The great thing is that he has a diplomatic passport, so he can take anything through customs and they can't stop him. When he's back in Geneva, he'll call a press conference at the United Nations Building along with senior UN colleagues and tell the world about the hovercube. Once it has been demonstrated in public and everyone knows about its amazing attributes, it won't be possible for one single nation to control it, especially not as an offensive weapon. And if it does become possible to clone it, then it will be a fantastic gift for the whole human race."

They fell quiet for a while. Then Felix broke the silence.

"Are you thinking that I will carry Capability to this Major Masimba?"

"You're catching on. Though he was General Masimba by the time he joined the UN."

"You mentioned that he would be about a kilometre away." Felix was having doubts.

"That's right. We don't want Banford to see him. As soon as the hovercube is on its way, Banford will undoubtedly try to detain us. He'll probably alert the authorities. Even though Masimba has diplomatic immunity it's better if nobody else knows about his role until he's safely airborne. Also it

should be safer for you. Of course, we'll have to wear disguise, but the way we see it is that Aliec and I will have to stay with Banford and company to keep them as busy and confused as possible. We'll just have to face the music, but whoever transports the hovercube has a good chance of remaining anonymous when the fireworks go off. Besides, that way Masimba will be closer to the airport and won't have to back-track along Lowes Lane, which adds a detour in the wrong direction and is easily blocked. Lieutenant Keen will surely re-enter the picture at some point, depending on how quickly she realizes something is amiss, and we don't want her catching up with his vehicle and reporting its registration number. So we're relying on you to pedal like crazy along the towpath to Cuttle Bridge and deliver the goods. That's about one kilometre eastwards, second bridge along."

Felix was letting this sink in when his phone buzzed. "It's a text from my mum," he told them. "I promised I'd let her know where I am."

"We'd better wrap up," said Paul.

Felix sent an SMS to his mother saying that he was with friends and would be back home in 20 minutes.

"Ideally, we need a rehearsal, and we only have a week," said Paul when they were in the car. "Is there any night when you could be out of your house between 9pm and 1am?"

"Friday, Saturday, maybe Sunday, I guess."

"Sunday's too late," said Paul.

"Friday's difficult for me," said Aliec.

"It'll have to be Saturday," said Paul. "You have Aliec's mobile number. Memorize mine as well." He then spoke the numerals slowly.

"I'll remember," said Felix.

"Good, but don't write it down and don't phone either of us. If you can't make it on Saturday, send us a text saying 'burnt toast'. But we will have to meet again. We'll get a message to you somehow. Whatever it says, we'll be in this car but round the corner a bit further from your street. Left turn. Okay?"

"More or less."

"We're counting on you," said Aliec.

They left him at the end of his road and drove off.

Hazel greeted Felix as he entered: "Where were you?"

"At The Lockwood Arms, having a drink with friends."

"You won't be eighteen for two months, remember."

"I feel middle-aged already. Anyway I only had low-alcohol cider. It hardly counts."

"You didn't cycle there, did you?"

"No, I got a lift there and back."

"I hope whoever drove doesn't think low alcohol means no alcohol."

"Mum, don't panic. She drank pineapple juice."

"She?"

"Is this an interrogation?"

"All right. Be enigmatic if you like, but I just don't want you getting into trouble. And don't forget, you promised to tell me where you'd be yet I came in to an empty house. You could have sent a text."

"Sorry mum. I'll remember next time."

But Felix knew that he had just agreed to break that promise. What on earth had he been thinking of? He went into his room and sat on the bed in a very anxious frame of mind.

* * * *

Two days later he was flicking through a school textbook in a desultory fashion when he received a text message from the number that Paul had given him.

Cinderella's carriage leaves at 4pm today if she can find her slippers.

He looked at his watch. It was 3:30pm. He sent back a text that read "Cinderella has found a pair of walking boots".

At four o'clock he walked round the corner at the end of his road and saw the same green Toyota that Aliec had driven. She was in the driving seat again, alone this time.

When Felix opened the passenger door, she asked: "How long have you got?"

"Not very long, I think, less than an hour."

"We'd better go for a walk then. Somewhere locally. There's a little wood at the top of this road beyond the playing fields I seem to recall."

"That's right."

"Let's go there."

She locked the car and they walked up the hill.

"I borrowed Paul's phone today," she began, by way of explanation. "He has another for work. I need to talk to you because we have a problem."

"Oh."

Aliec waited until they were strolling among the trees before telling him what the problem was. "Paul had earmarked a friend of his who's in the military police for our little escapade. But it turns out that he'll be out of the country on 1st September. He's been posted to Cyprus. So that just leaves you and me as the road block. In fact it would just be me, as you'll be under the bridge waiting to ride away with the loot. It won't be enough. It's good that they see a female officer at the road block (in other words, me). That will help to reassure them a bit. But on my own I just won't be able to do it."

"Paul will be there."

"Only after I have brought them to a halt. It won't look right if there's just a single policewoman. They'll probably smell a rat."

"Does that mean we have to cancel?" asked Felix. Although he firmly believed that their plot was for a very good cause, the idea that he might not have to take part in the operation gave him a sense of relief.

"Not necessarily," she replied, "not if you can persuade your dad to join us."

"What?!"

"Don't shout," said Aliec.

"That's impossible," he said in a more normal voice.

She ignored his protest. "The beauty of it would be that we'd have a real policeman on the team. He could tell if we were doing things wrong. Maybe he could get some real police-incident tape and the proper sign boards. Plus if he had his radio he could monitor the police frequency and alert us if they were likely to interfere."

"But he'd lose his job! He might go to prison."

"The question is: which is more important, your father's career or the future of humanity?"

"That's beside the point. It won't work. Our plan is illegal. His job is to enforce the law. It's his life. How could I persuade him? If I tell him about it, he'll probably arrest me."

"I realize that it is difficult."

"Impossible, you mean."

"We can't afford impossibilities."

"We can't wish them away either."

"We'll have to be getting back now. Please Felix, think about it. Sleep on it. Think it over. Are you free at the same time tomorrow?"

"A bit earlier would be better."

"Fine, 3 o'clock tomorrow. Same place. If you have more time we could drive somewhere and talk at leisure."

"Okay, in that case 2:30pm would be better."

"Right. See you then."

They'd reached the green car. As Felix was about to go, Aliec squeezed his hand and said: "I do appreciate what you're doing."

After Aliec had driven off, he trudged home deep in thought. His mind was in turmoil. He wished he had never consented to get mixed up in this murky business. It was utterly ridiculous to expect his father to join in. Nevertheless, he spent the rest of the day racking his brains to think of any way that he could broach such a subject with his father. And he was still racking his brains, in vain, when he finally fell asleep, long after midnight.

Part 4: A Perilous Project

The next morning, however, he woke up feeling surprisingly calm. He had decided what he needed to do.

As planned, he met Aliec at 2:30pm.

"The weather's fine and Lockwood Park is open to the public today," she said as he fixed his seatbelt. "I thought it might be neat to go and wander round there as we talk."

"Why not," said Felix.

Having parked the car, they headed first to the outer section of the Italianate Garden.



They found an empty bench and sat down.

"Have you decided about your dad?" Aliec asked.

"I have, but you might not be pleased."

"Aren't you going to talk to him?"

"I am, but so are you; and so is Paul."

"What do you mean?"

"If he just hears it from me, he'll either think I'm in fantasy-land and call one of his contacts in Mental Health Services to give me counselling, or he'll arrest me. And get you arrested too. It'll blow the whole plan. If he hears about it from you and me and Paul, he might believe us. After all, he does know about Capability. He still might not join in, of course, but on my own I have essentially no chance of persuading him."

"It's too risky."

"There's no other way. If you want me involved, you'll have to have my parents too."

"Parents?"

"Yeah. Do you really think dad and I can scoot off in the middle of the night leaving my mum to wake up and wonder what the hell is going on? With a rehearsal as well!"

Alic let out a long breath.

"You'll have to come round to our house, with Paul, and lay it on the table" Felix added. "I think Saturday afternoon is the only practical time. I should be able to make sure they're in. We're going to meet that day anyway."

"I'll have to check with Paul."

"If he can't do it, you'll have to find another policeman. Or pretend policeman. And I'll have to drop out too."

"You're backing out!" she said accusingly.

"Only if it's doomed to fail. Expecting me to disappear for several hours on two different nights without anyone noticing is just unrealistic."

"I'd have to get in touch with Paul," said Alec after a pause. She stood up. "Let me think about this. Shall we have a wander round the lake while I'm thinking it over? Walking helps clear the mind."

"Sure," relied Felix.

So they wandered round the lake where the source of so much upheaval in their lives had been found, with Felix taking care not to get too close to the waterside, and to avoid the plentiful droppings of the Canada Geese that they watched dipping for food. It gave them a chance to catch up. Alic explained how moving to Bedwold had enabled her to skip up a year at school and told him a bit about the work she was already involved with at Leicester University, even before becoming a full-time student there. There was a team there designing an experiment for a Mars rover, and she'd already helped with analyses of data from an earlier mission.

"I've handled a Martian meteorite that was brought from Antarctica," she told him. "That was quite cool."

"And one from further away than that."

"Yeah, probably a lot further away. Still, Mars is really interesting. We're looking for signs of life. There are a few clues, but no one is sure. We'll have to go there if we really want to find out. That's what I hope to do. My ambition is to be the first person to set foot on Mars."

"First woman on Mars: that would be cool!"

"First human," she corrected him.

"Won't happen if they lock us all up for a long time," said Felix.

"What a bundle of optimism you are!"

"Seriously, won't this business mess up your chances? Even if we succeed it sounds like you'll be in real trouble. Won't you lose your university place?"

"Yes, it could turn ugly. But we think that if General Masimba gets things right, it will be obvious that we've done something worthwhile. People will see that it was for the greater good. Giving us a severe punishment would be very unpopular. In cases like that juries sometimes acquit even when they shouldn't, legally speaking. That's our hope anyway. And you might get away with it altogether, so long as everything goes smoothly. We won't blab about your part."

"But my dad will get clobbered, even if it does go smoothly."

"Yes, it'll be harder for him to leave the scene without being identified. That's another thing I'll have to talk about with Paul."

They headed back to the car. While Aliec was driving him home, Felix proposed that she or Paul should send a message saying "Saturday matinee at X" where X was the time they were coming. He would do his best to ensure that his parents were at home all Saturday afternoon.

When he got in after Aliec had dropped him near his house, both his parents were in the kitchen.

"Are you going to be at home this Saturday afternoon?" Felix asked.

"I think so," said Neil.

"I'm not sure. Why?" asked Hazel.

"I can't explain now, but it's important that you're here. Very important actually. A couple of visitors will be coming that really need to talk to you."

"What time?" asked Neil.

"Not quite sure. It'll be after lunch. I'll tell you the time when I know it. I should know soon."

"Who are these VIP visitors? Won't you even tell us what it's about?" asked Hazel.

"Can't say any more."

"This sounds dodgy," said Neil. "I hope you're not in trouble."

"Please trust me, dad. You will understand."

Neil looked across at Hazel. "What do you think?" he asked her.

"We could give him the benefit of the doubt," she replied.

"Okay then," his father said to Felix, "but it had better be good."

"It will be," said Felix.

Late that evening he got a message from Paul's number. "Saturday matinee at 4pm" it said.

* * * *

That Saturday, Paul and Aliec arrived at Felix's front door at 4pm prompt. Felix led them into the sitting room.

"Mum and dad, you have met Aliec and Paul before," said Felix by way of introduction. "They have come to discuss something very important."

Hazel asked if they'd like something to drink, then went into the kitchen to make tea.

While she was out of the room, Felix said to his father: "Dad, I want you to remember that you're off duty."

"I don't like the sound of that," said Neil. Hazel returned with the teas.

"Allow me to explain," said Paul. "We've come to ask for a very big favour. Your son wants to help us in a project that he agrees is of vital importance to the whole world; but it carries a risk, so quite rightly he will only take part with your cooperation. As you may have guessed, we approached him because our project is connected with the object he found in Lockwood Park last year. Like him, you know that object has special properties."

Neil nodded in assent, and Paul, with help from Aliec and Felix, spent the next half hour describing the details of their plan to kidnap Capability, in order to make it a resource for peaceful purposes worldwide rather than a weapon for one or two nations.

When Paul finished there was a short pause; then Hazel shook her head sadly and said: "It's completely crazy!"

Neil said: "You have put me in a very difficult position. I joined the police to catch villains and keep them off the streets. I didn't sign up to save the whole world."

Aliec looked apprehensive.

Neil went on. "You have admitted that you intend to break the law. Obviously I should inform my superiors so that they can take the necessary actions to deal with you. That includes you, Felix." Neil turned to his son and continued: "But in fact I'm proud of you. As your mum says, it's an insane idea;

but it's a brave one and it's in a worthy cause. So let's get a move on. If we're going to have a practice run at 9pm, we haven't got much time."

Felix burst out laughing. Hazel cried: "I married a madman! My son's gone bonkers too!"

"You reckon we should call it off then?" asked Neil, suddenly less confident.

"Not at all. Count me in. You'll need someone sane to look after you."

Neil smiled.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Aliec.

They set off for their rehearsal just after 9pm. Aliec, Neil and Paul went by way of Barrow upon Trent to Lowes Bridge where they planned to stage the hold-up. They took a fold-away bike in the boot, which Felix was to use to convey Capability. Luckily Neil had kept an old Halt signboard which got damaged in a traffic operation several years back as a souvenir in his garage, so they took that along too. Meanwhile Hazel drove Felix by a more southerly route via Swarkestone to the place where they planned for General Masimba to wait, just off the A514 by Cuttle Bridge. It was a good thing they had arranged a trial run because once they were in the area they realized that things wouldn't be as simple as they'd thought when looking at the map. In the first place, the intended waiting place they had in mind for General Masimba was far too busy for a car to stay parked for up to two hours without attracting attention. They found a quieter location further down Swarkestone Road, but that would add at least 400 metres to Felix's journey on the night.

That would mean communicating again with Masimba, to let him know about the change of plan. They wanted to keep their communications to a minimum, just in case they were being monitored. Fortunately, Masimba, like most other UN staff, had a kryptophone, which was designed to be secure against any kind of electronic eavesdropping, and he had lent a handset to Neil, so they thought they could solve that particular problem.

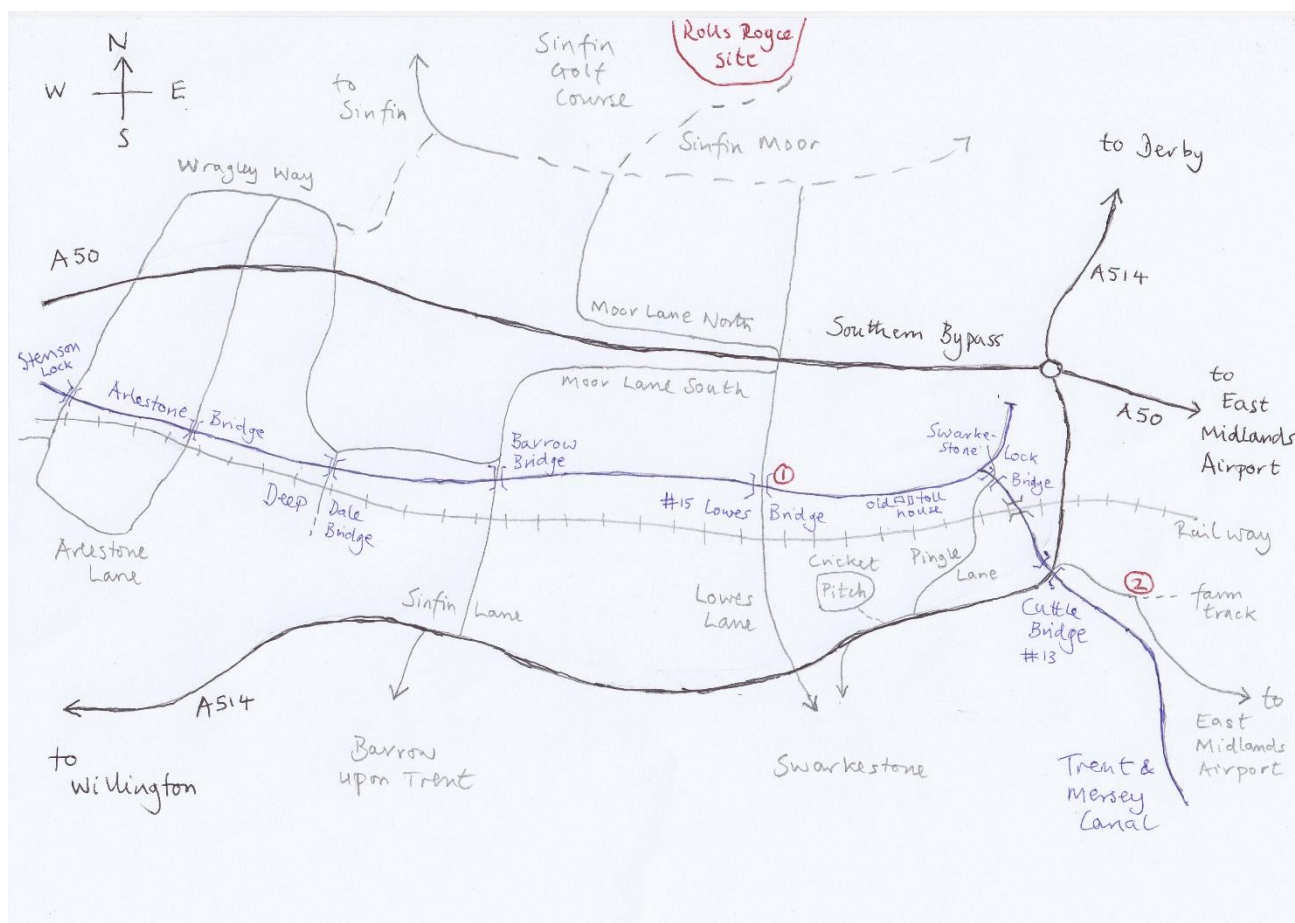
The next difficulty was that there was a tractor with a trailer parked in the lay-by just beyond Lowes Bridge where they planned to park their car on the night. There was no one in it, but it meant that they had to think of a back-up location. They found a fairly sheltered parking spot further up the road, round the corner on Moor Lane South; but if they had to use that, it would complicate matters. Among other things, if they had to rely on that plan B, it would make it harder for Neil to slip away in the confusion without being identified.

The rehearsal plan called for Felix to walk from Cuttle Bridge, where his mother dropped him, to Lowes Bridge, where his father and the others were stationed, to get accustomed to the layout of the towpath. Then he would pedal back on the folding bike so that they could time his trip and estimate how long it would take to get Capability from the scene of the hold-up to Masimba's car. On the way by foot, he got confused because Paul had said Cuttle Bridge was two bridges along, but he'd ignored a railway bridge. In fact Felix's route would go under three bridges, not two, a fact that he only worked out after starting to leave the canal on the wrong road and finding nobody waiting. Also, when he cycled back, in the direction he would use when carrying Capability, it took nearly nine minutes. Firstly it was slippery because it had been raining so he didn't go at full speed. Secondly it took him a while to get used to the folding bike with its small wheels. Thirdly, even at almost 10pm, there were some people working by torchlight on a boat moored by the old toll house, partly

blocking the path, and he had to slow down and weave carefully past them. On the 1st September he would have Capability, so nobody could impede him deliberately; but it showed that there plenty of ways that their plan could be upset. Finally, and most importantly, his extended route was longer than the thousand metres which Aliec and Neil had quoted. It was more like 1500 metres.

When they returned to Felix's house shortly before midnight they reassured Felix that he'd be much quicker on the night: now that he knew the route he would take five minutes at most. There was plenty more to discuss. By the time they'd talked over the adjustments needed to the original plan, and made sure everyone knew exactly what they would be doing on the night of the heist, it was past 1 o'clock. Aliec and Paul departed and Felix and his parents went straight to bed.

Felix fell asleep almost at once. But during the night he had a horrible dream. He was cycling along the towpath with Capability when he hit a puddle in the dark and skidded. He fell sideways into the water and felt himself being sucked downwards to the bottom of the canal. All his struggling just dragged him deeper into the mud. It was like his first encounter with Capability, only this time he couldn't free himself. He awoke with a start, gasping for breath. It was just before sunrise.



Part 5: The Events at Bridge 15

On 1st September Aliec drove Felix and Neil to the hold-up spot just north of Lowes Bridge, marked 1 on the map. They took up their positions soon after sunset. Hazel started half an hour later and took a loop to Cuttle Bridge from the south, so that she could drive past that place where General Masimba's car was meant to be waiting and confirm that he was at the spot marked 2 on the map. Then she drove to her place in the car park of the Crewe and Harpur pub in Swarkestone. The idea was that Felix would cycle there to meet her after dropping Capability and that Neil would get there on foot to join them, provided that he could slip away without being identified after taking part in the initial hold-up. Then they would quit the area. If anyone seemed suspicious of Hazel waiting in the pub's car park, she would have to drive up to the A50 roundabout, go right round it and come back, hoping that they would lose interest while she was gone.

Neil had smartened up his Halt sign and obtained a roll of tape saying "police line do not cross" which was about to be trashed because Derbyshire police had recently adopted a new style with a lighter shade of blue. Members of the public wouldn't notice the difference.

The tractor and its trailer were gone, so they could park the car where they intended, but at first there was rather more traffic than they wanted. A number of cars drove by, returning from some kind of shooting range on the other side of the bypass. Nobody stopped so they assumed they had not attracted attention. Felix took the bike down to the towpath and unfolded it. He waited behind a bush just off the path since they had seen some walkers when they arrived and he didn't want to have to explain why he was hanging around.

As it grew darker traffic on the lane dwindled to nothing. Time seemed to pass very slowly. At about 10 past 10 Neil said: "They're leaving it late."

"Yes," agreed Aliec, "Another half hour and Masimba won't be able to make the 11:35 flight."

"Then we'll be in trouble."

"Big trouble," said Aliec. "There is a flight at 6 in the morning, but by that time there will be a real hue and cry. If he has to hang about for six hours I'm not sure that even a diplomatic passport would be enough to protect him."

At that point their conversation was drowned out by the noise of an engine approaching. A helicopter passed overhead, heading towards Sinfin Golf Course.

"That was flying extremely low," said Neil. "I felt as if I had to duck."

"It wasn't a police helicopter, was it?" asked Aliec.

"It didn't look like it," replied Neil.

Another twenty minutes passed. Their nerves stretched taut. Just as Neil was saying "they're cutting it too fine", Aliec received a text message from Paul. It read: "Prince Charming's carriage is a pumpkin."

"Paul has sent the cancel code!" she said, shocked.

"You mean the whole thing is off?" asked Neil.

Before she could answer, a bright light lit up the sky. Moments later their ears were assaulted by the noise of a huge explosion. They looked north to the source of the sound where a blazing incandescent orange trail marked the path of an object shooting vertically upwards at great speed.

"Time to depart," said Neil. He leaned over the bridge and called to Felix, who came running up to join them carrying the fold-away bike.

"Did you see that?!" exclaimed Felix.

"We couldn't miss it," said his father. "Now fold that up and let's get going."

They drove to the car park where Hazel was waiting and informed her that the operation was cancelled. From there Felix and Neil went home with Hazel. Aliec drove off in her car to try to make contact with Paul.

* * * *

The next day, both the local and national newspapers contained reports of an accident the previous night at the Derby factory of the Rolls-Royce aerospace company. Eight people had been injured, although only two remained in hospital and their injuries were not thought to be life-threatening. According to these reports, the accident was caused by the failure of an ultra-new jet-engine prototype during a maximum thrust test. The TV news bulletins gave the same explanation that evening. But it wasn't true.

Very few people know what really happened that night. But Felix and his parents know, because Paul found out and he told them.

It turned out that Colonel Banford had, without informing Paul, decided to risk telling the Director of the Barston Down research centre about the plan. Instead of arresting him, the Director had given the idea wholehearted support. However he thought that driving from Barston Down to Derby and back would be too slow and prone to potential obstruction, so he proposed that his son, who was a helicopter pilot, should take them there and back. There was no role for Paul or Lieutenant Keen in the revised plan, but for security they were not told until the very last minute.

Everything had gone smoothly until the replicator had been powered up with the hovercube inside. Then there was an almighty explosion, which sent Capability hurtling through the roof and destroyed high-tech equipment worth more than five million pounds.

This event led to considerable friction in military circles between Britain and the USA. Colonel Banford and the Director were forced to take early retirement, and the Director's son was demoted. The two people at Rolls Royce most responsible for giving Banford access to the replicator found themselves without jobs. Paul, however, was unaffected. Colonel Banford stuck to the officers' code of honour and didn't reveal that Paul was intended to be part of the plan before it was modified. General Masimba even managed to catch his flight, which had been delayed till nearly midnight, though his cabin luggage lacked the item that would have justified his journey. As for Neil, he carried on with his job; and Aliec went on to Leicester University rather than a criminal court. She did well in her astrobiology course, which gave her the chance to study plenty of other celestial objects, including meteorites -- though never one as extraordinary as Capability. As you've probably

guessed, she still didn't want to be Felix's girlfriend, although they did continue to meet from time to time. Her hope of being the first human to step on Mars remains alive.

Sadly, however, the mysterious hovercube is lost to humanity. It has now gone far out into space. It is too small to be seen by our telescopes but a few astronomers know what happened, and they believe it is moving fast enough to leave the solar system altogether. During its stay at Barston Down the scientists who examined it never discovered exactly what it was nor how it worked. One theory is that a highly advanced civilization in a distant part of our galaxy developed a technology to avoid violent conflict between sentient beings, which allowed them to build small-scale, almost weightless devices that could be used to prevent fighting. They then sent many billions of such devices to all parts of the Milky Way, so that they might land on other planets where conscious life forms could exist, and thus help preserve other civilizations from the scourges of murder and warfare. Unfortunately we humans can no longer benefit from this precious technology. So those scourges will continue to afflict us. Unless there is another extraterrestrial gift waiting to be found somewhere on earth, which seems exceedingly unlikely. Or we learn to settle our differences without violence, which seems even more unlikely.

As for Felix, after A-levels he joined the Derbyshire Constabulary, like his dad. However, he didn't enjoy it very much. It turned out that he wasn't as good as his father in stopping drunken louts from fighting. He soon started wondering whether he should try a different career. In fact, it wasn't very long before he rang the number on the card that Melanie White gave him, to find out whether she was still interested in some kind of joint venture. But that's another story.

[Richard Forsyth, September 2020.]