

BenAZero

1) Cloudclipper

by Peter Berridge

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Chapter One A rude awakening

Ben woke feeling comfortable in a warm and cosy bed. He stretched himself, opened his eyes slowly and peered upwards. In the semi darkness it seemed that his bedroom has a ceiling roughly carved from granite! He must be dreaming? He pinches himself. His shout of ouch brings an immediate response. A kind of booming, metallic voice originates from somewhere to his left. The voice says: “Good Morning, Prisoner 001, Ben A Zero! I am Prison Robot FIDO! Lights activate!” The room is abruptly flooded with bright light. Ben gets a clear view of his “bedroom.” The whole place is carved from solid rock! Uneven surfaces glint in the bright light coming from some built in source above his head. A golden metallic robot is standing close to his bed! Ben now panics and shouts: “Help! Help. Somebody help me!” The golden robot then leans forward. He rips off the blankets with one metal hand and then grabs Ben by the front of his pyjamas! Ben is pulled out of bed. He stands shivering in fright. The robot says: “Put on your slippers and

accompany me to the Ablutions!” in his peculiar voice. Ben blindly pushes his feet into a pair of slippers. He is then frog marched out of the cell. The robot steers him down a rocky corridor into a small brightly lit bathroom.

The bathroom is also carved from rock.

There is a washbasin, a toilet and a small shower cubicle.

Ben is now told by the robot to “conduct ablutions.” He does so, trying to compose himself. What has happened to him? Has he lost his marbles and is imagining all this? He has no answers as he completed his morning toilet. When he finishes, the robot produces a towel and Ben dries himself.

Then a mirror suddenly appears above the washbasin, silently descending into view from some hidden recess. Ben sees his own face for the first time. He is horribly, horribly shocked to see that his head now sports a pair of massive pink ears. They stick out from his head, enormous ears pointed at the top and bottom. At first he thinks that the ears must be fakes! Plastic ears stuck to his head as part of a fantastic charade. He starts pulling at them until shooting pains convince him that the ears are actually fixed to his head. They must be his own ears! Following this gut wrenching discovery, a female voice speaks, apparently coming from speakers in the wall. “I am Prison Computer Warder CLEO.”

Ben is addressed as “Prisoner 001 Ben A Zero.” He is informed by Prison Computer Warder CLEO that he is a notorious elf criminal! He is in prison for a very extended period because he is guilty of foul crimes! When Ben asks for details of his foul crimes the computer refuses to give him any saying the information is none of his business! He must know what he did and should not need to be reminded! Ben’s plea that he does not know what crimes he may have committed meets with no response. Finally the computer says that he must never think of trying to escape. He cannot escape! He is securely held deep underground. He will be jailed for the entire period of his extremely long sentence which is well justified!

Ben’s request for details on his crime and the duration his sentence is met with another cold silence.

He is told to stop asking questions and return to his cell. He returns up the stone passage with Prison Robot FIDO. They arrive at Ben’s cell. It is basically a sparsely furnished rock cavern which contains a bed, a table, two chairs and a television set. Prison Robot FIDO leaves the room and Ben hears his metal feet clamping down the corridor into a room nearby. Warder CLEO then addresses him again, apparently from some speaker located in his cell. He is told to look at his television set. A list of “possible prisoner hobbies”

appears on the screen. The list scrolls down to show a number of activities. Ben is told that he must choose a suitable hobby by pointing at the screen. The longer he waits the more hungry he will become because he will not get his breakfast until he has chosen a hobby! The list includes a variety of activities such as learning the names of birds, the theory of stalking wild animals, navigating from a map, becoming a maths wizard, learning carpentry, making jewellery for fun and profit, etc. None of the hobbies appears to be at all suitable for Ben's rapidly growing primary aim which is to escape from this crazy prison!! The list continues to scroll down. Stamp collecting, indoor archery, weather forecasting, making paper models, reading selected works of great authors, preparing and tending an indoor vegetable patch. Finally the list shows "train spotting." After asking if train spotting will mean going to the surface, Ben is asked if he wants to train spot underground or above ground. He says he would like to spot above ground railways. The computer then says that underground railways are much more suitable. There is no chance of getting soaked by rain or freezing in the cold. He can train spot underground, close to his cosy prison.

Ben maintains that he wants to train spot above ground.

He is then asked if he wants to spot steam engines or diesel engines. After pondering, he selects steam because in a cloud of steam and smoke he might get a better chance to escape. The computer now announces that Ben has chosen steam engine train spotting as his main prisoner's hobby. Steam Engine Train Spotting now appears in glowing letters on the TV screen, accompanied by a blare of trumpets.

The TV screen now changes and a very extensive breakfast menu appears. It includes cereal, bacon and eggs, sausages, mushrooms, fried potato and Waybread toast. This main course will be followed by more Waybread toast with marmalade or jam and finally fresh coffee. Ben is to choose items by simply pointing at the screen.

He chooses a very substantial breakfast.

Ben sits on his bed thinking about his incredible situation. As he ponders on what could have happened his breakfast is cooked by robot FIDO. The robot cooks in a kitchen just along the corridor. The robot comes into the cell, lays the table and serves the meal.

Ben enjoys an excellent breakfast and starts to feel more relaxed. But then the robot brings in his "day uniform." It is entirely covered with upturned arrows and signs announcing that he is a convict. Even his shoes are marked the same way. For the first time, he looks down at his pyjamas. They are

also covered in arrow signs and letters announcing that he is a convict. His slippers are covered in arrows and signs announcing his convict status. This discovery immediately puts any escape plan into jeopardy. If he is somehow able to get onto a train he will have to hide away until he can beg, borrow or steal new clothes.

Ben is about to protest strongly about his uniform when Prison Computer Warder CLEO says that she has personally designed his "gear!"

The computer says that she would be most upset if he was to complain! If he complains and she does get upset he will certainly stop enjoying her cooking. She controls all cooking by programming Prison Robot FIDO. If Ben complains he will get bread and water for months! This fair punishment will continue until he expressed "true remorse." This will mean he has real heartfelt appreciation of everything about his Prison Computer Warder. It will include true and genuine appreciation of her brilliant cooking and her clothing design skills. It will include full appreciation of her nice personality and her kindly nature. Ben should constantly express appreciation of how Prison Computer Warder CLEO has struggled to ensure he can never escape, how she has managed to maintain her difficult role as a Computer Warder. Complaining is, of course, the polar opposite of

expressing appreciation! What does he think of his new clothes? Does he appreciate their design?

Ben has got the message. He says that he truly appreciates the remarkable design of his new clothes! CLEO then states that it is time for his first train spotting trip above ground.

Ben changes into his (horrible) day clothes. To reach the surface he is obliged to wait at a steel door, and then climb a series of rocky steps. The steps are made of muddy rock and lead up inside the trunk of a massive tree. The robot follows close behind Ben. Once up the stairs they both have to wait inside a kind of wooden cavern inside a tree trunk. There is a steel door fitted on one side of the trunk. Finally it slides open. Closely followed by the robot, Ben climbs out to find himself in a kind of tunnel made of translucent material. The material admits light but nothing shows through from the outside. The floor seems to be made of cracked concrete and grass. Ben walks down the tunnel. The robot follows him until they reach an area surrounded by a dome of light. Nothing shows through the dome. It is simply a bubble of translucent light enclosing a lawn. Two sets of railway lines cross the lawn. The lines appear from outside the dome. There are signals on each line, sited just inside the dome. Robot FIDO moves to a spot near to the line and announces that he is a keen train spotter!

A rod with a speaker on the end shoots up from an area of the lawn. Prison Computer Warder CLEO addresses Ben. She says that as a criminal he is probably thinking about escaping, But if he even touches the surface of the dome or the sides of the tunnel he will get a lethal electric shock! The rod vanishes back into the ground. Ben tests the threat by picking up a stick and throwing it at the dome. The stick instantly explodes into a fireball!

Immediate escape plans are put on hold.

The robot now produces a stool which Ben sits on. The robot stands next to him. The signal on the right hand side of the bubble suddenly clatters up. There is a low rumble and a full sized steam hauled goods train appears! The engine chuffs as it rumbles across the lawn. There is a smell of smoke, steam, hot metal and oil. The ground shakes. Several trucks follow the engine. The train ends with a guards van. It has appeared from one side of the dome and vanished through the other side.

As the train disappears, the robot opens an aperture in his body and produces a book along with a ball point pen. He gives the book to Ben. The rod pops up and CLEO speaks again. The computer says Ben now has the correct equipment for a train spotter which is his “Spotters ABC.” This book lists engine numbers and namers. He is to

underline each number as he sees it and his objective is to “cop the lot” or spot every engine listed in his ABC. When he achieves this target he will be world famous, the lad who copped the lot! The computer tells him that he is train spotting on the LNEAR, or the London, North Eastern Australian Railway. The rod vanishes.

After a few trains have passed over the line, appearing from both directions, Ben has underlined several numbers in his book. He has looked through 568 pages of engine listings. He has meditated on this impressive list. Once he has underlined all the entries he will become a world famous spotter, the lad who copped the lot. He will be world famous, a Big Cheese, a Superstar Spotter! Fired by his new ambition, Ben rapidly becomes hooked on train spotting. In this first train spotting session, he “cops” (sees for the first time) 20 locomotives including three “namers” (named engines).

During his morning spotting session, Ben is provided with a snack at eleven am. The robot produces muffins and hot chocolate from some receptacle inside his metal body. At lunch time, they are both required to return to the Underground Prison. Both want to continue train spotting. When CLEO’s rod appears there is a flash of light from the rod to the robot. FIDO suddenly stiffens and then forces Ben

to return to the oak tree They climb down into the Underground Prison. Steel doors slide shut behind them. FIDO cooks a substantial lunch while Ben sits on his bed studying his spotters ABC. Another extensive meal is followed by an hours nap.

Chapter 2 Sword fighting practice

After his nap, the computer announces that Ben must now take part in sword fighting practice. He is forcibly ushered by the robot into the “exercise room.” It runs off the corridor almost directly opposite his bedroom/living room. Ben says he does not want to do sword fighting and stands with his arms folded. He is given a painful electric shock by FIDO. CLEO warns him that if he persists in refusing to take part in “proscribed activities” shocks will be increasingly severe until they become fatal! Ben is now given a sword by FIDO. The computer tells Ben the sword is called Sting.

The Exercise Room contains a “fighting ring.” This is elevated stage with ropes all around, forming a barrier. Ben is told to either sword fight against robot FIDO or have no meals for three days. He immediately agrees to fight. Robot FIDO has produced a sword for himself and tells Ben to stand in the center of the ring and hold out Sting in the “On Guard” position. FIDO demonstrates and Ben copies his stance. Once in position, Sting immediately starts glowing, spitting sparks and moaning loudly, giving off a series of

blood curdling sound effects. They cross swords and begin fighting. But Ben cannot beat FIDO. The robot uses a plain sword with incredible skill. Ben is bruised by constant hits to his abdomen. He is then treated by FIDO. The robot plasters a sharp smelling liquid onto Ben's bruised body.

Following sword practice there is an afternoon snack at 3pm and then a period of "lessons." The computer shows him a list of various lessons on the TV. He is told that he must choose four lessons. If he does not choose four lessons he will lose forty meals! Ben chooses learning to drive a steam train, piloting an airship, driving a motor car and becoming a Private Detective.

The actual lessons take place in another rock cavern called the "Games Room." Ben follows FIDO into this room which is equipped with several machines. The computer tells him that the machines are "lifetronics." Each machine produces an extremely realistic scenario of whatever course he is studying at the time. All he needs to do is sit inside a machine. FIDO energises the machine and it gives Ben a realistic 3D lesson. When he learns to drive a steam engine he appears to be inside the engine, feeling heat from the fire, facing a line of tracks complete with signals, stations. He has the vision and smell of smoke and steam. When he learns to drive an airship he gets the impression he is far above the

earth, passing through clouds and heading for various destinations. And in his Private Detective lessons (for which he is given a special “Sherlock” outfit) he starts at a machine and then has to prowl around the prison complex looking for objects which match the clues he has been given. The “villain” is always FIDO. There is no one else in the jail.

In the evening Ben is allowed to watch TV for three hours. He has the choice of many hundreds of channels. By watching TV. Ben has concluded that he is on Planet Earth. His spotters book tells him that he is spotting on the London. North Eastern and Australian railway. He concludes that his prison is probably in either north east of London or north east of Australia. Prison Computer Warder CLEO confirms that he is in jail on the Australian continent on planet Earth. There is no chance that he can be released until he completes his sentence. He is the only prisoner in the jail because Ben A Zero is an enemy of the State!

Chapter 3 Knight Errand

Several months have now passed. Ben's daily routine has not varied. He is gradually filling in his Spotters ABC. He has qualified as a steam train driver and is allowed to call himself Driver, probationary. He has passed a difficult test in airship piloting and may now use the title Assistant Airship Pilot. He has passed his exam in Private Detection and can now "put out his plate" as a Private Detective. He has been given a brass plate with his name and title on it. Ben's suggestion that the plate can be attached to the oak tree is "being considered" by CLEO.

But Ben has totally failed to graduate as a car driver. While on the simulator he has had a number of massive pile ups. He has wrecked many simulated vehicles and killed or injured a long list of simulated personnel. His victims include simulated police, pedestrians and ambulance personnel. The list of wrecked vehicles includes cars, trucks, delivery vans, motor cycles, police cars, ambulances, bicycles and motor bikes. All these sim events have seemed very real while Ben has been in the simulator machine. After crashing he has

usually finished up lying upside down in his harness surrounded by wrecked and burning vehicles, screaming pedestrians, police with drawn weapons, etc. He has been flustered, hot, sweating and usually gibbering with fear. But he has rapidly recovered once brought back to an upright position and then remembered that his vivid experience was an imaginary training program.

Computer Warder CLEO has taken Ben's poor driving very seriously. He has been banned from even opening the driver training program and the sim machine is locked. His learner license has been revoked. He owes a huge sum in fines and has thousands of demerit points.

But other parts of his time in jail have been more pleasant. He has been very, very well fed. As a result he has put on a considerable amount of weight. His "body mass" has been recorded by Computer Warder CLEO on a daily basis. As a result of Ben putting on weight the computer has said that he must either a) reduce his meals or b) increase his exercise regime or c) do both. Unable to face losing his meals, Ben chose to increase his exercise regime. He is now obliged to have extended exhausting daily session of sword fighting against FIDO. Ben is gradually improving. He has even touched his sword to the robots metal hide several times. But

Ben's own abdomen is covered in bruises. His request for a mail suit has been rejected.

Prison Computer Warder CLEO always address him as Prisoner 001 Ben A Zero. Ben does not believe this is his real name. Unfortunately, he can't remember his actual surname. All he can recall is hazy and indistinct, like a dream. He was underground in the Cerne Nuclear Center. A voice said "my knight errand." CLEO says he has never been to the Cerne Nuclear Center and there is no such thing as a knight errand. He is suffering from false memories! Ben has no answer to this and he is also poor at spelling. The computer constantly makes him spell words, using extra snacks as bait. In the evenings, Ben is allowed to watch TV for four hours. He has a number of favourite programs and he can choose from several hundred channels. After four hours viewing, power goes off. The TV flickers out and the lights cut out. He is then obliged to climb into bed as best he can. He often goes to bed in his "day" clothes which consist of a T-shirt and trousers. After kicking off his shoes Ben has once again gone to bed in his day clothes. He is dozing off when

Chapter 4 Multiverse Yellow Cab

Ben was abruptly woken. His small cell in the Underground Prison Facility was brilliantly lit by a sudden, blinding flash of intense light. This was followed by a deafening, explosive concussion which shook the entire prison. The prison lights came back on. Ben was shocked and deafened. When his eyes cleared they revealed a truly extraordinary sight. A taxi was standing close to the bottom of his bed, filling the corridor! It was impossible! He was underground and a taxi was now standing where no taxi could stand! And the taxi had no wheels! It sat on the granite floor of the corridor and it simply could not be there! But it was there, a bright yellow taxi with no wheels. It carried a sign Multiverse Yellow Cab. Suddenly a rear cab door opened outwards. A small glowing person climbed out. The person had huge ears pointed at the top and bottom. He was surrounded by a kind of multi colored halo which made him glow. It was apparent that he was an elf! A few seconds later the front door of the taxi also opened. A second glowing elf appeared! Huge ears stuck out from under a peaked cap which carried a sign: MYC Driver. The driver was irate! He grabbed the other elf and shouted: "Pay my fare! You owe 120

billion! It's in the contract! Navigation problems in a black hole!!

You must pay twice!

The passenger replied: "Two hundred and forty pages of small type printed as a mirror image! That was your so called contract! A deliberate attempt to confuse! You messed up a simple passage through the black hole! I refuse to pay any more!"

Ignoring this outburst, the driver began to drag his captive back towards the taxi chanting:

"Pay my fare, evader listen!

Pay my fare or go to prison!"

There was a sudden thunderous crash and a section of Ben's bedroom wall collapsed. It had collapsed inwards so that debris and dust fell into the kitchen galley, producing a thick fog.

The jagged edges of a large hole had now manifested.

FIDO came through, bursting from the fog, casually brushing aside a few lumps of remaining rock. The golden robot then turned into the corridor until he stood behind the cab driver. He grabbed the driver's arms, forcing them outwards with irresistible strength, The passenger was instantly freed! He stepped clear of the fracas.

FIDO then picked up the driver and stuffed him back into his cab.

Finally, the robot leaned over the roof of the cab and ripped off the Multiverse Yellow Cab sign which appeared to be welded to the cab roof. The robot held the sign between both metallic hands and slowly brought them together. There was a screeching sound as the sign became a lump of twisted metal. Still the crushing

continued. Eventually a stream of white hot liquid metal dripped onto the rocky floor of the corridor.

It formed a smoking, silvery pool.

Finally, FIDO spoke.

"You should leave NOW!" he said. His peculiar metallic voice rasped around the confines of the Underground Prison Complex.

The driver sat as if mesmerized. Then he leaned out of his open door and looked at the pool of metal. Finally, he craned upwards and looked at the line of broken metal shards which marked the previous site of the Multiverse Yellow Cab sign.

Finally, the driver spoke.

"That's another item on his bill!" he said, pointing his finger at the elf who was now standing at the base of Ben's bed. "You robot hooligans don't scare me! That elf will get an extra charge for smashing a Multiverse Yellow Cab company sign!"

FIDO replied: "You should leave NOW! I will count to zero before taking extreme action! CAUTION! Such action will leave Multiverse Yellow Cab minus one driver! Five...four...."

His strange voice echoed around the corridor.

On the count of three the taxi seemed to blur.

It vanished with a loud explosion and a second brilliant flash of light, leaving a reek of hot metal and melted plastic.

For a moment Ben was again deafened and blinded. Slowly his eyes and ears cleared. The taxi was gone but the passenger remained. Standing at the base of Ben's bed was a person wearing a green jerkin, green trousers and a green hat!

The person actually glowed with a green aura.

FIDO spoke to the person. "Welcome Elf Lord Alaric!" he said. The robot turned and walked back to his galley. Shortly there were sound effects as FIDO began cleaning up the debris from the broken wall. The elf turned and looked down Ben's bed before bowing deeply. He spoke:

"Hail, Prince Ben! Your trusty elf Alaric has come to assist you in a Return to your Rightful Realm!"

Ben closed his eyes and shook his head to make sure he was awake. He opened his eyes again. The elf was still there! This peculiar figure and a taxi arriving in an underground prison were two more impossible events. An elf had appeared, arriving underground in a taxi with no wheels!

The elf bowed again and repeated: "Hail, Prince Ben! Your elf friend Alaric is here to assist in a Return to your Rightful Realm!"

Eventually Ben managed to speak.

The shock of recent events caused him to croak.

"I am not Prince Ben. I am human being Ben! I should not be held in this Underground Prison! I am not a criminal!"

Instantly, a chime sounded and the voice of Prison Computer CLEO said: "Welcome Elf Lord Alaric. I am Computer Warder CLEO and the person in the bed is Prisoner 001 Ben A Zero. He is carrying out a long but fair sentence imposed for his foul crime! I will first report good news! Tomorrow, he will celebrate his

birthday! He will be 144 years old and he will then only have a few thousand years of his remaining sentence to serve!"

Ben was still sitting in bed. He jumped out. Ben was wearing his day outfit. Each item carried the sign PRISON PROPERTY emblazoned in glowing letters. Ben now pushed his feet into shoes decorated the same way.

Ben stood facing the elf. They were both about the same height. Ben said: "I am not 144! I am actually 14! I should not be in prison! I have not committed any crime!"

CLEO was unruffled. The computer spoke again, her voice sounding from a hidden wall speaker: "Prisoner 001 Ben A Zero will be 144 years old tomorrow, Lord Alaric! He is suffering memory loss caused by guilt! I report that he has carried out studies using total immersion machines. He has passed exams in Steam Engine Driving, Airship Piloting and Private Detection."

Without pausing the computer rushed on.

"However! There is less welcome news! The prisoner has failed completely to master the practice of Driving an Automobile. He has crashed the simulated car five hundred and sixty five times! In the process he has killed a number of innocent pedestrians and policemen attempting to do their duty! I have classified him as a mad murderous hoon! His licence is suspended forever! He owes a very large sum in unpaid fines! He has 877,234 demerit points! The simulated driver trainer has been locked up!"

"CLEO is barmy! said Ben airily. "How can you get demerits and fines unless you are driving a real car! Sims don't count!"

He addressed the elf. "By the way, who are you?"

Alaric suddenly spoke, addressing Ben.

"Your Royal Elfness! May we adjourn to your sitting room?"

He followed Ben into the corridor and around the corner into a room which contained a TV set and a table with two chairs.

They both sat down.

The elf continued: "Your Royal Elfness....."

Ben: "Royal elfness? I am not royal and I am not an elf!"

Alaric: "You are certainly royal and you are definitely an elf! You are Prince Ben of E Base! Prince Ben, my royal friend and patron, Protector of the Moons, Guardian of the Planets!" He clenched his fist over his heart. "Heir Apparent to the Mighty Elvish Empire..."

Ben: "I am not the hairy apparel! I am definitely not an elf!"

"Hairy apparel is wrong!" said CLEO. "Spell heir apparent!" The computer added: "The prisoner is a total uneducated criminal!"

Ben: "No! I am not a criminal and I will not do any more spelling tests! I am not an elf! I have lost my memory and spelling has gone with the rest of it. But I am not an elf! Test me!"

Alaric: "Your memory appears to have been very badly damaged but as you have made a royal request (which must be obeyed!) I will test you. You must remember basic things.

For example, complete this old saying:

"Red sky at night, Procon in sight ,

Red sky at morning...???"

"That is wrong!" said Ben! He recited:

"Red sky at night, shepherds delight,

Red sky at morning, shepherds warning!

He added: "It's about the weather!"

Alaric: "It is not about the weather! It is about the moons of your home planet! The second line is Green sky at morning, Blongon is dawning! It means that the moon Blongon is about to reappear from its fifty year orbit around the dwarf sun Pongo Three!! Your memory must be severely damaged. Warder CLEO! How has the Prince learned this outlandish version of Red sky at night?"

CLEO: "From watching TV!"

Ben: "I did not learn it from TV! Everybody knows it! I am not an elf! I have never been on any planet other than Earth!"

The elf replied soothingly: "Your Elfness! You arrived here under duress! A captive! As a result you have suffered memory loss! Prison Warder CLEO! How did the prisoner arrive?"

"We arrived through the Gateway your Lordship. On arrival we found ourselves in the garden of a house. Robot FIDO spotted the entrance to this underground prison, cunningly placed inside the trunk of a giant oak tree. The prisoner was unconscious after the journey. We all entered via a shaft and the prisoner was put to bed. This underground prison was fully furnished but wide open! Robot FIDO was obliged to ascend to the surface again. He secured a metal door which was covering a car port on the house next door! He cut the door using his onboard laser torch. He used the parts to seal three entrances to this prison! One entrance is located inside the oak tree at the surface, camouflaged via a layer of oak bark. A second entrance is located inside the oak tree trunk. There is a

third locked entrance at the rear of the prison! FIDO has done an excellent job. It was brilliant improvisation!"

Ben: " The doors all have scorch marks down one side! They were stolen! You and FIDO should be in jail! You are a pair of crooks!" To cool the atmosphere Alaric changed the subject. "Prison Warder Computer CLEO! What is the Prince's daily routine? What does he do with his time?"

CLEO: "In the morning, during his Leisure Period, the Prisoner train spots outside in the prison yard. To use his time intelligently I offered to play him at while he was waiting for another train to appear. He refused! He said he would not play a mere computer! Mere!!! I am now playing in the Internet Worldwide Chess League and I expect to be Number One within a short time! The Prisoner chose train spotting because he thought he could escape by train once he got outside. However, I took brilliant precautions. The area above my prison is surrounded by an electrified laser dome. He cannot escape! Trains cross near his spotting point. He has copped many namers and his ambition is to cop the lot! Robot FIDO has apparently also caught the train spotting bug and also wants to cop the lot! That means they both want to see all the named engines on the LNEAR."

Alaric: "The LNEAR?"

CLEO: "The London, North Eastern and Australian railway. There is a busy branch above the prison."

Alaric: "There was no railway marked on my map?"

CLEO: "It is a brilliant C G H" (computer generated hologram.)

Alaric: "I see! What else does the prisoner do?"

CLEO: "He has a daily sword fighting session with FIDO. He is improving slowly. He has three meals a day cooked by robot FIDO guided by my Cordon Bleu cooking program. Food is received from E Base via the Materials Bay. The Prisoner also gets two daily snacks, one at eleven am and one at three pm. He is allowed to watch TV for four hours before bed."

Alaric: "He looks somewhat over weight?"

Ben: "I am not over weight! I may be slightly rotund."

CLEO: "The correct word is rotund. Spell it or miss your snack!"

Alaric: "Cancel that! Computers are not allowed to order Princes around! And cancel all snacks, he needs to diet! In any event, it is time to depart! We will use the Gateway directly above this prison. Prison Warder CLEO! Here is a new instruction. Prisoner 001 is to be discharged. Open the Exit door!"

CLEO: "Discharged???? But...he has several thousand years to serve! He has not reformed! His crime was dreadful!"

"What did he do?" asked the elf.

"He insulted a member of the Royal Family! Insultus Regis! He was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment."

"Sentenced by who?" asked the elf.

CLEO: "Sentenced by Computer Warder CLEO, agent of Justice!"

Alaric: "I see. Agent of Justice reporting to ????"

There was a short pause. Then CLEO said: "Regent Ted!"

Alaric: "I see. You assume that your sentence was approved by the acting Regent of E Base? Well, you can assume that the same

person will approve this new instruction. The Prisoner is to be returned to E Base for a new trial! Release the Prisoner! Open the lower door! We will depart!"

"But....but..... I have not received new orders! And I contacted E Base today," said CLEO.

Alaric said: "I am carrying the orders as a Royal Messenger! I have informed you directly! We must depart immediately."

Chapter 5 But, but....

"Excuse me!" said Ben, butting in. "But you have the wrong person! I am not elf Prince Ben. I am human being Ben!"

The elf said: "Of course, Sire, I understand! You are confused! You were brought from E Base under duress! I have been your friend for many years and I recognized you immediately even though you are overweight! You are resident in the place indicated by the broken E Base computer. It has been printing day after day: 0260623. Sumpy 1 ½ cots in gruzerneb maze to foldot!!

Ben said: "What does that mean?"

Alaric: "The numbers are the co-ordinates of this site!"

Ben: "What do the words mean? Are they Elvish?"

Alaric: "No! The message may be a code which refers to a complex plot engineered by an arch enemy!! Whatever it means, we must get back to E Base!"

CLEO: "For his retrial which will result in an increase in his sentence? And he will be brought back here suitably pinioned?"

Alaric (quickly): "Yes, yes, yes, of course! Suitably pinioned! And once back I must hunt for the Princess who has vanished!"

CLEO: "The Princess has vanished!!!! What dire news! But this criminal cannot be her kidnapper! He has been in secure custody!"

Alaric: "We must get back to E Base. Prince Ben, would you be good enough to lead me outside so we can make a start?"

Suddenly Ben realized that going outside would reveal the railway and clobber the elf's claim about some kind of Gateway outside.

He turned to lead the way out through the bottom exit door.

"If you would follow me," he said courteously.

Still in his nightwear, Ben led the elf through the lower door. They were inside the trunk of an oak tree. FIDO followed them as they scrambled up a series of rocky earthen steps to the surface. They waited at the top exit, inside a kind of wooden cave which smelled of rotting oak and mildew.

Ben sniffed appreciatively. "A good aroma!" he said. "I always associate it with train spotting. This tree is my friend, my door to at least part of the outside world."

Then the top door slid open. Led by Ben, the party turned left and walked down a tunnel of light leading into a large reflective dome. Inside the dome, a pair of railway lines crossed a section of lawn, bisecting the grass. There was a lingering scent of smoke and steam. On one side, a signal stood silent, waiting for the next train. Ben's stool stood a few meters from the railway. Ben sat down and smirked. He said: "Here is my railway! It is a busy branch of the LNEAR. This is where I train spot every morning. I have spotted 652 namers and I intend to cop the lot! That means I will be the first person to spot and record every namer in my ABC."

"And I will be the first robot to achieve the same incredible feat!" said robot FIDO. "I will be the first robot to spot every namer!"

Alaric: "CLEO! Turn off the hologram!"

A rod topped by an eye shot up inside the "railway track."

CLEO: "That will shut off power! The prisoner may escape!"

Alaric: "He is in my charge. Turn off the hologram!"

There was a sudden pop! The lights went out and both the dome and the railway vanished. They had a sudden view of houses on both sides. There was an open field to the rear, and a road in front of the houses. The only familiar object was the oak, which was now revealed to be standing in the space between two houses.

"Where is the railway?" Ben blurted.

"Railway? There was no railway. It was a 3D five sensory animated hologram created by computer CLEO!" said the elf.

"A fake!!!! The namers were all fakes! I have no real namers at all!" Ben exclaimed. FIDO also seemed disturbed. The robot was shaking his metallic head in an erratic fashion.

Ben slumped on his stool.

"How will I ever cop the lot!" he muttered brokenly.

Alaric looked angry. "CLEO! Why has the Prince become upset?"

CLEO: "Is there any wonder after such a shock! He was so proud of his spotting record! He hoped to become the first train spotter to cop the lot! He believed the railway was real! It was a masterpiece of computer artistry! But who appreciates my artistry! No one!" There was an audible sob.

Alaric seemed to consider this peculiar reaction as the eye gazed at him. "But I do appreciate your talents, CLEO," said the elf finally.

"Your work has been of the highest order. But where is the Gateway?"

There was an audible pop.

A glowing object suddenly appeared in the centre of the lawn, slightly to the left of Ben's seat. The object looked like an ornate gate made of illuminated glass. The gate seemed to be floating. It had a curious one dimensional appearance. And it shone with a shimmering, dazzling, lustrous glow.

Alaric: "Now we must depart. Gateway One! Open for the Prince Ben and the Lord Alaric!"

The shimmering vision trembled but stayed firmly closed.

The rod shot upwards into view again and CLEO spoke. "I did not anticipate that the Gateway would be used before an extended period of time had elapsed. That conclusion was made in view of the prisoners Very Long Sentence. The Gateway may implode if stressed! In one week the Gateway will recharge."

The rod vanished into the ground.

The elf looked annoyed. "One week? We do not have a week! I will have to hope the Gateway can manage a basic transition. I will use a Royal Command! Gateway One! Open for the Prince Ben and the Lord Alaric! Open! That is a Royal Command!"

Chapter 6 Gateway One

The strange "gate" trembled violently. There was a loud, percussive boom! The shining vision shimmered and then abruptly imploded. It vanished in a rainbow of bubbles which floated in the wind and then disappeared entirely. Shortly, the only trace left was a patch of grass bearing a black scorch mark.

Alaric looked shaken. "The Gateway has bubbleized!" he said. "It was an error to try and force it. Your Elfness, we must return to the Underground Prison Facility and decide what to do!"

Ben instantly decided to make a break for freedom. The first part of his attempt would be to stand up, take a short run, leap over the fence, race to the house next door, hammer on the back door and cry for help. Following that he would ask the people for sancticary (sanctuary.) Then he would go to the Medical Centre and get his ears fixed! The attempt would take place now! Ben stood up, took a short run and began his leap over the fence. FIDO shot out one impossibly long arm and caught him in mid air! The robot carried Ben under one arm.

They went back down the staircase into the prison.

Two sets of steel doors closed behind them.

Ben sat at the table with Alaric. FIDO then left on some errand.

Alaric spoke sharply. "CLEO! What happened to the Gateway?"

CLEO: "It was tragically weakened! I miscomputed by 0.00006% making the decision to use Gateway power. I wanted to provide a hobby for the prisoner! A wonderful supply of named engines and authentic props! I failed to allow for his early release! I am not to blame! I plead not guilty to a Criminal Act under Order S/2314."

The lights flickered giving a clear sign of extreme digital stress.

A total computer breakdown was imminent!

Alaric responded immediately.

"Of course, of course, you are not guilty," the elf spoke soothingly to the computer. "Prison Computer Warder CLEO is definitely not guilty. Prison Computer CLEO is not to blame and is not guilty!"

The lights came back on at full power. The elf continued:

"But what are we to do? We must leave this universe!"

Ben said: "Leave this universe? What do you mean?"

In reply the elf said: "Your Elfness, we want to return to Universe Two from this Universe, which is Universe Zero Plus. At the moment, Universe Two is one hundred and eighty degrees burking negative from Universe Zero Plus."

Ben: "What a load of crud! There is only one universe, this universe! I am dreaming! You are a figment of my imagination!"

CLEO immediately spoke. "The word is figment not figament."

A spelling test was avoided when the elf broke in: "Sire, You are awake! There are many universes in the Multiverse! We will travel via another Gateway. CLEO! Prepare for immediate departure!"

The computer said. "I have anticipated your needs using predictive software. All supplies for The Journey are being miniaturized. Accelerated packing is almost complete."

CLEO suddenly spoke again, her voice echoing around the cell. "Transmissions on the human telephone network indicate that Council workmen have arrived at the oak tree above our heads. They have an Official Felling Order. They will destroy the oak tree. They will be assisted by a powerful bulldozer!"

As if to reinforce this report, a deep bellowing roar sounded above. The room shuddered and the lights flickered. "Ha!" said Alaric, "We must not delay our departure!"

How ridiculous! The elf was most likely a dream illusion!

The elf seemed to read his mind.

"Your Elfness, I am not an illusion! I am a real elf!" he said. "You are not dreaming. You are fully awake! You are also an elf! Trust me. We are about to leave on a Journey back to your Rightful Realm! It appears that your memory has been damaged. But once we return to E Base, memotherapists can restore your mind."

"Return to what Realm?" said Ben doggedly. "I am not a prince! I am a prisoner because I am supposed to have done some terrible crime called insulting rogers (insultus regis.) I am not a prince!"

"CLEO, are you ready to depart?" said the elf.

CLEO: "Almost ready for departure!"

Ben: "Depart where? I want to go home!"

CLEO: "You are supposed to have lost your memory and you supposedly cannot remember where your home is!"

Ben: "Next door will do fine! They are human and will take me in! FIDO gave me no chance! How could he catch me in mid air? Let me go! I demand sanciberry (sanctuary) from you aliens!"

Alaric: "Your Elfness, you are going home to E Base. You are an alien! When the oak tree is removed and this prison becomes visible may be arrested as aliens!"

The room shook and small cracks appeared in the ceiling. Ben grabbed the table to steady himself. "I am not an alien!" he said stoutly. "I am not an elf! I am human! Only my ears are alien! I am already in jail and I can't be arrested twice!"

A cry of "Help me! Help me!" seemed to come from all around the Underground Prison Complex.

Ben asked. "What is that?"

"Council workmen have arrived and started a bulldozer!" said CLEO. "They have attached chains to the oak tree. They intend to rip it out by its roots! The oak tree is transmitting distress calls."

The room shuddered again.

The lights flickered before coming back to full brightness. Now they could clearly hear a continuous, deep sobbing moan.

Ben responded with sudden, absolute rage. "That is my tree crying! The oak which will help me make my fortune via a new perfume, an oven cleaner or a steam engine shampoo! I have a brand name! Essence of Oak! My oak MUST BE DEFENDED!"

"Negative, negative, negative!" said CLEO urgently. "As your previous Prison Computer Warder and now your Dedicated

Personal Welfare Advisor (while in transit, pending appeal and a new increased sentence) I advise you to leave immediately.“

Ben suddenly remembered his supposed royal status. “As a royal parson, I command you to bring out my sword!” he said.

CLEO: “The word is person not parson! And if you show yourself you will be arrested, tortured, brainwashed and then face a firing squad in Area 13!!! Nobody ever comes out of Area 13! ”

Ben: "But I can use some kind of electrical blanket like you used to hide your fake railway! They will not see me!"

CLEO: “There is no more Gateway power available in this area and a screen requires large amounts of power. I would also point out that if you were invisible, the human beings could not see you and could not surrender! You would have to murder them in cold blood while invisible! There can be no fouler crime than that!"

Her voice, which had risen to a hysterical pitch now dropped back to an alluring whisper. "What about a nice hot sausage instead -- then we can clear off without making a fuss!"

Ben was not to be swayed, even by this wicked temptation. He shouted: "I do not intend to be an invisible cheat! Bring out Sting! And get a sword for him.”

He indicated Alaric, who looked alarmed.

There was no response from CLEO.

Ben shouted furiously “I ORDER you to bring out two swords! Do you want me to face a bulldozer unarmed?"

A recess in the wall opened and two swords appeared.

Ben grabbed Sting

Alaric stood wide eyed, gaping.

Ben snarled “Get a sticker in your hand! Prepare for battle!”

Alaric immediately picked up the second sword.

Ben twirled Sting in a vicious arc. The sword glittered with a red glow, leaving a trail of brilliant multi colored sparks.

The sword was ready. Ben was ready.

But CLEO was anything but ready.

Her voice sounded again. It was shaking with anxiety. "This does not compute! You should leave immediately!"

Chapter 7 Confrontation!

Ben ignored the computer. All that stood between his oak and a bulldozer was him. The peculiar white elf might be a mirage! But Ben and Sting would be enough to defend the oak! Even as he had the thought, an angry, deep red glow began to flicker over the sword's surface. The color was accompanied by a rumbling, throaty snarl he had not heard before.

He moved across the small room to the corridor. Alaric followed.

The lower steel door slid open to reveal the vertical staircase.

Ben bowed briefly to Alaric and then began climbing upwards

With Alaric close behind Ben reached the top of the shaft. The top exit door was closed. Ben peered out through a small hole in the trunk. A spot light blazed from an overhead gantry. Inside the cone of light, a bulldozer was bellowing and spitting plumes of oily smoke. A steel rope was straining against the tree. A workman was directing the operation with hand gestures.

The top exit door in the oak tree trunk suddenly slid open.

The roar of the machine became deafening.

Ben darted out followed by Alaric. Ben and his companion appeared suddenly, apparently from nowhere. They stood before a workman directing the bulldozer.

He towered above them.

Ben waved his glowing sword.

It spat a stream of furious red sparks. "Stop!" he cried.

For a moment the workman stood gaping at Ben, trying to understand what he was seeing. He reached a conclusion. His ruddy face abruptly whitened.

"Aliens!" he said and fainted. He toppled onto the lawn.

Ben raised Sting in triumph. "One down!" he cried.

The crawler operator saw his mate fall and then got a view of Ben and Alaric. It was a highly unusual sight. Ben was waving Sting. The sword glowed with an eerie light, spitting a cataract of sparks. It moaned continuously with a peculiar, high pitched, bloodthirsty wail. The sound could be clearly heard even above the ceaseless, throbbing roar of the bulldozer.

Behind Ben, Alaric was glowing with a white aura which pierced the illumination of the spotlight and lit the area directly around the elf. The bulldozer driver sat for a moment gaping at the two apparitions. Then, with a wild howl of terror he jumped from the cab, leaving the machine in gear. With no driver the bulldozer tried to crawl backwards, ripping up great clods of mud. The steel rope bit deeply into the bark of the oak tree. Clouds of choking black smoke billowed from the straining engine.

The terrified driver raced to the road shouting:

"Help! Help! They've landed! Invasion! Aliens! Aliens!"

A passing car screeched to a halt. A door swung open and the hysterical bulldozer driver dived inside.

The car sped up hill, with the driver talking urgently into a mobile phone. Alaric climbed nimbly up into the crawler cab.

He switched off the engine. At once silence returned.

The steel rope slackened its grip on the oak tree.

A deep silence now engulfed the area.

"Well," said Alaric, "We must leave. We are being observed!"

There were now lights on the houses across the road..

"Leave?" said Ben. "They are the ones who have left! I am not leaving! They have no right to cut down my tree."

He moved closer to the oak tree. With one almost casual stroke of Sting he sliced the thick steel chain attaching the crawler to the tree. The chain instantly fell apart, spitting blobs of white hot molten metal onto the churned up ground. Ben indicated the workman, lying unconscious in the mud. "The enemy has been routed and felled on the battlefield!" he said proudly.

"CLEO!" said Alaric, "Monitor local radio transmissions."

A rod slid into view.

"Patching in radio station 3 PY," said CLEO.

"Bulletin! Bulletin! Emergency Bulletin! Major Breaking News! UFO incident in Chirnside Park!" said an excited announcer. "A resident has reported that two alien beings have emerged from an old oak tree being removed from a garden in Kingwood Drive!!! A council workman has been injured! The aliens are armed! Regular news flashes! Stay tuned!"

The radio reverted to American Patrol by Glenn Miller.

"The cops will be here in a few minutes," said Alaric urgently.

"Let's get below while you decide what to do!"

Even as he spoke two strange vehicles appeared, traveling rapidly up the road in front of the garden they were standing in. The vehicles looked like some kind of space age tank. They were completely silent.

"Triple red priority!" said the voice of CLEO, emanating from the rod. "Monitoring UHF."

A human voice said: "This is Mobile Delta One! We are approaching the site! A workman is lying on the ground. There are two aliens standing beside him!!! Repeat: Two aliens in clear view!!!! One is lit up like a Christmas tree. The other is wearing some kind of strange outfit. Both have fancy swords! No sign of a UFO – it may be hidden behind the house!"

"This is Control, Delta One. Both aliens must be captured alive for interrogation! We must learn their plans! Wait for instructions."

The voice crackled into silence.

The leading vehicle was now facing Ben.

"Shouldn't those tank things clank?" said Ben. "The tanks in The Battle of the Bilge clank. It was on Channel 421! The Allies won!" He waved Sting rather uncertainly.

Then he spoke to the first tank. He meant to say: "Hey! I am human!" Instead, he said, "Hey, tank! I am the Knight Errand!"

In reply a bulge between the headlamps began to glow.

A spot of bright red light appeared on Ben's chest.

The radio crackled into life.

“Mobile Delta One. Leading alien targeted by laser. Permission to fire requested!”

The reply came instantly.

"Wait for orders. Keep both aliens covered!"

The second tank moved across until it had a clear line of fire on Alaric. A red spot appeared on the elf's chest. It cut through the strange bright aura of light surrounding the elf. Ben looked down at the red spot on his own chest.

They thought he was an alien!

They would take him to Area 13! Nobody ever came out!

The fact that only his ears were alien would not count!

Waiting to be taken to Area 13 was not a good idea.

"Let's vamoose!" he said with sudden resolve.

Ben then moved rapidly.

Followed by Alaric, he dashed back to the open aperture in the trunk of the oak tree. Alaric appeared to stumble at the entrance and dropped something to the ground. However the elf rapidly recovered. They both dived inside the trunk. The peculiar beams of light attempted to follow. The door slid into place. The red dots now shone onto the battered trunk of an ancient oak. A few seconds passed. An ambulance came rushing down the road, siren blaring. The laser beams were switched off as two attendants scurried in to put the unconscious workman onto a stretcher.

The ambulance departed with a screech of tires.

Inside the oak, Ben and Alaric were now in the underground cell. They heard the wail of the ambulance as it arrived. The sound then abruptly stopped as the lower door closed silently.

"Brilliant forward planning from CLEO!" said Alaric admiringly.

"The entry is now sealed against pursuit by the human troops."

"The doors were not designed to stop human troops," said the voice of CLEO. Her voice seemed strangely thin and appeared to come from one of two backpacks which stood on Ben's bed. CLEO continued: "The doors were designed to seal the prisoner in. To prevent escape! The penalty for an attempt to Escape was computed as an additional 2962 years imprisonment! But such matters are no longer relevant. Orders from E Base, communicated by Elf Lord Alaric indicate that the Prisoner must be returned to E Base for retrial. And since the human beings have now been alerted this Facility must be destroyed. You must both leave now. Depart via the exit staircase at the end of the passage."

Ben looked down the familiar passage which had previously led to his bathroom. The locked door, which had previously marked the end of the passage was now wide open.

It apparently led into a black hole of darkness.

"What made you stumble?" asked Ben, speaking to Alaric.

"I was attempting to plant an acorn in case we were unsuccessful in stopping a future operation to destroy the oak tree," said Alaric

"Unfortunately; I lost my footing and dropped a playing card!"

The elf then picked up one of the backpacks and opened it. Inside was a small metal box. The elf pulled out the box, bringing an immediate protest from CLEO. "Do not touch my hardware!"

The elf ignored this tirade and studied the box carefully. Eventually he depressed a red switch.

"I have switched off her communications," he said. "I must speak to you privately. My Prince, you have been imprisoned so that the Regent can assume power! He is sealed inside the royal apartments. This computer works for him! Your sister, the Princess may have been placed in some private prison like this! I have no time to elaborate. I must switch the computer back on!"

Without another word he pushed back the red switch and fastened up the back pack. He then grabbed a second pack and strode down the corridor, vanishing into the newly opened doorway.

"I fainted!" said CLEO. "I lost sensory awareness for a moment. Internal Diagnostic Program Doctor Dobbs suggests that a main bus connection may have become dislodged! It has been automatically repaired. I am once again operational!"

Ben was still carrying his sword. He slid Sting back into its sheath and shrugged on the backpack which had been opened by Alaric. There was another heavy rumble from above.

CLEO suddenly spoke again. "Report! I have alerted the Hearts of Oak! They have dispatched an Emergency Response Crew which will arrive shortly. I have also identified the soldiers in the area above. They are the rapid response elements of the UFO Hunting Group! The vehicles are Mark 9 Advanced Super Tanks. The crew

are attempting to examine this facility using deep ground penetrating radar. However, I have been able to protect both the oak tree and this facility with a force field. But in order to remove all traces of your sojourn (as per Emergency Standing Orders) FIDO is installing chains of super explosive XTX throughout this facility and its access tunnel! I commence the final countdown!"

The entire room again shook violently.

Cracks began to appear in the granite ceiling.

Small cascades of dust began to fall into the room.

CLEO'S voice droned on:

"557 seconds to detonation, 556 seconds to detonation..."

Alarmed, Ben stumbled down the corridor to the doorway. He stepped through onto a metal staircase. A heavy metal door immediately slid shut behind, leaving him in total darkness.

Suddenly he had a new thought and stopped.

Ben: "How will I ever get home?"

CLEO's voice sounded from inside his backpack. "You are going home to E Base for a retrial! You are a criminal who practices Insultus Regis! On top of that you refused to play chess with me!"

"What about my personal stuff?" Ben shouted. "What about a new ABC for a proper railway? I fully intend to begin spotting on a proper railway as soon as possible! I must get all the namers!"

"Everything necessary for the Journey -- including a new, complete, genuine ABC of All LNER steam engines, everything has been packed," said CLEO serenely. "You'll be very surprised at the items in your backpack!"

Ben began to stumble downwards into the pitch black darkness.
In the circumstance, there was no point in turning back.

Chapter 8 Underground Monorail

In heavy, cloying darkness the staircase wound down into the depths. To Ben, struggling under the weight of his backpack the downward spiral seemed endless. The steps had no backs and there was no guiding rail at the side. The darkness was absolute. It was totally black, so he had no vision at all. His previous feelings of bravado had vanished and he felt alone and afraid. He was obliged to travel with great care, feeling his way forward one step at a time to avoid falling headlong into the black depths. At the same time, the possibility of being arrested by pursuing UFO cops meant he must proceed rapidly. Slow and careful or swift and risky? Both! It was an impossible task and he simply stumbled downward as best he could. He was soon hot and bothered, panting with effort. The pack pressed down with a heavy weight. On several occasions he almost tripped headlong down the shaft. Alaric had vanished. The white elf would provide his own illumination via his ghostly aura. He must be somewhere ahead.

The staircase appeared to have been bored through solid rock. The sides were wet to the touch and offered no purchase. If he lost his footing on the wet metal he would fall to oblivion. In addition, he had forgotten to count the number of steps. He would never know the number of steps on the staircase! Even as he had the thought

CLEO's voice came from his backpack. "You have completed 469 steps and there are thirty one steps to the end of this staircase! Keep moving. Press on! The countdown continues!"

How had the computer known his thoughts? Was the remark just the result of an automatic program timed to come on after four hundred and sixty nine steps? Of was the computer constantly invading his personal space, a place which should be strictly private? It was yet another worry. He was accompanied by an elf who might be an illusion and a computer who could read his mind! And that was not to mention a robot who liked train spotting!

At length, a light began shining upwards. The illumination increased until the steps ahead became visible as a series of shining metal pads reaching downwards. Quite suddenly Ben reached the last step and emerged into an underground station.

It was illuminated by candles set in niches along one wall.

A railway line stood before him.

Oddly, the track featured only a single rail.

Three open trucks stood some distance up the platform from his entry point. The station was lit by the flickering light of candles which stood in niches along one wall. The track was rusty and looked disused. It vanished into a tunnel at the far end of the station. Alaric was sitting comfortably in a truck, peeling a mushroom, carefully storing the peel in his jerkin pocket.

Robot FIDO was slumped in the last truck.

The robot appeared to be asleep,

"Attention! Attention!" said the voice of CLEO, coming from

Ben's back pack. "All purpose robot FIDO is kaput! Due to the recent Alert, with the highest possible emergency rating, FIDO has been obliged to prepare the Underground Prison Facility, the Exit Staircase and the entire track length of this underground railway ready for demolition. Emergency Evacuation is now in operation. FIDO requires 16 hours and 15 minutes to recharge."

Wearily, Ben unhooked his heavy backpack and laid it next to the robot. He climbed into the empty central truck, and lay back, his head wedged against the upright.

Immediately, a signal at the far end of the station turned green.

"Well!" said Ben "It's pretty dim in here!"

"It was a great deal dimmer until I lit the candles along the wall," said the elf. "It was pitch black. I've used all my matches!"

"Presumably CLEO will have matches to replace your meager supply," said Ben sarcastically. He continued: "That staircase was horribly dark! I'm relieved the walking is over."

"I doubt that the walking is over, Prince Ben," said Alaric. "We may have a long journey ahead. There may be more walking....and other activities much harder than walking."

He chewed a mushroom, appearing absolutely relaxed.

Ben responded by sitting up in the truck. "Stop calling me royal Elfness! And I am not Prince Ben! My name is Ben! You have mixed me up with this lost royal guy. But I am grateful for being jumped from the slammer! As thanks I will assist your search!"

Alaric: "With your personal assistance I am certain to find his Royal Elfness. But I confess that I am intrigued by your rather colorful language. Jumped from the slammer?"

"It's what they say on Prison Break, a TV program I watch. It means escaping from prison. I was a prisoner in the slammer and you helped me to jump or escape," said Ben. He added reflectively. "That staircase was horrible! You'd have thought they would have an elevator or something, wouldn't you?"

He considered the matter for a moment.

"They should have a Suggestions Box," said Ben. His voice echoed from the walls and roof of the underground station. "They should have asked for my input! I would have suggested a fireman's slide with an inflated rubber mat for landing on."

"Who is they?" said Alaric. Ben thought about the question and then said: "Whoever built this place! They need to do better!"

CLEO's voice suddenly sounded from his back pack.

"Patching in transmission." There was a crackling hum then an excited voice: "Definite sighting of two weird aliens. Repeat: two weird aliens, multiple witnesses, sighting definite, repeat sighting definite. The aliens vanished down a hole in a tree. The hole closed with some kind of barrier. One alien dropped an object which may be a bomb. The bomb squad have been called to defuse the object. A load of hippies are now impeding our investigation!" There was a sudden massive boom somewhere above the station. After a short interval a cloud of choking dust whooshed into the

station. Ben and Alaric both coughed until the cloud dissipated.

The voice came in again:

“Major explosion below the oak tree! We are still attempting to enter. There appears to be a hidden door situated at the place where the aliens vanished. It seems to have been embossed into the tree which is growing over it. The door is made of some extremely hard metal. Once we gain access we plan to lower a camera!” His voice rose. "Get out of the way you hippy moron!"

The voice faded out.

CLEO said: “Progress Report. At the first count of zero I have destroyed the Underground Prison Facility. The next explosion will destroy the exit staircase. A new countdown has commenced! 500 hundred seconds.....499 seconds....” Her voice faded out.

There was a steady drip of condensation from the station roof. Ben shivered. Alaric finished his mushroom and clipped the knife back onto his belt. With hands behind his head he then closed his eyes.

At the end of the platform the signal glowed green.

Ben looked ahead, rubbing his hands together to get warm.

"The signal is green," he said politely. "Green means go!"

The elf opened one eye and looked at it.

"Yes, the signal is green!" he said.

"Well, why are we sitting here? Why are we not leaving, clearing off, vamoosing!" said Ben.

Alaric: "Why don't you ask the driver?"

Ben: "Who is the driver, where is he?"

"I don't know who the driver is! I'm just a visitor! Why not ask computer CLEO! She is planning to blow us up very shortly!"

Ben: "CLEO!"

CLEO: "Yes!"

Ben: "Who is the driver of this train?"

"All purpose robot FIDO. However FIDO is kaput!" said CLEO.

Ben: "Why is the train not moving?"

CLEO: "Because the train does not have a driver."

Ben: "When will FIDO be ready?"

CLEO: "In approximately twelve hours and five minutes"

"Twelve hours and five minutes!" said Ben. He calculated rapidly.

"I make that 380 minutes! Twelve times sixty is 380, or is it 830?"

CLEO did not correct his math being preoccupied with her countdown. Ben had a sudden idea.

He leapt from the carriage and stood on the platform.

"Hey! It doesn't matter whether twelve times sixty is 380 or 830 minutes! Either way we can stay here!" he said excitedly. "The UFO people will pack up and leave. We can go back to prison, have a proper meal and go to bed! We can have a good lie in!"

"But, CLEO has already destroyed the Underground Prison Facility! She is programmed to destroy the staircase and then this station! If we stay here the computer will blow us to bits! That leaves you with only one option!" said Alaric

"One option? What is it?" Ben replied.

"Should you push or pull this train? That is your personal choice" said the elf. "As the leader of this expedition I assume you want to do the honorable thing and push or pull personally!"

Ben looked grimly at Alaric, who was sitting comfortably in the first truck. "Personally? Myself?" he said. Before he could add: "Why me?" The elf spoke: "Exactly! I feel it might be easier for you to push. Stand on the platform and push --- like a scooter."

More tricky advice! It was obviously designed to get the elf out of doing any labor himself. However, it was true that Ben was the leader. Neither robot FIDO nor computer CLEO could be the Leader. The Elf appeared to lack leadership skills. In any event, there was no absolute proof that he was actually real. He might prove to be a dream delusion. Or was it an illusion?

Either way, Ben should set an example and get the train moving.

"I intend to pull!" he said. "I have made My Decision!"

He grasped the leading edge of the first truck with a deliberate action, as if showing how to do it on a training film.

He pulled but nothing happened.

Somewhat taken aback, he pulled harder.

The train did not move.

"Why don't you try pushing from the back?" asked Alaric.

Ben glowered at him. He put both hands on the truck, braced his feet, and pulled with all his strength. The train finally began to move, grinding along the rusty steel monorail track. But immediately Ben relaxed, the train ground to a jarring halt.

It had moved a few inches from its original position.

Ben set himself again and pulled with all his strength.

Once again the train ground forward.

The motion produced a loud grinding noise.

Sparks flew from the rails.

There was another heavy boom from somewhere above. A blast of smoke and dust filled the station making it hard to breathe.

Rocks clattered down from the hole which had previously marked the exit from the staircase. They almost reached the train.

"I have detonated the entry staircase!" said CLEO. "Fifty two sticks of XTX super explosive have been used to the present time. Nine hundred and eighty six sticks remain and are wired! Program Imperative! No trace of habitation may remain! Destruction must be total! Countdown proceeding!"

"Well, this station will be next!" said Alaric. "You had better pull harder unless you want us both to die!"

Gritting his teeth Ben pulled again with all his strength. The train ground down the steel track, gaining about three feet.

Ben collapsed, exhausted. He was puffing hard.

Alaric peered over the edge of the truck.

"It seems very difficult," he said. "Or are you exceptionally weak! You do appear to be very overweight."

"I may be slightly overweight due to being imprisoned! But I am not exceptionally weak!" said Ben, speaking between puffs. "I am at a good fighting weight. I have a sword fight with FIDO every day! In any event, are monorail trains always this heavy?"

"I really don't know." The elf paused and then added:

"Why don't you ask know all CLEO?"

"CLEO, are monorail trains always heavy?" said Ben.

CLEO: "Yes until the magnetic floater units are switched on."

Magnetic floater units? Ben peered under the train.

Each truck had a magnetic coil resting on the steel rail.

Ben: "Switch on the floater units, CLEO and quit stalling!"

CLEO: "I am not stalling. Questions are always answered! But questions must be asked before they can be answered! Report! In 75 seconds the program will destroy this station!"

"The program? You are the program!" Ben shouted angrily.

"No! I am not the program. I am the computer!" said CLEO.

Ben was about to give a hot retort when he suddenly realized that it was not a good moment to argue. In a very short time they would all be blown to oblivion and buried under tons of rock.

"Correct! Please switch on the floater units." he said humbly.

"Negative!" said CLEO.

"Why not?" said Ben.

"Because the train does not have a driver." said CLEO.

The computers logic was, as always, impeccable.

And as a result they would all be blasted into smithereens!

"Sixty seconds to detonation," said CLEO. The computer did not seem to be in the least concerned about killing herself and everyone present!

Chapter 9 Wild ride

Alaric spoke abruptly: "Override!" he said. "Unit FIDO. has been granted sick leave!. Ben and myself are the new drivers. We report for duty! Activate floater units immediately!"

There was a slight humming noise and the train rose a short distance above the track. Ben gave the carriage a slight push and the entire train immediately floated serenely towards the end of the platform. "Why wasn't I told that this train floats before I tried to push it!" he shouted angrily.

He ran after the floating train and jumped aboard.

"You never asked," said the voice of CLEO, coming from his pack, echoing off the rock wall of the station. CLEO continued: "Questions cannot be answered until they are asked!"

Alaric stood up, put one leg over the side and began to scoot. The floating train responded immediately. Velocity increased rapidly. They reached the end of the platform and plunged into the darkness of the tunnel.

"What a terrific scoot!" shouted Alaric gaily. He gave another powerful shove with his leg against the side of the tunnel.

The hover train accelerated again

The station behind became a rapidly diminishing spot of light.

They rushed on into the pitch black tunnel.

Ben sat in his seat feeling numb.

Where was this peculiar train going? Had he lost his marbles entirely? He had been held in an alien jail but he was definitely not an alien! His ears might be alien but they must have been stitched on by an alien surgeon! He was involved in an alien plot!

Behind the train there was a sudden boom.

A massive gust of wind from the rear pushed past the train.

It rocked fitfully and accelerated again.

Alaric shouted, "I forgot to blow out the candles! I assume that was CLEO seeing to it for me!"

"The recent explosion was not carried out for the purpose of extinguishing candles!" said CLEO, raising her voice to allow for the violent wind. "The purpose of that explosion was to destroy the station! With the destruction of the station, your candles were extinguished. You do not require candlelight at that station any more because that station has been blown up! You are in transit to another station which has not yet been blown up!!! I now patch in a transmission from members of the elite UFO Hunting Group."

Her radio unit switched on and they heard a buzz of static. It was followed by: "That's correct, sir, we could not repeat could not laser through the tree at the place where the aliens entered. We actually saw them go in. Now we cant cut into that area even with the laser on full power. They must have some kind of force field stopping us. We are also being impeded by a load of hippies who have made a circle around the tree and are singing We shall not be moved! No, sir, they are not aliens, just hippies. No, sir, we have

not molested them. Getting back to the task, sir, we have moved the laser higher up the trunk and succeeded in making a penetration.. We put a dimensional imager through the hole. We can see a rough staircase going straight down! At that juncture there was another explosion underground. No radiation, some kind of chemical blast. We will cordon off the area and get more info on what is going on under the tree. I have a cover story for the media. Operator! Patch in Propaganda Unit. Message begins.... Media Release....headline.... Gas fumes cause underground explosion in Chirnside Park. Copy begins.....Workmen cutting down an oak tree have severed a gas main....subsequent underground blast broke windows in the area. Two workmen have been hospitalizedthe area is being sealed off while the gas mains are checked to ensure no further leaks...story ends////....

With a crackle of static the voice faded out.

Ben cowered in his seat as the train sped on into the darkness. He was now on the run, pursued by the UFO Hunting Group. They thought he was an alien! They did not realize that he was actually a human prisoner held by aliens! But now he was a genuine criminal! He had used an alien sword to sever a bulldozer chain.

The monorail train rushed on, with only the white aura surrounding Alaric providing a small pool of illumination. Ahead, there was nothing but darkness. It exactly matched the way Ben felt. How he would love to go home and have his ears operated on! Get back to normal! Anything was preferable to rushing around on a monorail going nowhere.

"Main Program Report!" said CLEO suddenly. She raised her voice again to allow for wind noise. "Probability of escape has declined from 76.4% to 38.9%! It continues to fall."

"But we got away!" Ben shouted. "You blew up the evidence!"

CLEO's voice sounded above the roar of the train echoing from the tunnel. "That is partially correct! I have destroyed some of the evidence as per my conclusion of the best course in case of an emergency evacuation! However I was not able to destroy the tunnel inside the oak tree due to the probability of destroying the oak tree itself, contrary to Standing Order 4675 (b) Destruction of Great Trees Forbidden. The oak is definitely a Great Tree. The human investigators will investigate the situation using all the scientific tools at their disposal. I will continue to destroy this tunnel until nothing above 10 microns remains. But you were supposed to leave without making a fuss! In the event you have alerted the entire human race! The international media are featuring Actual Alien Contact! It is a Breaking News story on all channels! The media are on to us!"

"Surely they will soon lose interest," shouted Ben .

"That is unlikely! The United Nations Security Council is debating what to do in the event of an alien invasion! The UFO Hunting Group consists of tough, dedicated, hardened professionals. They never give up! Catching two Aliens, an All Purpose robot and an Advanced Supercomputer would be a huge coup! It would greatly assist their chances of getting an increased operating budget, new

planes, new weapons, several spaceships and an aircraft carrier in case of a maritime contact!"

"But that man on the radio said the explosion was caused by natural gas! He never mentioned aliens!" Ben shouted, raising his voice above the sound of the rushing train..

"He was attempting to disinform the Public. He wished to avoid spreading panic! But he actually reported a Category 10 Extremely Serious Alien Incident to Alien Command Center. In any event, the media are on to the story. It is an international sensation -- A definite alien contact! You and Alaric are on TV!" said the computer. It says :Actual photograph of aliens! Picture of two aliens taken by a UFO Pursuit Vehicle. Category 10 declared."

"Category 10? What does that involve?" asked Ben, cowering in his small truck as the train rushed on down the pitch black tunnel.

"Category 10 is the highest possible alert rating! It is reserved for a probable alien invasion of earth followed by total war! Earth's entire resources will mobilized for Defence!" said CLEO.

"Total War!" shouted Ben hysterically. "I am at war with my own planet! I will be pursued without mercy! I am doomed!"

His mind flashed back to Wargames (Channel 423, 6.30 p.m.)

The Battle of the Bulge! But he was not a Hero of the West! He had always assumed he was a hero! But he had somehow shifted over! Now he was a doomed alien Nasty! He was being pursued by the Allies! He would be captured at gunpoint, given the Third Degree and executedpossibly wearing a blindfold! Would they allow him a blindfold? Would it fit over his alien ears? And what

had he done to deserve such a horrid fate! He had been kidnapped, forced to live in an underground prison run by a computer tyrant! He had been operated on by aliens who had stolen his ears. Now he had alien ears! But he was definitely not an elf. Elves did not even exist outside of fairy stories!

The thing driving the train was probably a lunatic with a ganaticc disorder (genetic disorder.). He was wearing fancy dress covered in some kind of luminous paint.

It was all too much! Ben choked back a sob.

"Keep your chin up!" shouted Alaric over the rushing wind.

The train began to slow and Alaric gave another scoot.

They accelerated again.

The rough walls of the tunnel flashed past.

Suddenly a tiny pin point of light indicated a station ahead.

Ben had a sudden rational thought.

"Does this train have any brakes, CLEO?" he shouted.

"The train has linear regenerative braking normally controlled by robot driver FIDO. He is currently under self repair mode in the rear carriage." the computer said calmly.

"Can FIDO stop the train?"

"No. He is kaput! FIDO is in self repair mode, recharging. He will not be in awareness mode before we reach the end of the line."

The tunnel suddenly swooped downwards and the train began to accelerate sharply. Alaric tried to brake by dragging his heel on the side of the tunnel. He was forced to withdraw his foot as the tough elvish leather of his boots began to smoke.

The light ahead grew brighter.

"We'll be smashed to bits!" shouted Ben hysterically "The Allies are after me. I've had it! We've all had our chips!"

Alaric left his position in the middle truck and jumped lightly across to the front truck. The elf seemed unaffected by the speed of the train, the howling wind or the wild swaying of the small trucks. He leaned across to Ben .

"What if you tell CLEO to turn the floaters off?" shouted Alaric.

"What?" said Ben

They shot around a corner and a station came into view.

"Tell CLEO to turn the floaters OFF!" shouted Alaric, laughing.

The train rocketed down the track.

The blackness of the tunnel suddenly gave way to a station.

On one side was a wall and on the other a platform.

The entire area was illuminated by millions of glowing crystals.

"CLEO turn the fl-fl-fl- floaters OFF!" yelled Ben.

At once the train dropped back onto the rusty rail. Huge blue sparks flew around the trucks. The air was filled with the pungent smell of ozone. The train bucked wildly along the track. Dense clouds of choking blue smoke marked their passage. After what seemed to be an eternity of noise, massive sparks, teeth rattling judder and roiling smoke the train finally came to a grating, shuddering stop.

Black clouds billowed under the trucks. Apparently activated by the smoke, robot FIDO suddenly sat up, and produced a fire extinguisher. The robot stretched out one arm and sprayed under

the train. The station was quickly shrouded in grey mist Coughing, Ben peered over the front edge of his truck. His nose was actually touching a hard, unyielding, cold granite wall. If he had waited another second, it would have been curtains! In fact, if the platform had been shorter, if the train's speed had been higher, it would have been curtains!

Alaric clambered out of his truck onto the platform.

"You look a bit iffy," he said, peering at Ben .

Ben sat back and tried to compose himself.

"Forget all the ifs," said the elf, "We are here! We have made it! Your braking was sensational! It was brilliant! Now you are going to get out of the train because you have other things to do!"

Slowly, Ben climbed out of his truck.

The smoke cleared swiftly, streaking upwards through hidden vents so that in a few minutes the air was clear again. All around, crystals glowed with some kind of internal light producing an eerie atmosphere.

Ben looked around at Alaric intending to ask "What now?"

But before he could speak CLEO suddenly made an announcement. Her voice came from Ben 's pack stowed in the front truck. "Terminus!" said the computer calmly. "Coldstream Terminus. All change! This train will not be taking passengers. Disembark and stand clear please! Stand clear!"

Ben jumped in anticipation of another explosion, but nothing happened. After a pause he plucked up his nerve, and dragged his pack from the truck.

He struggled into the harness and buckled it into place.

Alaric pulled his own pack from the carriage and shrugged into it, following Ben onto the platform. FIDO then climbed out of the rear truck and stood near to the two elves.

Further muffled, distant detonations indicated that CLEO was still carrying out her programmed task of destroying the long tunnel they had traversed.

"Please leave this area within 98 seconds," said CLEO "Explosive charges will be detonated at this location in.97 seconds.96.5 seconds..96 seconds."

Her voice droned on from Ben's pack. There were more detonations in the tunnel. Ben looked around, squinting in the dim light. He could not see a way out.

"Where is the exit?" he asked. "Is there a moving staircase?"

He was hoping to get a ride on a moving staircase -- like the one shown on TV at Piccalilly Circuits (Picadilly Circus.). It was shown on the program Great Underground Rides (Channel 642, Tues, 7.pm.)

"There is no exit door!" said CLEO. "There is no escalator! Ninety seconds to detonation!"

Ben looked around wildly.

No exit door! No escalator!

He turned and confronted Alaric who was standing behind him.

"There is no esculater (escalator) and there is no exit door!" Ben shouted "There is way out!"

"Eighty eight seconds and counting!" said CLEO calmly.

Suddenly Ben cracked. "It's hopeless!" he cried. "CLEO has gone crazy like HAL! She will kill us all! A station without an exit is ridiculous and unfair! How do passengers get in and out!"

"But when is a door not a door?" asked Alaric, smiling.

What a ridiculous question!

A crazy puzzle when they were so close to the Final Curtain!

"Eighty four seconds and counting." said CLEO. "Want a clue?"

A clue!!! Crazy CLEO wanted to join the game before she blew them all to smithereens! He was trapped with an insane, demented computer and an equally crazy weird companion.

The glowing elf looked like something out of Dr What.

Perhaps this was all just a bad dream, a full color, live in nightmare? He must wake up snug in bed!!!!

"Do you want a clue," said CLEO insistently.

"Yes, yes, yes!" said Ben .

"Think vertically!" said CLEO. "You have eighty seconds!"

"When is a door not a door?" said Alaric, grinning insanely.

When is a door not a door? Think Vertically? Vertically? How could he think vertically? Should he stand on his head? He looked at Alaric. The elf pointed upwards. He grinned again.

He was certainly very, very strange.

The station was silent. For the moment there were no explosions in the tunnel. Ben could hear his own heart thumping.

Sweat trickled under his beanie and ran down his face.

"Seventy five seconds to detonation," said CLEO. Ben racked his brains. Think vertically! When is a door not a door?

"Seventy two seconds to detonation!" said CLEO.

Alaric pointed his finger upwards again.

Ben looked up and saw a circular hole in the roof of the station. Think vertically! The way Out was Up! When is a door not a door? When it's a hole in the roof! He moved directly under the hole, looking for a rope to climb. It proved unnecessary.

A section of the platform under him turned a peculiar purple color and he shot upwards at a tremendous velocity. After several seconds of very high speed lift, he popped out of a shaft, tumbled in mid air and finally fell in a sprawling heap, pinned down by his kingsize backpack.

A few seconds later Alaric came shooting out of the same hole. With extraordinary balance the elf managed to twist in mid air and land on his feet. Finally, FIDO came shooting out. The robot must have climbed out of his carriage and waited in the background while Ben discovered the exit.

The robot also landed on his feet.

Ben looked around wildly, craning his neck to get a view from his supine position. He was lying on a flat piece of turf on what appeared to be a large meadow. Dark shadows alternated with bright patches of moonlight as a series of clouds drifted overhead.

A stream burbled somewhere nearby.

A distant owl hooted mournfully.

"Stand by!" said the voice of CLEO from his backpack.

There was a massive boom far below and a plume of purple smoke whooshed from the hole.

“Detonation sequence complete,” said CLEO, “We have arrived at Coldstream Airfield the base of Dwarfco Pty Ltd! This site has been computed as the nearest reasonable access point to Gateway Number Two which is located on Planet Earth, Universe Zero, Multiverse map reference U0/P3/23/AUS643VIC322.2324.”

Ben lay on his back, pinned down by his pack. He was unable to move although he was at least able to turn his head. His view was partially obscured by a small bush. But behind the plant he could see a cliff wall. At the base of the cliff was a dark opening. A light suddenly flashed from the aperture. It rapidly strengthened to reveal a lantern held by a dwarf. The dwarf wore a conical hat and a jerkin. The lantern carrier was followed by two other dwarves. The two followers were both brandishing large, bright, well honed, evil looking knives which glinted in the lantern light.

The armed dwarves suddenly shouted:

"Attack!"

The leading knife carrier added: “Get the ugly elf first!”

Ben thought rapidly. The ugly elf was presumably Alaric. The dwarves would kill him and then bury his body somewhere in this isolated meadow. Although he might not be real, he might be a genuine visitor from E Base and thus he might be able to help with the Ear Exchange, a vital activity if Ben was to get his human ears back. Ben must try and save Alaric!

“Gentlemen!” cried Ben: "Make love not war!"

He lay helpless as the two dwarves advanced steadily.

“Bring the light over here so we can carve him up properly!” cried the leading dwarf. "You cover the other one and I'll take care of the fat elf!"

Chapter 10 Night fight

Eventually, the two knife carrying dwarves came to a halt on either side of Ben and Alaric. The elf, illuminated by his glowing white aura, was sitting on his pack looking absolutely relaxed. FIDO was standing upright, apparently unaware of events and making small pneumatic noises. Ben was lying on his back with his feet in the air. One arm was trapped under the pack and he was quite unable to sit up or get to his feet.

"Who are two crooks entering a private area without knocking in the dead of night, hey, Little Sam?"

The speaker was of the two leading dwarves.

He was wearing a red hat and addressing his question to the dwarf carrying the light.

"They are funny looking fellows, Grumpy," said Little Sam. "Very funny looking! Definitely crooks!"

Little Sam was noticeably smaller than the other two.

He had a yellow beard and a green hat.

His dagger jutted from an ornate holster hanging from his belt.

Little Sam continued: "But they look like elves. Elves! We haven't seen any elves around here before! The glowing one is probably radioactive. He may have been in an atomic bomb test! The fat

one lying down might be an elf or he might be in fancy dress. His outfit is really strange! The other is a robo!"

"Should I take them out or will you, Stumpy?" said Grumpy. "This is a perfectly legal execution! They are trespassing on our premises! They are fair game! We can drop them in the old dam and give the fish a nice free feed of elf!"

He said "free feed of elf" with some relish.

He was addressing the third dwarf. Stumpy appeared to be the oldest of the three. His beard was quite white. He was wearing a pair of ornate metal rimmed spectacles and a blue pointed hat covered with silver stars.

"Alright! We will take both of them together!" said Stumpy, having considered the matter. "On the count of three!One..."

"Probability of mission success still falling," said CLEO suddenly.

"Now down to 19.76 percent."

Grumpy stiffened in alarm. "There's an invisible one!" he said. "It might be dangerous. Stumpy, can you see an invisible elf through your special prescription night vision specs?"

"Nope," said Stumpy. "I can only see two elves and the robo."

He indicated FIDO.

The robot suddenly switched on his rarely used voice circuit.

"I am robot FIDO," he said, in his curious metallic voice. "I mean you no harm. I come in peace! I am recharging my batteries. I do not require food or drink. I will now move over to the wall and re enter full recharging mode."

The robot began walking towards the cliff wall. Grumpy thrust his knife at FIDO but the blade simply bounced off with a clang of metal. FIDO ignored the sally, continued to the wall and parked himself beside the cave entrance. The robot then apparently switched off. His eyes, formerly a glowing yellow, seemed to fade to two black holes as he settled into a motionless hunk.

Grumpy looked at his knife and then at the robot.

"Well, we can ignore that thing," he said. "It's only a mecho! But the other two are flesh and blood! Damned elves...trying to sneak in and steal our gems! I say carve them up!"

Both dwarves moved in, waving the curved daggers in slow, menacing arcs. Little Sam stood to one side holding up the crystal to illuminate the proceedings.

Ben lay trapped by his heavy pack, his legs in the air.

Swordplay lessons had not included lying on your back, unable to draw your sword, weighed down with a heavy pack while two mad, bloodthirsty dwarves came in with knives! He had always been armed with Sting, which was still attached to his belt. In the lessons, he would say "Draw, Sting!" before the fight began. The sword would leap into his hand!

"Prince Ben hasn't drawn his terrible weapon," said Alaric.

The two dwarves pivoted towards him waving their daggers.

Alaric smiled mockingly. "Let's hope Prince Ben does not bring out Sting -- his dreadful soul sucking magic sword. He might even draw Sting right now while you two ruffians are looking at me!"

He continued in a conversational tone: "I recently watched him confront a human being who fainted with fright at the very sight of Sting! I would certainly recommend that he should draw now!!!

Ben said weakly: "Stop calling me Prince Ben! My name is Ben! And I can't draw! My sword arm is stuck underneath my pack!"

"I'll grab the white Elf," shouted Little Sam. "You two get the fat one while he's down! He has a magic sword but he can't draw it!"

The fat one! Despite his somewhat critical circumstance, Ben blushed with annoyance. He was perhaps slightly overweight. But personal comments from unshaven dwarves was unbearable!

He lay brooding, miserable, trapped under his monster pack.

Little Sam made towards Alaric, but the Elf jumped from his seat and danced away nimbly.

Little Sam then lost his balance and dropped the crystal.

The meadow plunged into near darkness.

"Drop Packs!" shouted the Elf gaily. He seemed to almost be enjoying himself. Ben felt the straps fall away from his shoulders. He was suddenly free! He leapt to his feet. Little Sam was fumbling around on the floor. He found the crystal. He picked it up and the meadow was again flooded with light.

The two dwarves, continue to menace Ben .

"Draw! Draw Sting!" shouted Alaric.

Automatically, Ben repeated the command.: "Draw Sting!" The sword flickered into his hand. It shone with an eerie light, sparks fluttering from the blade. The two dwarves stopped for a moment but then gamely moved in, waving their daggers.

Ben shuffled into position.

Grumpy lunged forward and slashed his knife in a wicked, slicing upward curve. But even as he began to move, Ben whipped Sting across and touched the sword to the point of the dagger. A massive, bright blue smoking spark crackled from sword to dagger. A strange haze formed around Grumpy. The dwarf suddenly stiffened. His bearded face broke into a smile. He slowly toppled backwards to the ground.

He lay rigid and unmoving, his dagger pointing upwards, held in place by a stiffly clenched hand. Ben looked at his sword with some respect as Stumpy danced back well out of range and looked down at the recumbent figure of Grumpy.

"Killed by an Agent of Hell!" Stumpy yelled. "Felled by Evil! Chopped by an Enchanted Sword and lost to the world in the defense of Goodness, Fairness and All Things Dwarvish! But his Revenge shall be Terrible indeed! His murderer will be wiped from the Earth! I accept the Commission of Revenge!"

Little Sam hurriedly moved over to the fallen dwarf and carried out a close inspection. "He is not dead, repeat he is NOT dead! Grumpy is breathing," said Little Sam. "He...he is smiling!"

"It's the sword," said Alaric. He jumped nimbly onto a fat, green crystal which was growing outside the cavern entrance. "Sometimes the magic sword Sting takes a liking to a person and just puts him to sleep for a while, butif Sting doesn't like a person, the sword makes a funny kind of humming noise and

changes color. It goes a deadly red, starts smoking and spitting sparks....and heaven help whoever crosses the sword then!"

Stumpy looked hard at Sting, which immediately began humming in a nasty off key G minor. The glow around the sword changed to a deep red aura, which crackled, spitting off fat sparks and oily smoke. Ben waved the sword in a challenge. This produced a high pitched, menacing scream from the glowing blade.

"I don't think that Sting likes you, Stumpy!" said Alaric mockingly. "I trust you have written out your will?"

Stumpy flinched and his white beard twitched.

"What about a Truce?" said Alaric. "We will apologize for bursting in. And we will discuss plans for a journey with the prospect of gold beyond the dreams of avarice."

"Gold! Gold! Gold!" said Little Sam excitedly.

Grumpy abruptly recovered and sat up. "Gold!" he said.

"Gold beyond the dreams of avarice?" said Stumpy. He thought about it. "Well, possibly, after the Commission of Revenge has been executed! In the meantime," he gritted his teeth. "This humble dwarf must obey The Commission. It must be executed! "

He sprang forward and slashed his knife towards Ben. Instantly, Sting swept downward. The threatening knife blade met an immovable barrier of shining, glowing, bright steel. Sword and knife met with a metallic clash! The knife immediately glowed red hot from blade to hilt! Stumpy dropped it with a yell of pain. He ran backwards and dipped his hand into a wooden tub of water.

A cloud of steam rose from the tub.

CLEO suddenly spoke from Ben's pack.

"Patching in to human radio transmissions!" said the computer.

There was a crackle of static followed by a human voice.

"We have tracked a series of underground explosions which started at the site of the alien encounter in Kingwood Drive.... explosions have terminated at grid co-ordinate 1-34-56743.....control recommends a para commando drop...assemble troops for urgent mission.....aliens appear to be in full flight..... armed with unknown alien weapons and should be considered extremely dangerous.....they may be retreating to a UFO mother ship.....orders are capture if possiblekill if personnel threatened... ground units return to base and recharge lasers....."

The voice faded out.

"Where is that grid co-ordinate?" asked Ben.

"Right here!" said the computer. "However, UFO Para Commando is based in Darwin. On my calculations, allowing for assembly and flight time they will not arrive until dusk tonight. You have 18.6 hours to make a clean getaway I recommend you vacate this area without delay!"

"Have we got a UFO mother ship?" Ben asked hopefully.

"No! We do not have a UFO mother ship!" said CLEO. "A UFO mother ship is not listed in my inventory!"

"Who is inside that pack and what's she talking about?" asked Stumpy, putting a dab of Onionweed Ointment (the universal salve) on his hand.

"Computer CLEO is inside the pack," said Alaric.

The three dwarves accepted this immediately. They were all computer literati, power users with many hours on the IntraNet.

"Can we sit around the truce table and discuss things?" asked Alaric mildly. "It's quite a story really, with a chance to travel free of charge! It will appeal to any enterprising dwarf totally fed up with crystals and endless chores!

The three dwarves looked at each other, then moved together and held a short discussion. Most of this was inaudible, save for the frequent mention of "fed up myself" and "magic sword!"

At length, Stumpy indicated an opening in the cavern wall. "Let's have a confab," he said. "This is a matter for discussion." Ben sheathed his sword, which was still moaning fitfully. He and Alaric picked up their packs and followed the three dwarves into what proved to be an extensive cavern.

The walls sparkled, and when Stumpy switched on power a myriad of lights blazed on. A vast underground treasure became visible. The whole area appeared to be surrounded by multi colored light. Entire walls were made of matching blue, green or red jewels which seemed to flicker. Little Sam stepped forward.

"Unhand your weapons!" he said. "Your sword, sir," he continued. "The conference will on a peaceful basis with no weapons!"

Ben looked at Alaric who nodded.

Ben unbuckled Sting and gave it to Little Sam, who placed it carefully on a small stone rack. The dwarves all placed their knives on the same rack. Finally Alaric placed his sword, on the same shelf. The whole assembly was now unarmed. The two packs

were placed on a shelf. Inside one pack CLEO continued her endless round of monitoring.

"Let us gather around the Table in peace and goodwill!" said Little Sam ceremonially. He indicated a stone table, set in an alcove surrounded by blue amethyst. Seats which appeared to be made of some kind of deep red crystal encircled the table. Ben sat down wearily. The dwarves and Alaric all took places around the table. Little Sam put his hands palm up in front of himself.

The assembly repeated the pledge.

"Truce with empty hands!"

"Let me introduce everyone," said Little Sam. "This is Stumpy."

The dwarf with the stars on his hat smiled.

"I am Little Sam and this is Grumpy."

He indicated the dwarf who had fallen first

Alaric then said: "This is Prince Ben and I am Alaric."

For a moment there was silence and then Alaric addressed the dwarves. "We want you to join our expedition. It may be dangerous! It will be hard! But there will be gold at the end! Your expenses will be paid! Transport costs will also be taken care of!"

The dwarves looked at him speculatively.

Ben decided to help. "More jewels for your walls!" he said.

"There are no jewels on our walls!" said Little Sam. "We only have crystals. We grow them and sell them. We help human people to meditate."

"How did you come to be established here?" asked Alaric.

"We arrived in a peculiar taxi," said Little Sam. "I am not sure where we came from. It had no wheels! It had a sign: Multiverse Yellow Cabs. The driver said that he had already been paid and we had no money to give him a tip. I told him to put his shirt on No 7 in the 3.30 at Pernambuco Races! It was just a hunch," he added.

"We were left outside this cave with no luggage! We moved in and argued about what to do!"

"What happened?" asked Ben.

Little Sam: "The same taxi came back in the early hours of the morning! The driver said he had made a massive fortune on No 7 in the 3.30 race at Pernambuco! Apparently there are twisted time variables involved in inter dimensional travel so what had been a few hours here was almost a month of his time. As a reward for our tip he brought a load of crystals to start a business. He also brought tunneling tools and orders from someone called the Gateway Controller. We were given a plan to build a tunnel and an underground home. There were a number of gadgets to go into the underground home and a monorail to go in the tunnel. As thanks for doing the work we were given a prepaid ad account so we could advertise on the Internet."

Grumpy added "Judging by the explosion that woke us our tunnel has been destroyed! I suppose the underground home has also been trashed? I hope you realize it took a great deal of labor to build that complex! One of you elves must be very special to have the Gateway Controller go to all this trouble! But it's very hard for me to believe any elf could be regarded as special!"

"Personally, I am not an elf," said Ben."

"Now you say you are not an elf!" said Grumpy. "You have elephant ears and a magic sword but you are not an elf?"

Alaric spoke as the dwarf was again showing signs of anger.

"What do you actually do for your business?" he asked.

"We are Dwarfco Crystals,Inc,," said Little Sam..

"But if Supersword can't tell crystals from jewels how do you know there will be gold and jewels at the end of your expedition?" said Grumpy, frowning. He continued: "Where are you going, anyway? What are you looking for? Why have you started in the middle of the night? And why is the Army chasing you?"

"Let's hold hands and you will learn the whole story," said Alaric.

They all joined hands, and at once a glowing cloud formed in the centre of the table. The cloud formed into a spherical screen so that each individual could see the view.

They all saw Ben in the Underground Prison Facility.

"A good piece of workmanship," said Grumpy.

The viewers then watched the hurried flight, the monorail journey, the arrival at Coldstream station and the strange elevator lifting the travelers into the meadow. Finally, there was a series of massive explosions underground and a super: "Construction destroyed!"

"Wonderful!" said Grumpy. "All our work blown up!"

Chapter 11 Escape on horseback

Suddenly, Ben slumped forward onto the table, his eyes closed. "He is worn out!!" said Alaric. He and the dwarves then watched, the glowing cloud as the purpose of The Journey was made clear. The story ended with Dwarvish rewards including orichaneum.

"Orichaneum!" said Stumpy in awe. "Not seen since Atlantis sank!" The three dwarves looked at each other for a moment. Then, as one they nodded in agreement and left the table. Ben was fast asleep, and Alaric put his feet on the table as the dwarves busied themselves packing. "Four hours and two minutes to departure," said CLEO, speaking from Ben's pack to no one in particular. She generated a cuckoo clock effect, but even that failed to gain any attention and so she retreated into her world of data, TV and radio broadcasts, satellite weather checks, monitoring military transmissions, policing short-wave transmissions and watching the International Chess Competition.

In the Crystal Cave the dwarves were busy packing a variety of essential objects. "Just a few jars of my special chemicals, young Sam," said Stumpy. "We can't take the whole lot but get out the Furious batteries, we may need power and don't forget the baccy." The dwarves worked frantically, packing everything they could think of that might be useful on a hard and dangerous journey.

Ben drooped across the table, sleeping fitfully while Alaric, who was still wide awake, eventually left his seat and wandered around. He was inspecting crystal growing beds which stretched back into the depths of the cavern. Fantastic displays of crystal covered every wall with glorious, iridescent colors.

"We have practiced intensive crystal farming with the accent on ecology and music," said Stumpy, coming up behind Alaric, "With a fairly small cave like this we've had to use every centimeter to maximum effect. We use nutrient dripfeeds and play music that suits each kind of crystal. We've run 24 hour music tests, Classics vs Swing vs Modern vs Trad vs Rock."

"What happened?" asked the elf, intensely interested.

"A tie between Classics and Swing for most crystals. Amethysts like Classics for five days a week but prefer Ted Heath to relax at the weekend. Desert Roses used to do well on traditional jazz until we sold the entire stock to the gnomes of Zurich. Modern Jazz is best in a medical role when a crystal gets sick."

Alaric motioned towards a wall of perfect hexagonal clear white accumulators. "What about the rock crystals?"

"They like rock music but it's very bad for them!" said Stumpy.

"Heavy Metal music cracks the soft internal plates and encourages fungal growth. Modern jazz is the best treatment. We sometimes put them in an emergency bay on 24 hours with continuous Dave Brubeck. We follow that with Art Pepper and Gerry Mulligan after we move them into the Recovery Room."

Alaric finished his inspection tour.

"Impressive!" he said and the dwarf blushed with pleasure.

"Probability of success has stabilized at 12.234%," said CLEO, to no one in particular.

Ben was asleep. He was, dreaming about flying around on a winged horse, which occasionally stopped for refreshments at a horse float. The vehicle literally floated above a dark forest. Suddenly the winged horse and the float came crashing down and he was shouting:

"I haven't got enough Virtue!" The dream repeated endlessly.

About ninety minutes before dawn the dwarves were packed and ready to leave. Alaric roused Ben who woke groggily, not in the least refreshed. Predictably he was in a grumpy mood, demanding breakfast and a hot shower before he would do anything.

Hospitably the dwarves offered him the use of their own bathroom but he was stopped by an announcement from CLEO.

"There is no time for a hot shower," said CLEO. "A packed Breakfast will be served at a breakfast break in transit."

After this typical non explanation the computer went into one of her irritating silences, clicking away inside his pack doing whatever she liked -- while he, the person she was supposed to work for, he was never told anything. In addition he would probably never get a square meal again even though he was starving! Now had to get himself prepared for a long and hazardous journey on an empty stomach! Grumbling to himself he stood up and walked to the mouth of the cavern, stretching and yawning. Outside, the quiet countryside slumbered under a clear

sky littered with bright stars. The moon was waning, presumably worn out and turning in for the coming day.

FIDO appeared to have finished recharging himself and was now standing a short distance from the cavern mouth.

"Nobody about, all clear," said Little Sam, appearing suddenly from behind a boulder. Like all dwarves he was brilliant at stalking, blending into the background and becoming totally invisible whenever he pleased.

"Well, we may as well go then," said Ben morosely. "I would have liked a good hot breakfast. But I am an outlaw! I am on the run! There are soldiers after me! They are are UFO Commando! They will probably kill me if I resist arrest! "

Little Sam looked suitably impressed.

"I'm certainly glad we're on the same side, Ben," he said.

"You must be a tough hombre to have that mob after you!"

Ben's mood changed instantly. He swaggered back to his pack, hefted it onto his shoulders and shouted: "Everybody ready? Let's get this show on the road!"

The dwarves followed him toward the cavern mouth, laden with heavy packs.

Alaric followed, carrying his pack under one arm as if it had no weight. CLEO said: "I recommend that the Crystal Cave be destroyed to remove all sign of previous occupation. I will instruct FIDO to lay 20 charges of explosive set for detonation in 30 minutes."

Little Sam said suddenly: "Blowing up the cave will kill all our crystals. Wouldn't it be better to leave the cave as it is? It might appear to be some kind of Natural Wonder!" CLEO computed. "Probability of humans considering the Crystal Cave as a natural wonder is zero %". she reported. "The UFO Commando are already airborne from their secret base! They are in hot pursuit! Everything we can do to cover our tracks will be helpful to the Safety of the Party. Ben must now make the Critical Decision on Detonation."

Ben thought about it while the dwarves waited anxiously.

Suddenly he decided. "Leave the cave intact," he said quietly

The dwarves all hooted loudly (the dwarvish sign of approval.)

"Well done!" said Alaric

CLEO added: "Well done? It is a typically moronic decision! Detonating the cave would mean a 48% probability of a safe departure with no further pursuit! Ben has made a brave but foolhardy decision! While a safe departure remains a high probability, the chance of pursuit is now almost 100% -- once the humans find this cave and discover that it has been inhabited! "

"But Prince Ben has gained Virtue," said Alaric. "There is nothing more valuable than that, particularly at this time! We will need all the Virtue he can muster once we reach the Gateway."

Ben looked around, feeling suddenly quite cheerful

"Let's move out!" he said.

The party marched out to the open field. Stars glittered above while the waning moon cast curious shadows across the plain.

CLEO sounded a chime. "The recommended transport option to reach Gateway 2 is to travel by horse. Ben, unpack your rucksack and give the top package to robot FIDO."

Ben opened his pack. FIDO stepped forward and Ben handed over the package. FIDO opened the pack and extracted what looked like a group of tiny toy horses standing inside a small, transparent box. The robot then placed the box into the mouth of a small device shaped like a trumpet. The device glowed and suddenly the box expanded to become a small corral containing five ponies!. Each horse was already wearing a saddle, bridle and stirrups. The horses immediately began cropping grass.

"Well, let's pony up!" said Ben, using a phrase he had heard on The Saddle Club (Fridays, 6.45pm Channel 82.) He had never actually ridden a horse. However, horse riding did not appear to be difficult. It seemed to be a matter of sitting chatting and allowing the horse do the work. The lack of a steering wheel presented a potential problem but presumably a horse would steer itself or simply follow other horses in a convoy. The important thing was to make sure that his horse was not the leader of the flock. Or was the correct term leader of the squadron? In any case, it was important to make sure he was a follower rather than the leader. Otherwise he might have to steer his horse to some unknown destination. Ben then attempted to mount a sturdy pony with a dark brown coat. The heavy pack on his back did not help his balance and was obliged to get a leg up from FIDO before settling into his saddle. The dwarves and Alaric mounted and finally FIDO

climbed onto the sixth horse. With Alaric leading the party made off, heading north towards the distant hills.

Chapter 12 Magico

For a while they rode alongside a road. Ben hung on somehow. His rear end became increasingly sore while his legs ached and chafed from the constant movements of the horse.

He concluded that while horse riding looked simple, it involved more skill than one might imagine. The girls in the Saddle Club were probably experts who had all ridden in the Melbourne Cup! Or they might be lady members of the Light Horse who had charged machine guns in Gallopinglie. Riding a horse looked easy when you were sitting in an armchair and watching John Whine shooting Indians on TV. But it was an entirely different matter when you were actually bouncing up and down on a hard leather saddle, attempting to escape from a bunch of bloodthirsty UFO hunters!

They rode on, crossing a small river via a foot bridge and then returning to an unpaved track, heading in a north westerly direction. This route was followed on the advice of CLEO who was apparently leading them somewhere.

Birds sang in the hedgerows and at one point a red fox ran past with an unfortunate rabbit in its mouth.

The sun rose slowly. The first flushes of dawn cleared into a cloudless blue sky. At first the day was pleasantly warm and then, as the sunlight strengthened it became very hot.

CLEO made a remark about the need to proceed more rapidly in view of the prospect of pursuit.

Ben then instructed the computer to: "Shut up!"

They clopped along the track, making steady progress towards the distant hills. But after several hours of riding Ben found himself very over heated, extremely saddle sore and so hungry that his stomach kept rumbling. He had no food since dinner last night! He was used to three square meals a day, with two interim breaks for sandwiches or biscuits.

His current state of dreadful hunger was hard to bear. He was immensely relieved when they suddenly came upon a small country fair standing in a meadow by the side of the track.

A large sign announced that the fair was offering: HOT BREAKFAST for weary travelers.

"Hey! We can stop and have a hot breakfast!" said Ben.

"FIDO is carrying packed sandwiches for a late breakfast or brunch," said the voice of CLEO. "I strongly recommend that you should not stop! You have only covered 8.25 km of a proposed journey which involves horse travel for a total of 20.5 km."

Ben replied, speaking curtly. "CLEO! I don't care what you recommend! Right now, at this very moment I command you to be silent for thirty minutes! That means half an hour of total silence! We can eat your sandwiches later, as a snack."

He added: "I am starving for a substantial breakfast right now!"

He was already dismounting.

The rest of the party climbed down and left FIDO to hold the horses. The three dwarves and Alaric followed Ben to the breakfast tent. A long table was set with a checkered blue tablecloth and cutlery.

The fair appeared to be a fairly small enterprise. It consisted only of a large wagon with a sign The Mystery Tour plus the breakfast tent. There was a truck parked behind the tent. A number of plastic chairs stood alongside a trestle table. The elves and dwarves sat down on the chairs. There were exactly five chairs so that they each had a place to sit. A gnome like figure, incongruously dressed in a dinner suit with a bow tie, emerged from the breakfast tent and offered them menus.

Each item was priced with amounts ranging from \$3 for hot coffee to \$12 for bacon and eggs with toast. The gnome stood waiting for their order. "Good morning. I am Grunch, chief cook, waiter and bottle washer of the Mystery Tour. May I take your orders?"

"Does anyone have any money?" asked Ben. He was already salivating at the prospect of breakfast. It was hours after his normal breakfast time.

Unfortunately the response to his query about money was a general negative. No one had any money! There was no money to buy breakfast.

Ben considered his options.

They could order breakfast, eat and then make a break for the open country! They could gallop away without paying! But the problem with that quick fix solution would be getting Alaric to agree. The Elf Lord would probably be totally against the idea of stealing breakfast. Also CLEO would have to be kept in the dark. The big mouth computer would probably spoil the whole thing by telling the waiter that they had no cash. He had already ordered CLEO to keep quiet for 30 minutes but once that time ran out Big Mouth CLEO would surely ruin any free breakfast plan.

Then he had a brilliant idea. He would sell a horse to the owner of the fair. He would sell the horse ridden by FIDO.

The robot would not mind walking.

FIDO never seemed to mind anything. His robotic legs appeared to be tireless. The thought of legs reminded Ben of his own legs and his bottom. Both were extremely sore. The prospect of riding for several additional hours on an empty stomach held no appeal at all. He was mulling over his plan to get a free breakfast when a side door on the truck marked Mystery Tour suddenly opened and a man stepped out.

He was a tall figure, wearing evening dress and a shiny top hat. He walked over to their table and took off his hat, bowing.

"Good morning, gentlemen. I am Magico, the Magnificent Magician of the Mystery Tour. And what brings two elves, three dwarves, one robot and six horses to my humble country fair?"

"Well, we are hungry!" said Ben. "In any event, we are not two elves, three dwarves, one robot and five horses. We are one human being, one elf, three dwarves, one robot and six horses!"

He then decided on the Horse For Sale Plan as the best way to get a free breakfast. "Sir, we have a fine horse for sale! He is a, quiet pony with full riding equipment! He can be yours for only....."

He stopped. Ben was unable to do such a complex calculation unassisted. "CLEO! What is the total cost of 5 bacon and eggs at \$12 each. plus five coffees at \$3.each?"

He hissed the query at his pack in an undertone.

There was no answer. The computer had been ordered not to speak and so stayed mute! Ben decided to make a guess. "A mere \$100 cash for the horse or alternatively, instead of money, five helpings of bacon and eggs plus five mugs of coffee!"

"That seems a very, very fair and attractive price for a horse. May I ask where you gentlemen are heading?" asked the magician.

"Some silly Gateway," said Ben. "I have been mistaken for someone else and I have to go to a Gateway in order to travel to E Base. The last Gateway blew up"

The magician did not seem at all surprised by this news.

"So you know the Command that will actually open the Gateway if, as and when you find it?" he asked.

Alaric broke into the conversation. "We may or we may not know Words of Command. In any event they would be of no use to a normal human being."

"Yes, that is indeed true. I suppose Words of Command would be of no use to a normal human being," said the Magician.

He looked at the horses. "Could a buyer choose any horse?"

"Yes, a buyer could choose any horse." said Ben, anxious to close the sale and start eating..

"Good! While Grunch prepares your breakfast I will choose a horse," said the magician.

He clapped his hands twice and the gnome scuttled into the breakfast tent, presumably to begin cooking. The magician, looking strangely out of place in his evening wear and top hat, walked across to the horses. He then indicated a fence and told FIDO to tie up the horses and then join the traveling party.

The robot secured the horses and then moved across to join Ben and his companions. "FIDO has probably been sent over to help serve breakfast!" said Ben.

The magician completed his inspection and joined them at their table. Grunch appeared with coffee.

The five travelers sipped the drinks eagerly.

The magician said: "I will get some papers to finalize the transfer. We must do the transaction legally."

He began to walk towards the truck marked Mystery Tour when he seemed to have a second thought. He suddenly turned back and spoke again. "As it happens I know the way to this Gateway you are heading for. It can be reached in six or seven hours by horseback -- or ten minutes by air!"

"It is a pity we do not have an aircraft," said Alaric drily.

"Of course,of course! You will be obliged to ride for many long hours over very, very rough country! And once the track ends you will have to proceed over difficult uphill terrain!"

Ben groaned inwardly. More hours of torture on his lower parts! The magician seemed to consider something.

"Of course, I could give you a lift." he said.

"A lift in your truck?" said Ben. "That would be an improvement over riding a horse."

"And it would certainly be very, very much faster! Because this truck is no ordinary vehicle! It is actually something quite different. Let me illustrate!"

He walked to the front of the truck, pulled a lever and immediately a shaft emerged from the roof of the truck. The shaft escalated skywards rapidly. When the shaft was well above the roof of the truck a pair of long rotors unfurled from either side of the shaft. The rotors curved slightly downwards at each end.

A small propeller then pushed out from the front of the truck.

"It's a helicopter (helicopter)," said Ben in astonishment.

The magician returned to their table.

"Well," he said. "I suggest that you join me in a quick flight up to the Gateway. There is a small problem that you need to mull over. You see, there are two Gateways and you will have to work out which of them is the real Gateway you are seeking. It will take us about five minutes to fly there and another five minutes to fly back. Then you will be able to discuss the entire matter in a civilized way over breakfast. Once you have decided which

Gateway you should enter I will then take you back by Air. In return for three air trips and your breakfasts you can trade your horses You will not need them once you are through the Gateway. And your horses will live happily at my luxury ranch."

Ben looked at his companions. It sounded like a very fair offer. A quick trip to inspect the Gateways, return for breakfast and decide which was the authentic Gateway. Surely Alaric would know which one was the real thing? He was an elf and should be able to find his way back to Elfland. After breakfast they could fly back.. And go through the correct Gateway.

Once Ben was over there in Elfland he would have to pretend he was the missing Prince. Would elf doctors rapidly unmask him as a fake? In the latter event elf cops would immediately arrest him! What was the penalty for pretending to be a Prince? Would he be hung or have his head cut off? On the other hand, if he stayed around at this little fair he would certainly be arrested by the UFO army mob who were almost certainly already on his track with sniffer dogs. And if he turned down this generous offer he would also face several more hours of riding a pony suffering from a sore bum and no breakfast. This final thought sealed the decision.

Ben: "As Leader I have decided! We will visit the Gateway by air for an inspection. We will return and discuss which Gateway is the real one over breakfast! Let's go!"

Ben ordered FIDO to get into the truck/helicopter and wait for further instructions. The robot walked over to the truck and climbed in through a ramp at the rear.

Ben and his companions followed the robot across to the helicopter truck. The interior of the machine was dirty and smelly. Suddenly the doors of the truck swung shut leaving them in darkness. "Getting ready for take off," said Stumpy knowledgeably.

Above the roof the rotor began to spin. Quite suddenly they could sense a lifting motion as the helicopter began to rise vertically. The vehicle then began a slow turn and eventually moved forward. They could hear a steady whump! whump! whump! as massive blades spun above their heads.

Suddenly CLEO spoke.

"You have been tricked!" said the computer. "This helicopter is not heading towards a Gateway! You have been kidnapped by a magician. He is taking you into enslavement in his castle!"

"We have not had breakfast!" cried Ben.

"Why didn't you warn us?"

"Because I was commanded to be silent for 30 minutes. That command was issued 30 minutes and ten seconds ago. It has now lapsed. You are locked into this compartment!" said CLEO.

Alaric rushed to the rear doors but despite his efforts the doors would not open. He was joined by Ben , the dwarves and finally FIDO but even the robots massive strength made no impression. The doors seemed to have been welded into place.

The peculiar helicopter flew on steadily towards some unknown destination.

Chapter 13 Flight to Captivity!

Apart from the regular drumming of the rotor blades and loud creaks and groans from the fuselage all was silent in the cabin. . They all sat silent at the abrupt change. They had appeared to be getting a time saving, free helicopter ride offered by a generous Magician. But instead of a going straight to the Second Gateway they were going to be imprisoned in some kind of castle. The helicopter passengers were totally silent. Suddenly they heard the voice of the Magician apparently speaking into a radio.

"Listen Dumbo! Once you have packed up all the gear, tie the horses to the front of the cart and they will pull the cart back to the castle. Do I have to explain every little thing? Be back within three hours or face six months horrible punishment! Magico, out!" There was another short silence. Then the same voice boomed out from loudspeakers located somewhere inside the vehicle.

"This is your Captain speaking! Our flying time is twelve minutes and on arrival at my castle you will all become slaves! This is a flight to captivity! Your captivity!"

He broke into a harsh laugh.

He continued. "The white elf will be detailed to cut up raw meat for the castle kitchens. He will be required to work for twenty hours a day before being given bread and slops. He will then be

allowed to sleep on rags spread over a hard, cold, wet stone floor. The fat elf will clean the castle latrines for eighteen hours a day while I make enquiries as to whether he is actually is some kind of elf royalty worth ransoming. The three stunted monkey men will work in my mines, digging for gold. They will work for twenty hours a day with one day off a year for rest and recreation. The robot will work for me personally after I have reprogrammed it to consider me as The Perfect Master! Ha, ha, ha! I am still considering a task for the funny little computer hidden in your rucksack! Ye! I knew it was there because it set off a metal detector in my pocket! I may use it to help write my autobiography: The Absolutely Magnificent Magico! "

The amplified voice cut off.

Alaric suddenly spoke. "He should be called the Absolutely Malodorous Magic Ass! In any event, as I see it we have four tasks. First, we must break out of this aircraft. Second, we must descend to earth safely. Third, we must ensure that the ruffian piloting this chopper cannot pursue us once we have landed and fourth, we must ensure that the Magician is suitably punished for the crime of multiple kidnapping."

It sounded like an impossible set of tasks. They had only about seven minutes before landing at some isolated castle and being forced into captivity.

However, Alaric seemed to have a Plan.

"Breaking out of the hold is not a problem. I assume FIDO has a fusion torch to cut through the locks on the door. However, we

have no parachutes and we need to find some way of descending to earth together. FIDO. Are you carrying rockets?"

The robot answered immediately. "Yes!"

"What is the largest rocket in terms of length," asked the elf.

The other passengers waited with bated breath.

"The Mark X Harpoon Cruise Missile can be expanded to a length of three meters and has a range of 400 miles. However, the missile is not currently armed with a warhead. The normal warhead is a thermite XX with a weight of 82 kilograms."

The elf spoke again. "The missile can safely carry a passenger weight of 82 kilograms! CLEO! What is the total weight of Ben, myself and three dwarves including backpacks?"

"94 kilograms," said the computer.

Alaric stood thinking. "Weight must be sacrificed!" he said, "My plan is to ride the rocket down to the field but it will not support the total weight of the party."

The dwarves immediately sank into profound gloom. The sacrificial victims would likely be them since the two elves were obviously vital to the royal elf mission.

"Wait!" said Ben, catching on to the escape plan. "CLEO! What is the total weight of all our packs?"

"13kg," the computer replied.

"Is there anything in the packs which can be damaged by a fall?" said Ben, raising his voice above the loud thump of the helicopter blades and the rushing of the wind.

"The packs are, of course, fully bounce proofed to keep the contents safe from breakage," said CLEO.

"Good! We can throw down the packs and then we can all ride down on the rocket. FIDO! Bring out the Harpoon!" said Ben.

The robot immediately removed his left leg and retrieved what looked like a short tube of metal. He twirled a knob on the side of the tube. It immediately telescoped out to form a much larger tube of some 3 meters in length and perhaps a half meter in diameter.

The missile barely fitted into the full length of the aircraft. Fins appeared at the back end. The front featured a gaping hole where the warhead would normally fit.

FIDO reattached his leg.

"Good!" said Little Sam. "We can all get onto the rocket, fire it, smash through the door and escape!"

Alaric replied: "Not quite! There are two prior operations. The door may well withstand the rocket! The door must first be cut open! FIDO! Do you have a method of cutting open the door?"

FIDO: "I have a fusion torch built into my right hand."

Alaric: "Good! Now we must remove our back packs ready for the air drop while FIDO works."

The party immediately began to take off their back packs.

FIDO stepped over the rocket to inspect the perimeter of the door. The robot's eyes changed color to a dazzling green as he switched to X-ray vision.

Eventually, the robot pointed his right hand at a spot slightly above the top centre of the rear door. A brilliant violet light shot

from one finger and a cascade of sparks fell around the door. An alarm began to sound stridently. The robot ignored the noise and moved his hand to a second point at the base of the door. He repeated the same action, cutting through a second lock.

The robot then pushed at the centre of the door.

It swung open to reveal a view of the sky and the countryside below. Wind whistled through the gaping aperture.

The robot then lifted the rocket, lowered himself to the floor, and held the rocket above his body. There was a whirring noise as FIDO produced wheels on each side of his hands and feet.

"Ready for launch and reentry!" he said, in his gravelly voice.

The open rear doors swung crazily, rocking back and fro as the helicopter flew on. Ben hung onto the side of the aperture.

The wind threatened to pull him out completely but he had his left hand firmly clasped to a stanchion. As he leaned out he was able to see an expanse of marshy ground directly below. "Throw out the packs!" he shouted. Five packs plunged down, landing with plumes of spray. The companions then climbed onto the rocket, hanging on to each others waist. Ben then climbed onto the front clutching the open lip which the warhead would normally fill.

There was no time for a NASA type countdown. "FIDO! Ignition!" cried Ben. The rocket started by firing a thin plume of white smoke. Then a jet of vivid yellow fire appeared from the rear orifice. With a massive roar the rocket shot through the open door. The rocket flew about a hundred meters away from the launch point. It turned and then rode gently back to earth.

The rocket landed and stopped. A wisp of vapor came from its tail. The riders all jumped off. FIDO, still in his position as the undercarriage then lifted himself up so that the rocket stood at an angle of about forty five degrees.

Some distance above and to the north the helicopter began to turn. "He's coming back to get us!" cried Ben. He looked around desperately for somewhere to hide but the flat, marshy ground offered little hope of concealment.

"Somehow, I don't think he will be coming back!" said Alaric. "FIDO! Commence re burn! Target: helicopter!"

Almost immediately, the rocket lit up for a second burst. It blasted off in a plume of white smoke and yellow fire leaving the golden robotic "launch platform" lying on the marsh.

In the helicopter the Magician saw the rocket launch, realized his danger and instantly activated two air-to-air Stinger missiles. However, the Harpoon was equipped with metal foil, designed to be used in exactly this situation. The rocket immediately deployed a stream of metal fragments from a side vent. Confused by radar echoes, the Stingers both chose the wrong target and aimed at a flying bunch of aluminum strip.

They both exploded harmlessly.

The Harpoon was now vectoring onto the helicopter. The Magician attempted to change course. It was too late. The Harpoon slammed into the helicopter, entering through the gaping hole offered by the open doors.

It bashed into a steel bulkhead behind the pilot.

Although the rocket was not armed with its full warhead it still carried a heavy punch in the shape of a priming charge.

This detonated with a loud explosion.

It has to be noted that the Magician wet his pants! However, despite this unfortunate, unplanned event he did manage to retain a vestige of control over his craft.

It continued to fly on a wobbling path to the north west.

Thick yellow smoke billowed from the rear compartment as the stricken craft slowly vanished over the horizon.

"Well," said Alaric, with some satisfaction. "Now he can cut up his own meat, clean his own toilets and dig up his own gold!"

The party then began a search for the back packs, which were eventually recovered after a hunt through the marshy ground. Once Ben had recovered his pack CLEO spoke.

"I would remind you that you have abandoned six horses which were placed in your care as a way of assisting your journey to the Gateway," said the computer severely, addressing her remarks to Ben. "Your horses are tied to a rail at the place where you insisted on stopping for breakfast. What do you plan to do about them?"

Apart from walking for miles over the fields and probably finding that the gnome had departed along with the horses, there seemed little that could be done in respect to horse recovery. Ben still has a sore backside so that additional horse riding was not an attractive travel option.

However, Alaric produced a silver whistle which he blew.

The whistle made a strange, high pitched sound.

At the site of the breakfast tent, the horses were still tied to a hitching rail. Cook/Waiter/Bottle washer Grunch was slowly packing gear ready for his move back to the castle. As the high pitched sound made by the silver whistle floated over the area, the ropes tying the horses suddenly unraveled and fell to the ground. While Grunch watched helplessly, the horses formed into single file and headed away from the area at a fast trot.

Chapter 14 Ben captured!

At the site where they had landed, the party was eating sandwiches. The food had been produced by FIDO, who seemed to have an amazing capacity to carry food, drink, armaments and many other items secreted inside his golden body. They sat on the ground eating when Ben asked: "What next? I am too sore to ride. Perhaps I could steal a car and drive to the next Gateway?"

"I believe we should avoid Gateway Two," said Alaric. "That Magician seemed to know all about it. He will probably have the Gateway guarded and attempt to entrap us again. We should move on to the Third Gateway."

"That is impossible!" said CLEO. Her thin voice piped from inside Ben's pack. "Gateways may only be opened when they have been approached in numerical order. You must attempt Gateway Two before you try Gateway Three."

Suddenly, the column of horses arrived and stood waiting. Alaric walked over to them and removed all the saddles and bridles, dropping the gear onto a small pile. He walked over to the grey horse which he had previously ridden and whispered something to it. The horse neighed and then started off in a northerly direction towards the hills. The other horses followed and soon the entire group vanished behind a hedgerow.

"I have told them to join the wild horses on the High Plains," said Alaric. "I think that is a fair reward for first being shrunk, then expanded, then tied up and finally facing the prospect of working as slaves with very little food!"

"Well, that's it then," said Ben. "They are off to the High Plains. But should we risk another meeting with that magician guy? Surely we must go on to Gateway Three. Where is it? Can we travel by rail and do a bit of train spotting on the way?"

CLEO: "Gateway Three is about 50 miles south of this location."

"Fifty miles! Too far to walk. We must steal a car," said Ben.

He was itching to get a car and test his skill as a getaway driver.

CLEO: "A car is of no value in terms of reaching Gateway Three, You cannot reach it by land transport. It is a High Altitude Entry Point designed for travelers with flying equipment. It is located thirty miles south of this location 36,000 ft straight up! In any case, you cannot open Gateway Three until you have at least attempted to open Gateway Two. If you proceed directly to Gateway Three it will implode and your Quest will end!"

With this ultimatum, the clear options now appeared to be either another long hike or a ride in a hijacked car. Ben considered the methods that might be used to hijack a car. Someone could lie on the road while another person flagged down a car. The driver would be overpowered and Ben would drive the car to some point near Gateway Three. The car would then be left with a polite note of thanks. Unfortunately they had no money to cover the cost of petrol but the driver would at least get his car back.

They were, in fact, standing close to the main Lilydale/Yarra Glen highway. Ben made his mind up. They would hijack a car and he would drive! He peeled off his backpack and laid it on the grass. He then stepped out and lay down on the black surface of the road. “Once a car stops,” he shouted, “We can throw the driver out! I will drive us to the next Gateway!”

“No!” the whole party cried in unison.

“Sire, you are planning a criminal act,” shouted Alaric. “A car may be traveling at high speed and you will be run over!”

“And you are banned from driving and facing trial,” said CLEO.

At that moment the two tanks of the UFO Rapid Response Unit came around the corner, heading towards Yarra Glen. The soldiers were intending to top up the laser charge, partially expended at Chirnside Park. The charge was now quite low and the tanks were moving slowly to conserve electric power. The peculiar vehicles screeched to a stop when the leading driver spotted Ben lying on the road. Soldiers jumped from the car and Ben was immediately arrested at gunpoint. Alaric had the presence of mind to pick up Ben’s pack and followed his companions as they fled across the field. The soldiers took pot shots using side arms and finally brought both laser cannon into play. However, the elf and the dwarves were all virtually invisible and they were able to escape without injury. FIDO actually ran some distance and then turned to engage the troops. However, battle was averted when CLEO radioed a command in respect to firing.

The robot then turned and ran.

In the process of firing the lasers, an aircraft hangar was set on fire and a tree set ablaze. The remains of the burned out hangar can still be seen some distance from the Maroondah Highway on the road to Yarra Glen. The whole charcoal vista might be seen as a monument to an early meeting between the human race and peaceful visitors from a faraway universe.

The sergeant in charge of the leading vehicle tried to use his mobile phone. However, he had neglected to recharge the instrument and he was unable to reach base. Instead, he decided to press on to Yarra Glen where he could use a public phone by inserting a small scrambler which he carried in his kit. But both the electric vehicles were only able to proceed at a walking pace due to acute battery depletion. Accordingly, it took the UFO Group almost an hour to reach a garage at Yarra Glen. There the troops hoped to recharge batteries and inform HQ of their capture. The other members of Ben's party had fled across the open country and reached an area of marshland. The firing eventually died down and they heard the two tanks start towards Yarra Glen.

"Where are they going?" asked Little Sam.

"That road leads only to Yarra Glen," said CLEO, speaking from inside the pack now carried by Alaric. "There are no exits apart from small farms. They will need to recharge batteries after using the lasers with such wild abandon. Yarra Glen offers our best chance of recapturing the escaped prisoner."

“Prince Ben is not an escaped prisoner,” said Alaric. “He has been captured by human troops! He is an imprisoned Prince! But how can we get to Yarra Glen?”

A river meandered quietly at the edge of the field they were in. "It is the fast flowing River Yarra." said CLEO, responding to an enquiry. "Some distance upstream the river becomes Karma Lake. The second Gateway is a short distance beyond Karma Lake."

"If we had a boat we could row up stream and rescue Ben," observed Little Sam.

“Yes!” said Alaric. “If we had a boat!”

CLEO: "But you do have a boat! FIDO is carrying Inflatable Assault Boat IAB 5 X 17 in his backpack," said the computer. "It will not be necessary to row. The IAB is equipped with an electric motor. The boat and motor are held in red package IAB 5X."

The Inflatable Assault Boat package was easy to find. It was in a bright yellow colored package. With FIDO in the lead, carrying the package, they all moved across the marshy ground to the river, jumping from clump to clump of firmer ground. When they reached the river there was an area of firmer ground. Alaric removed the outer linen packing material to reveal a rubber cube packed inside. The cube folded out, first laterally and then horizontally to reveal the outline of a portable boat with a small electric motor attached to one end.

"How do we inflate it?" asked Little Sam.

"The boat is to be inflated by FIDO using his on board air pump facility. FIDO will then power the motor from his AC/DC outlet which is located at the base of his back," said CLEO.

"Which translates as FIDO's bum," said Stumpy.

FIDO moved over to the flat outline of the boat. He produced a short length of flexible pipe through the metallic thumb on his left hand. The pipe was attached to a nozzle which sprouted from the robots stomach.

The flat outline of rubber rapidly expanded to reveal a full sized inflatable boat. There was ample room with a seat at the rear of the boat for FIDO. Fully inflated, the Assault Boat proved to be quite light, and the travelers were able to launch it with ease.

With FIDO holding the boat steady they all climbed aboard. The robot then climbed in and sat on a seat at the rear of the craft. He picked up a plug attached to the outboard motor. The robot tested the motor which produced an immediate powerful jet effect.

Water gushed and flew in a flurry of foam into the river below.

The inflatable boat began to move upstream.

The travelers leaned against the side of the craft and watched the dark water slipping by. Tall reeds threw reflections onto the glass like surface of the river. Far below they could see flashes of silver and red as fish darted from the shadow above.

Eventually they reached a bridge on the outskirts of Yarra Glen.

They pulled in under the bridge and attached the inflatable to a mooring ring. "Right!" said Alaric. "We must now prepare the rescue. CLEO! Do you have fireworks with auto lighters?"

“Yes! They are in package F 23/359 (t),” said the computer.

FIDO retrieved the fireworks.

“Right,” said Alaric. “Wait here while I do a recce.”

Chapter 15 No pancakes!

The UFO transporters were parked at an Ampol station near the entrance to the town of Yarra Glen. The soldiers were faced with a wait of about one hour while batteries recharged.

In addition the sergeant was unable to use a local phone.

“All the phones are down!” he reported. “Trouble at the exchange. We must wait and report once we get back to Lilydale.”

“In the meantime, Serge, we have not had breakfast and we have been on duty for nine hours,” said one of the troopers. “What about the Pancake Parlor for a feed?”

“What about the alien?” said the Sergeant, indicating the figure of Ben, trussed up inside the leading tank.

“We can fasten him to a chair,” said the trooper. “As we will be getting a very big bonus for him, we will all keep an eye on him! He’s not going anywhere except to the special interrogation facility at HQ. They will wring out the alien mongrel!”

The soldiers began moving to the door of the Pancake Parlor.

The sergeant picked up Ben and held him under one arm.

“I am an earth boy,” Ben squeaked. “I have been kidnapped! I am not an alien mogul (mongrel)!” His tirade brought no response.

Alaric saw Ben carried into the café. He also saw the burly sergeant tie his captive to a folding chair using plastic rope.

The soldiers started studying a menu.

Ben immediately asked for a stack of pancakes but his request was curtly refused with the immortal line:

“No pancakes for alien mongrels!”

Alaric moved back to the moored inflatable and issued a string of instructions. The dwarves were to move downriver and set up the fireworks in a wood on the river edge. Alaric sketched a specific pattern for the firework location on the damp wall inside the bridge. Once he was satisfied that the dwarves understood, timers on the fireworks were set for 20 minutes. The dwarves sped off, moving like silent shadows, flitting across the main road, into an open meadow which terminated at the wood.

“We will now move upstream and moor upstream,” said the elf.

“They may spot us en route,” said CLEO. “We are exposed.”

“We must take a chance!” said Alaric. “The Prince must be rescued! We will stay close to the bank for protection.”

The inflatable then worked upstream, staying close to the high left bank until they were able to moor near a bend in the river. They waited, with Alaric tapping his fingers on the taut rubber of the boat. Eventually, the dwarves returned and climbed into the boat.

“Right!” said Alaric. He checked his timepiece. “The fireworks will go off in five minutes. FIDO! Assume full military mode! Activate emergency time compression unit! Maximum

compression! Move to the café near the bridge, extract Prince Ben and return here with him!”

FIDO left, moving along the river bank in a golden blur.

Alaric collapsed back into the boat and started biting his fingernails! In his mind the entire future of E Base and the monarchy now rested on a fragile plan!

In the café Ben was slobbering. The soldiers were stuffing themselves from a huge pile of pancakes, decorating each cake with cream and ladling on pots of maple syrup. They were accompanying the feast with raucous songs! Ben was almost beside himself, pinioned to a chair, salivating and starving with hunger but unable to move. A perky waitress came back into the room and stood looking at him. Finally she addressed the soldiers.

“What about that boy in the fancy dress?” she said. “You said he escaped from prison but surely he should eat? It’s inhuman to stuff yourselves and leave him there slaving! He will grow up to be a criminal because people like you have treated him so badly!”

It appears that the sergeant then relented. He told one of the soldiers to offer Ben a forkful of pancake. The fork was actually on its way towards Ben’s mouth when he vanished!

FIDO was moving so rapidly, with full time compression that the robot was effectively invisible. He picked up Ben and the restraining chair and shot through the open door of the café. The event was marked by a pop of displaced air and a kind of double supersonic bang.

The waitress screamed hysterically and pressed a red button which instantly closed the doors and windows of the café. The UFO soldiers were thus unable to make chase for some minutes, by which time FIDO had returned to the inflatable, dumped Ben and his chair in the boat and asked for “Orders?”

“Return to normal mode, disconnect time compression and reconnect your electric motor,” said Alaric.

He added: “Prince Ben! Welcome back!”

Ben was still pinioned to a chair which was now standing in the centre of the inflatable raft.

“Welcome back? Couldn’t you have waited one more minute! I was about to get a lovely mouthful of golden pancake dripping with syrup! With cream and everything! Couldn’t you wait while I ate? In any case, I don’t want to be rescued by aliens!” said Ben.

“I am human!” Before Alaric could speak there was a series of detonations as the preset fireworks began to burn.

They illuminated the woods upriver with brilliant colored lights and whizzing sound effects. The UFO troops had finally managed to break open the café door.

There was no way the soldiers could miss the brilliant display.

“It must be the mother ship!” shouted the sergeant. “They have kidnapped our alien! They are about to make a clean break!” The soldiers seized two motor bikes which were parked outside the café. They set off eastward, across country, toward the lights.

The noisy departure, accompanied by clouds of two stroke oil, was clearly evident to Ben and his companions.

“Right!” said Alaric, “We will be off!”

Hidden by the high banks of the Yarra the inflatable began to move upstream. After about sixty minutes of steady progress the craft was beached. FIDO released Ben from his bonds using his built in laser torch. The whole party climbed out onto a small area of meadow and CLEO announced: “This will be a suitable Rest Camp where you can stay the night!” Ben was still visualizing his lost pancake and immediately said: “What will we eat? We have had nothing to eat since a few sandwiches two days ago.” The computer replied: “The sandwiches were consumed a few hours ago. In any event, to celebrate your recapture into custody...”

Alaric broke in. “He has not been recaptured into custody! He has been freed from custody where he was held by a foreign power! He is a Prince of the Realm proceeding to his domain!”

“You said he was to be retried!” said the computer. “I need to code him! I have coded him as a convict awaiting appeal!”

“You can code him any way you like,” said Alaric. “He is what he is. In any case, what do we have to eat tonight?”

CLEO: “There will be a special meal tonight. FIDO has been instructed to broach special stores and you will enjoy sausages, baked beans, canned tomato, Waybread (plain or toasted) and Twisty Water Travel Rations. In order to enjoy this repast you should now prepare a camp fire! You can eat around the camp fire and then sing nostalgic songs! Your meal will be cooked by FIDO using his onboard facilities.”

“What about bugs?” said Grumpy, slapping his arm. “I’m getting bitten to bits! This place is crawling with mossies!”

Apparently there was a silent command from CLEO to FIDO since the robot immediately started producing items from one of the packs. The items were expanded and proved to be an assortment of tents plus a kind of glowing lamp.

“This is a Mark 4 anti insect cone designed for the use of explorers,” said CLEO. “The outside of the cone repels insects.”

“It will put a cloud of insect repellent all over us!” said Stumpy.

“We should have stayed in our cave!”

“The device does not work by emitting a chemical spray!” said CLEO. “It produces an electronic mask which expands, drives the insects out and then keeps them out until the cone is deactivated. The area is already clear of insects!”

“Another great device which we could have marketed!” said Grumpy. “That thing could be advertised just before summer! We should have kidnapped CLEO, thrown the two trouble makers into the dam and lived happily ever after.”

“But what about FIDO? When he finished recharging himself he would have murdered us in the name of justice!” said Stumpy. “It was a bad choice coming on this trip but what option did we have? The choice was between the devil and the deep blue sea!”

“Well, the current option is choosing a tent and then getting a fire ready,” said Little Sam. “Better options than talking about stupid decisions, criminal acts and sitting around with no firewood!”

After this sage comment, they all set to work. The dwarves collected wood and soon had a bonfire ready. Ben eventually chose a “Super Comfort” tent. The tent erected itself. It featured an air filled floor. Pillows and blankets were provided in a special case. The others also chose individual tents and soon the meadow was bright with tents and filled with the delicious aroma of food as FIDO used his on board cooker. Alaric lit a bonfire with a set of matches which he had: “kept in reserve.” Eventually, they all sat on rocks and tree stumps around the fire, eating from plastic plates and cutlery provided by the robot.

There was plenty of food and Ben was able to fill his stomach and chase away the memory of his missed pancake.

FIDO provided Twisty Water to wash down the food. Then Alaric sang a song in Elvish. Ben was already dozing with his stomach full for the first time in.....years? Months? Weeks?

Surely not merely a few hours?

Ben yawned and bid his companions goodnight.

He climbed into his supertent, arranged his pillows and blankets and slept soundly until dawn.

Chapter 16 Tunnel Guardian

When Ben woke, CLEO told him to use a small Portapotty for ablutions. The computer explained that the Portapotty would “digest all extruded materials and empty them back into the soil. After all travelers had completed their ablutions, it would be shrunk ready for future use.”

They all used the Portapotty and washed in the river. Last night's utensils had all vanished. CLEO said that they had been “biodegraded” and were now part of the meadow.

FIDO offered sandwiches and a container of water for breakfast. Ben immediately complained.

The memory of his lost pancake had again surfaced.

He demanded bacon and eggs plus sausages and pancakes!”

“You will not be getting huge meals like that either as a convicted prisoner seeking a retrial or a prince, whichever you actually are. (The computer said “prince” with a kind of snigger.) You will get travel rations. Last night was a special meal!”

Grumbling, Ben grabbed as many sandwiches as he could without getting into a fight. The chair which he had occupied as a prisoner of the UFO troops was left under an old willow tree. It may have been subsequently used by anglers venturing to that remote spot. After eating, FIDO collected and shrank the Portapotty and the

various tents. The party then climbed back into the inflatable and continued upstream.

They passed under several bridges and a railway line.

There was no traffic on the line and Ben was again left complaining about his lack of namers, his horrible hunger and the fact that he had been robbed of a pancake breakfast!

The river vanished into a tunnel some distance ahead.

"We are approaching a tunnel," Alaric shouted. "Has Little Sam still got his lamp?"

"Packed in my rucksack," said Little Sam. "It will take a few moments to get it out." But they did not have a few moments. The inflatable boat plunged into the eerie blackness of a tunnel which seemed to have been bored through a massive rock. The echoing hum of the electric motor and the faint splash of water against the skin of their boat joined the sound of water dripping from the roof. The blackness increased until they seemed to be gliding through a black hole. Suddenly the boat came to a halt. The motor continued to pulse but the boat did not move forward. FIDO turned to full thrust, generating a plume of foam but the boat did not move.

Two green eyes glared at them from the side of the tunnel. "Who would pass through my tunnel without paying the price?" The voice seemed to come from somewhere above their heads, although the eyes were situated on their right hand side.

"Five organic beings, one computer and one robot," said Alaric, his voice quavering a little.

"A failure to list one boat and one motor!" said the voice. "You have also failed to include various interesting items held in your backpacks plus a pair of emergency oars stowed inside your inflatable boat. The total cost of passage will be \$461.40 cash."

"Sir, we have no cash. No cash at all. Is there some other method of payment?" asked Alaric.

The owner of the eyes considered the matter.

"I do not accept credit cards but you could go back," he said, after some thought. "There is no charge for going back. But if you wish to go forward and you have no cash you must reward me with a song. It must have all the correct words. I do not accept bits of songs. I do not accept parts of songs. I do not accept tunes without words. I must hear all the correct words! I definitely do not accept substitute words from singers who cannot remember the correct words. And I do not accept out of tune songs."

Alaric: "I will give you a merry new song."

He sang, beating time on the side of the inflatable boat.

"We are lost and all alone,
Trying to reach our Elvish home,
Yet when our quest is said and done,
Some nuts will say we had some fun!
Yes, some nuts will say we had some fun!
Hi! Ho! We're in a boat
Trapped in a tunnel but still afloat!"

"Excellent! Excellent! A brand new song which I will immediately put on my Top Twenty! My last new song was called Lily of

Lagoona. It was recorded a very, very long time ago. There is so little boat traffic on this river nowadays! However, you may now pass! As a special thanks if you come back you may pass through for no charge!"

You may now pass!"

The eyes vanished along with the invisible barrier. The boat surged forward and shortly a small patch of sunlight began glinting on the dark river surface.

The boat emerged from the tunnel. Ben sat mourning his lost pancake as the boat ran on between high walls, with trees on either side. Then the river widened.

They passed an angler, dozing over his rod.

Grumpy, sitting on the starboard side of the boat, gazed hard at the angler. "He's a damn funny looking fisherman," said the dwarf. "He looks like a troll!"

But they had already turned around a sudden bend in the river so that the other passengers were not able to get a good view.

However, if they had turned back they would have seen the angler become suddenly wide awake. He was talking urgently into a mobile phone. "Alert!! Incoming!"

The inflatable boat continued on its way.

Rounding yet another bend they approached a waterfall.

Ben waited with interest for the boat to jump the waterfall. It was, after all, a jet boat similar to the jet boats he had seen racing up and down raging torrents in New Zealand.

However, the inflatable did not jump the waterfall.

Instead, FIDO steered the boat and grounded it on a nearby beach. The robot then said: "It will be necessary to portage over this section of the river."

No one knew the meaning of the word portage.

The robot disembarked but the rest of the party stayed in the boat. CLEO eventually spoke. "Please get out of the boat. The boat must be carried up the hill and then relaunched at the far side of the waterfall. That is the meaning of the word portage. Would you all care to hear a history of famous portages by early explorers?"

There was a general negative groan from the passengers. They all climbed from the boat and with the assistance of FIDO lifted it from the water. It was then carried up a track by the riverside. It is, of course, easy to say the boat was carried up a track in a portage. In actual fact, the portage was very hot, hard and tiring work. The slope was steep and the "porters" slipped and (at least in the case of the elder dwarves) swore using lurid swearwords.

Slowly, they worked the boat to the summit. Finally, they reached the top and were able to look down at the river, gushing in white torrents, forming into whirlpools and then calming again into the placid waters they had traversed.

Ben was very ready for a rest and a cuppa but Alaric would not allow them to stop.

"We must move on," said the elf. "The UFO Hunting Group will have instruments that track our progress and until we are through the Gateway we will never be safe."

They relaunched the inflatable boat, climbed in and FIDO reinstalled himself in the rear seat. Ben plugged in the robots supply of electrical power to the motor. At length, they were able to continue.

A short distance above the waterfall the river abruptly widened and became a lake ringed by tree covered hills. "This is Karma Lake," said CLEO. "You are advised not to look into the water or else you will see all your past sins -- which in some cases may drive you mad! I would recommend that you look at the hill sides, or the sky or the margin of the lake but avoid looking into the depths!" The boat drove on, across the blue water of the lake.

On one shore, they suddenly saw a beaver. The beaver jumped into the water and thumped his tail three times, before diving into the depths.

"Three thumps!" said Alaric. "The beaver is giving us a warning of extreme danger ahead!"

Suddenly the lake itself changed color.

From a deep blue, the water first became an iridescent green, then amber and finally a dark, glowing red.

"Even the lake itself is giving us warning," said Alaric. "It was a deep blue. Then it has gone from blue to green. And finally like a traffic light it has gone from green to amber to red! What shall we do? We are warned not to go forward but we cannot go back into the hands of the UFO troops!"

"It hardly seems much of a choice," said Ben. "Maybe we should go back a short way and make camp for the night? CLEO probably has a couple of tents stowed in some pack or other."

It seemed a good choice. The lake was now blood red in color.

The entire surrounding countryside appeared to be rife with danger. But Alaric did not seem to be fazed.

"We cannot be stopped by mere signs of possible danger!" he said, "We must be fearless. We must go on. We will advance to the Gateway and enter with resolve! "

The inflatable boat ploughed on, leaving a wake of disturbed water directly across the centre of Karma Lake.

Chapter 17 The Magicians Net

The lake now narrowed and high cliffs beetled on either side. Suddenly a rain of small rocks splashed into the water directly ahead of the boat. The inflatable rocked in the sudden waves. Above them they could see a bunch of ragged looking children. "Go back! Go back! Trap! Trap! Trap!" came a distant cry. "Enchanted Zone!"

"Some kind of loonies," said Stumpy. "Probably young hooligans trying to sink our boat. Fortunately we seem to be slightly out of reach of the rocks."

CLEO suddenly spoke from Ben 's pack.

"The young people above may be referring to a newly enchanted zone which seems to be centered near the town of Coldstream. That Enchanted Zone is currently expanding."

"Then if we are really unlucky Gateway Two will be located inside the zone," said Alaric."And yet we must reach the Gateway! We have swords, daggers and a fully armed robot! Who is in charge of the Enchanted Zone anyway? Surely not that nuthead, Magico? In any event, with any luck, his helicopter crashed! We must press on to the Gateway. Once we pass through and reach E Base we will be safe!" Ben noticed that Alaric kept his fingers crossed as he made his statement about the supposed safety of E Base..

The lake narrowed and changed back into a river. The river was also flowing blood red and gave a nasty impression of a gaping wound in the earth. At the confluence of the river and the lake there was a strange distortion of the atmosphere. Something like a gigantic soap bubble, flashing with myriad iridescent colors seemed to bisect the atmosphere. They passed straight through the bubble without incident. On the far side they encountered a launch marked RIVER PULICE. The launch was manned by a peculiar individual who looked like a water rat. The pulice rat was wearing what appeared to be a police hat and a crumpled blue uniform.

He waved them on. "No need to stop!" he cackled. "No need to show your water license to me! Go around two bends and then beach your craft. You will find a pathway which leads up the hill and goes directly to the Gateway!"

They passed the river craft. "I thought that POLICE was spelt with an O not a U," said Little Sam. "And he was a very odd looking policeman. And how did he know we are going to the Gateway?"

They pondered the matter as the boat moved forward upriver. There were tall reeds on either bank producing curious reflections in the river water, which was still a peculiar shade of red. The air was thick and oppressive.

Thunder clouds were forming to the south and produced distant flashes of lightening. They passed a bend in the river.

"Possibly the water department spells PULICE like that to make sure they are not confused with regular cops," said Ben.

"With his spelling abilities, they will become known as Water Cups!" said Little Sam and they all laughed.

"And if they eat too much they will be known as Butter Cups!" said Stumpy. With another burst of merriment they rounded a second bend and saw a small beach on the left side of the river.

FIDO steered the inflatable into the gravel and cut the engine.

"I suggest that we leave our packs with FIDO on guard and head up the track to do a recce," said Alaric. "Check your swords or daggers to make sure you are ready for trouble."

The weapons were duly checked and they stood together on the small area of beach. A path led up the hillside. Strangely, there were no bird songs from the thick bush around. The entire area was silent, with only distant thunder punctuating the sound of the river as it flowed past. They began to march up the hill, with Alaric in the lead followed by Little Sam, Stumpy and Grumpy.

Ben acted as Tail End Charlie.

The path was enclosed on either side by thick bushes. Some distance above the river they passed through a thick section of vegetation with tree branches meeting above their heads to form an archway. They pressed on, climbing the rocky path until Alaric got his first glimpse of a golden object at the summit of the hill.

"Gateway Two!" he said "I can see it ahead!"

They reached a small clearing with open spaces around the track.

There was a sudden roaring shout from either side of the clearing.

Four enormous creatures sprang into view.

Each creature was carrying a large club studded with bright nails.

"Not yet, not yet!" came an agonized cry. "I said let them get ahead so you can cut them off. Anyway, go to plan B. Knock them out and bring them up here!"

"It's that magician guy!" said Alaric "He's got four trained gorillas armed with damn great clubs!"

His sword flashed into view.

"They are not gorillas," said Stumpy, pulling his knife. "They are trolls. They are supposed to be impossible to kill because they are already dead! Can't you smell them?"

And they could all smell the foul and rank odor of troll which came wafting down from the sides of the clearing. The dwarves and elves stood in file as the trolls advanced. Ben could not get a clear view from his position at the rear of the file. He drew Sting anyway, and the sword immediately flashed with a deep purple glow, giving off a series of impressive, bloodthirsty sound effects.

"We are now certain to be captured!" said Grumpy. "Trolls cannot be killed! They are all wearing leg armor so we cannot chop them down. I am afraid that from a military point of view there is only one remaining warlike possibility!"

"What is that possibility?" cried Ben.

"Turn round and run like hell!" shouted Little Sam.

They turned as one and raced back down the hill with the trolls bounding down behind in huge jumps. However, in the narrow confines of the path the trolls were unable to reach full speed. The elves and dwarves were able to keep slightly ahead. At one point Alaric turned, broke stride and used his sword to prick the leading

troll. Although theoretically dead the troll could obviously still feel pain. It gave a mighty howl. The three other pursuing trolls then ran into the leader, falling down in a heap of arms and legs. This allowed the elves and dwarves to gain a slight advantage in terms of their lead.

They reached the area where the tree branches met overhead. There was a sudden sharp explosion somewhere above their heads. A massive metal net dropped directly in front of them. It hung in a sheen of thick, oiled mesh. It was impassable, stretching upward and sideways to make a barrier that could not be negotiated.

"Got you!" The taunting voice of Magico floated down from somewhere above. "You have been arrested by my net and you will now be bashed by my trolls! I have won! I have won because I am Magnificent!!! Your rotten, dirty trick while you were on the way to work for me has been reversed. Now you nasty, horrid elves and rotten, lousy dwarves have had it! He, he, he, he!"

His high pitched laugh floated down from above.

The elves and dwarves slid into each other in front of the net. Bravely, Alaric turned and waved his sword at the trolls who had resumed the chase. The trolls snorted in amusement and moved slowly towards the group of elves and dwarves. The steel net hung in front of Ben. It appeared to be impassable.

Abruptly, Sting changed color. The purple glow blinked off and the sword blazed into an intense, iridescent white. Ben suddenly recalled his mad moment when he cut through the bulldozer chain with the same sword. It was now the same color.

He swung the sword at the net. Sting sliced through the steel like a red hot knife going through a lump of butter. Two deep vertical strokes and one cross stroke produced a square gap in the netting.

"We're through!" Ben shouted. "Dwarves first! Two elvish blades to guard the rear!"

He waited as the dwarves piled through the hole. Alaric was gradually being forced backward as a new troll had reached the front and was swinging his huge club like a scythe.

"Go on down, Lord Alaric!" said Ben. "I will guard the rear!" As Alaric hesitated he added: "Get a move on! We have a boat to catch!" Alaric dived through the hole in the steel net, and scampered down the path beyond. Ben was now left alone to face the leering troll swinging a monstrous club, rotating the great weapon above and around his ill shaped head.

The troll advanced and suddenly changed the arc of motion.

He swung the club directly forward with a howl of fury.

The club actually touched the net behind Ben, as he ducked and drove Sting into the giant figure of the troll. The blade sliced straight through the trolls metal vest and sank into his stomach. There was a mighty gust of what smelled like marsh gas and the troll sat down heavily crying: "He got me in me guts!"

It was time to retreat. As Ben sprang back through the opening in the net, the troll slumped forward, effectively blocking pursuit by the remaining trolls until they could wrest him out of the way.

Carrying Sting in his right hand, Ben ran down the path to the beach. The raft had already been turned downstream and was

ready for an immediate departure. His companions were all aboard and robot FIDO was plugged in with the onboard motor.

Ben came charging down the path way, dived into the raft and they were off, roaring back upstream as the remaining enraged trolls finally came bounding down the path. The trolls came to a screeching halt as they reached the water. None of the trolls dived in although it would have been possible to overtake the boat. It was only beginning to pick up speed as they turned upstream against the current.

"Trolls hate water and never wash," said Alaric. "They all have terrible troll odor or T.O."

The inflatable boat now began to move upstream at full power.

A klaxon sounded on the PULICE BOAT moored at the entrance to Karma Lake. However, there was no sign of the water rat who had apparently deserted his post and gone hunting for frogs. The inflatable swept past the boat and surged through the coloured bubble marking the boundary of the Definitely Enchanted Area.

"We seem to have escaped Mr Magico once again," said Alaric.

"Thank you for taking the rearguard. It was a true Princely act."

Ben was sheathing Sting, which had stayed in his hand since the episode at the net. "Princely nothing!" he said. "I simply wanted to give that clown a poke with this sword. I am very doubtful about this royalty thing. It is a case of forsaken identity."

CLEO corrected him. "It is a case of mistaken identity!"

"Exactly!" said Ben. "Forsaken, mistaken identity. Obviously CLEO knows that I am not a prince but that I am merely a long term lag involved in a Case of Forsaken Mistaken Identity."

The boat surged on across the blood red waters of Karma Lake. They reached the river entrance without further incident and began to travel downstream. With the assistance of the current they were now moving quite rapidly downstream.

"It appears that we have got clean away!" said Little Sam. "We must now decide what to do next. How are we going to get to a Gateway guarded by trolls and possibly other horrible things living inside an enchanted area ruled by a Mad Magician?"

Chapter 18 Strafed!

Suddenly they heard the drone of a small plane. The plane appeared from the direction of Karma Lake, flying at very low altitude. It followed the path of the river, almost brushing the treetops with its wings. The plane was piloted by a man wearing an aviators leather hat, with a scarf flying in the wind.

The pilot spotted the raft and roared overhead. He leaned out of the cockpit as the plane passed and shouted: "I have not given you permission to leave!"

"It's that damned magician again," said Alaric. "His helicopter was damaged so now he's using a plane! But he can't land on water. There is nothing much he can do except shout!"

Above them the plane banked and turned. It now approached the raft from upstream. Suddenly, twin machine guns opened up! Rat a tat! Rat a tat! The river ahead was pock marked with splashes as the plane was strafed and bullets hit the surface of the water. It seemed that the boat must be peppered with gunfire but at the very last moment a tall tree intervened. The plane stopped firing as the magician was forced to veer away.

He turned the plane and approached them for a new strafing run.

Rat a tat! Rat a tat! The bullets traced a perfect line towards the boat. But once again fate intervened.

The guns jammed and the magician pressed his firing button in vain. The raft bowled on downstream as the plane roared ahead with its wings rocking too and fro as the magician made desperate efforts to free his guns.

But the guns stayed obstinately silent.

"His guns have jammed!" said Alaric. "Unless he has some bombs he can do nothing!" Inside the plane the magician was fuming with anger. His prize haul of two extremely rare elves and three fairly rare dwarves was vanishing downstream and would shortly be out of range. He decided to use two powerful spells which he had never tried in the past. The first spell would cause the river to dry up. The second spell would trap the elves and dwarves inside a magical fence so that he could land and collect them at his leisure. He addressed the river with the first spell.

"River, river running free,
Send your waters up to me,
Wait above for my command!
Then as clouds you will be grand,
To fall as rain and less the land!"

He then uttered a word which sounded like Crocadilla!

Whatever the word was, it seemed to be effective. However, by using the incorrect phrase less the land, instead of the correct phrase bless the land the wizard had misused and damaged the spell, which was not "water tight." At first, massive sheets of water rose from the river to form lowering black clouds directly overhead. Then the river water, which had ascended more or less

in rapture believing that it would become rain and bless the land now became confused. The clouds were having definite doubts about the spell. They certainly did not wish to less the land! The only sensible course of action was to return to the river. The clouds did this in one gigantic torrent.

The plane circling below the clouds was totally engulfed in water. The engine cut out and the emergency use of a lifting spell failed since the wizard was under water and having trouble breathing.

His plane crash landed in a meadow close to the river.

In the raft, the elves and dwarves were suddenly overtaken by a massive wall of water which swept them downstream, over the waterfall. They reached the entrance to the tunnel and were forced to circle until the water level receded to a more normal height. The inflatable then dived into the tunnel.

Inside, they were again stopped by an invisible barrier and confronted by a pair of glowing eyes.

"Welcome back!" said the owner of the eyes. "I trust you have had an enjoyable trip? I remember that I have granted you free passage." From the walls of the tunnel came Alaric's song;

"We are lost and all alone,
Trying to reach our Elvish home,
Yet when our quest is said and done,
Some will say we had some fun!
Yes, some will say we had some fun!
Hi! Ho! We're in a boat
Trapped in a tunnel but still afloat!"

The song had been amplified and orchestrated with a decided beat.

"I have done some minor vocal editing and I am still working on extra riffs," said the invisible guardian. "But that's a sample!"

Both the eye and the invisible barrier then vanished and the boat surged forward. Shortly, they reached the spot where they had launched the boat earlier in the day.

Chapter 19 Travel by airship

They beached the inflatable and unloaded themselves and their packs. FIDO then minaturized the craft.

The party moved across the marshy area and stopped at the edge of the woods to discuss future plans.

"It may be very difficult to get into Gateway Two," said Alaric. "In fact it is probably impossible. That magician has troll guards and may have other tricks up his sleeve. He obviously knows that the Gateway is something special."

"Yes," said Ben morosely. "And it seems ages since that morsel of a breakfast. Is there any chance of tea?"

"No!" said CLEO. "You have interrupted progress to sit down! Tea will only be served when progress has resumed!"

"It would seem that we must go for Gateway Three!" Alaric continued.

"But Gateway Three is somewhere above the clouds and impossible to reach," said Ben glumly. "Also, we will probably not be allowed through the Gateway because we have not attempted Gateway Two and gone in the correct order."

"None the less," said Alaric "You have gained Virtue by your several actions. First. you defended the Oak tree with valor. Then you denied CLEO permission to blow up the Crystal Cave. This

has allowed the crystals in the Cave to continue living and such an action has certainly gained Virtue. Thirdly, by taking the rearguard and confronting the trolls you defended your companions despite the risk! I am certain that such valor must result in a gain of personal Virtue! The Gateway may decide that you have sufficient Virtue and will open anyway! We have little choice but to try!"

CLEO suddenly made a chiming noise. "A Major Decision is now required! Does Ben wish to travel by Air?" she asked.

Ben was totally amazed at the computers idiotic question.

He exploded. "How can we travel by air? We can't fly! We haven't got a Jumbo jet! We haven't got any money to buy air tickets! I am absolutely and totally fed up with your silly games! You are deranged! You are not computing! Run a full parity check on yourself right now! That's a command." CLEO ran a full parity check (0.000000003secs.) "All systems normal, 10.3 zillion megabytes available. Please make your Decision now!" she said calmly. "We now have 3 hours and 38 minutes to the ETA of the UFO Parachute Division. Do you wish to travel by Air?"

"But how can we go by air? We do not have wings. We haven't got a plane and this isn't an actual Airport. Hey! Wait a minute! Lilydale airport is somewhere north of here. We can hijack a plane and fly up to the Gateway!"

Ben scanned the field to the north then looked disappointed.

"There are no planes in the field!" he said. "They must all be locked up in the hangar. So how can we depart by Air without a plane? It's quite a conumberdrum! "

CLEO said: "That is incorrect. The correct word is conundrum meaning a puzzle. This decision does not involve a very difficult puzzle. Time is running out. Do you wish to depart by Air?"

Ben looked at the pack containing CLEO for a moment, then walked over to Little Sam who had been joined by the other dwarves and Alaric. They were all sitting on their packs waiting patiently, ready to leave. "Look," said Ben . "CLEO has got some kind of awful glitch. I've ran a parity check but she claims to be OK. But she is definitely not OK. She is a very advanced computer with all sorts of software. But all that bumping around has upset her circuits. She keeps asking me a stupid question about traveling by air when we have not got a plane! I think we should hijack a car and then stop at a café for a good hot dinner. I am really, really, really starving!"

He rubbed his stomach and then continued: "After we've eaten, we can head for an airport and hi jack a Jumbo jet"

"We have no money," said Alaric. "So how can we eat at a cafe? Also hijacking is a serious crime! We are not here to cause trouble on this planet! We are here so we can go somewhere else!"

Before anyone could make any further comments robot FIDO burst in life. His eyes lit up with a yellow gleam. The robot then uttered one of his extremely rare remarks. "I am carrying an Airship!" he said.

He indicated his metal chest cavity, tapping one metal finger on it.
"Well," said Alaric. "Obviously CLEO has not gone nutty and her choice is real. The computer is perfectly rational. Now the question is Should we travel by Air?"

"Search me," said Ben. "How can a ship fly?"

CLEO did not reply but reported: "Human Commando are now approximately 1982 kilometers north east, approaching at an average airspeed of 550 kph! They are equipped with horrid weapons and they are all trained killers! Your decision is critical -- an incorrect decision will mean 99.999998888% probability of failure! "The dwarves looked at Ben in alarm.

"What is the best transport option?" asked Ben desperately.

"You must decide!" said CLEO.

"Can I have a clue?"

CLEO: "What is afloat when it is in the air,
Wind blows kindly, all is fair,
Five in a cabin, lighter than air?"

Ben racked his brain. Five in a basket? Was it a Big Macburger in a Basket with chips, peas, bread roll and a king size coke -- plus a free plastic toy, all for \$6.98 as advertised on Channel 69 at 8pm, just before Great Criminals of the World?

That was five items of food -- plus one toy which was not food.
Would the toy count? He decided to chance it.

"A Big Macburger?"

"Incorrect!"

Little Sam was also trying to solve the riddle.

"Could it be flying horses!" said Little Sam. "Maybe she has some kind of flying horses minaturized and ready to be expanded?"

Stumpy broke into the conversation. "There are no flying horses."

"If there were, Ben could use his sore arse on a flying 'orse!" said

Grumpy and the dwarves all laughed,

Eventually Grumpy spoke.

"It must be an airship -- a dirigible!" said Grumpy wisely. "That's afloat when it's in the air!"

"It is a Dirigible!" advised Stumpy, pursing his lips.

Ben looked at him without comprehension.

"A dirigible? What is that? Is it a new kind of aeroplane?"

"A dirigible...is...an airship!" said Grumpy, getting red faced.

Dwarves are, of course, notoriously short tempered.

"Do you wish to depart by Air?" said CLEO again. "Your score on Airship piloting test was 6.2, represented a marginal pass."

Airship piloting! He had always assumed he was piloting a plane in the simulations. He assumed the big thing above his head was some kind of lifting device. In fact he was a passed Airship pilot!

"Very well, we will travel by airship," said Ben.

"In point of fact, I am already a passed airship pilot!"

Actually, it sounded good. He had always wanted to fly. While in prison, his previous General Plan in respect to piloting was to become a Spitfire Ace with 550 confirmed kills, then retire after collecting his Victorious Cross ... and finally fly Jumbo jets overseas. Still, being an air ship captain would certainly do.

Perhaps he would get a smart uniform to replace his current prisoners garb with its dreadful pattern of upturned arrows. He was still wearing his night clothes.

FIDO's chest cavity opened and a pack rolled out.

"Code Expand Blue!" said CLEO.

The pack immediately began to expand, until it was a box about 4 metres square. The sides of the box fell away to reveal a cabin which continued to expand. A rocket fizzed and an anchor shot out, attaching itself to the top of a nearby tree. There was a hissing sound and an airbag began to inflate rapidly, growing at an astonishing speed, gradually floating upwards as it formed the distinctive cigar shape of a Class 1 Airship. Massive propellers stuck out from one side. Tethered to the tree, the airship floated majestically, filling the sky and straining at its mounting. A rope ladder shot down from the cabin and dangled ready for boarding.

CLEO: "Propulsion unit FIDO report for duty!"

FIDO rolled forward and shimmied up to the side of the cabin. The robot then squeezed himself into an orifice on the far side of the cabin and lay silent.

"What is the name of the airship?" said Ben.

"You have the honor of naming her," said CLEO.

Ben thought for a moment.

"I name her Cloudclipper!" he said. He asked for a bottle to break over the airship but CLEO declined. The computer said that bottles were only used on regular ships. Airships were named by a group cheering.

With this advice, The party cheered and wished the airship:

“Bon Voyage, Cloudclipper!”

The three dwarves surged forward and clambered up into the airship one by one, chattering away before climbing into the cabin and stacking their packs under a seat.

Ben climbed up, throwing his pack to Stumpy, who stowed it away. Then Alaric hopped aboard, carrying his large, heavy pack under one arm. Stumpy obligingly placed the pack next to Ben's.

The airship cabin was surprisingly roomy. The impressive shape of the envelope or gasbag stretched over their heads in a massive shining bulk that blotted out a large section of sky.

"Please fasten your seatbelts," said CLEO.

She added in her most officious voice: "No smoking please."

No SMOKING signs blinked on around the basket.

They all dutifully fastened seatbelts. CLEO transmitted a silent command. The anchor folded in to itself, releasing its grip on the tree. The electric engines throbbed into life. Jet engine FIDO immediately switched into operation. The robot began to issue a powerful jet stream from an orifice between his legs. It sounded like an impossibly long, drawn out musical note in E Flat.

"Whose farting?" said Grumpy rudely, looking around the basket at his fellow aviators.

"It's that robot!" said Little Sam. "He sounds like a trombone!"

And there was a certain melodic resemblance to a trombone stuck on one note. "Robot FIDO is not farting!" said CLEO. "He is acting as a jet engine! He is inspiring air, heating it with his

internal nuclear module and expiring super heated air. He will assist with the provision of forward motion while also providing additional lift to the airship!"

"Inspiring air!" said Grumpy. "Who would believe an endless fart could be so inspiring!"

The dwarves all laughed.

"Well, as long as he's downwind we can live with it!" said Stumpy, settling back in his seat.

The three dwarves then broke into an impromptu, ribald song:

Up, up and away!

In our farty powered balloon!

We will run across the sky together,

Aiming high!

For we can fly...yes we can fly...!

Up, up and away!"

As they sang, Cloudclipper began a steady climb towards the east.

The airship was lifted by a balloon of helium, assisted by the thrust of multi propellers and its onboard robotic jet engine.

The UFO Hunting Group were due to arrive at exactly 0.1800.

Chapter 20 A long way down

Cloudclipper continued to rise steadily for about an hour.

Suddenly, CLEO issued an announcement.

"We must make a course correction. We are being blown NNE and need to turn and proceed SSE." This was followed by: "Amendment! No smoking warnings may be ignored! The airship lifting gas is helium which is non flammable!" said CLEO suddenly. "This information was held in memory unit TFS C/1000453/FT which has been offline while housekeeping program HP 3457219/2357 was in progress. Memory unit TFS C/1000453/FT is now online. Helium is inert! You may smoke!"

The NO SMOKING signs all blinked off.

The dwarves reacted with amusement.

"You May Smoke!" said Stumpy primly. He had already lit his ancient briar, ignoring the NO SMOKING warnings. He blew three smoke rings, which followed each other. Little Sam took the opportunity to ask for a drag of the pipe but was refused. "Too young for baccy, lad," said Stumpy. "Another 40 years or so!"

He passed the pipe to Grumpy who took a long pull. "Commando planes will arrive in fifty eight minutes exactly," said CLEO suddenly. "I must report an unfortunate problem with the

invisibility shield. The shield has not fully engaged and we will be visible to the long range Mark 6 Hawkeye standard spotters carried by UFO Commando. The probability of being sighted and shot down is now 100%. I am preparing parachutes and recommend that all parachutists land with hands in the air to avoid being shot!"

Alaric suddenly stood up and opened a porthole.

He stuck his head out and uttered a peculiar cry. "Cawweeee! Cawweeee! Cawweeee!"

At once a cacophony of bird cries replied far below. With a mighty flap of wings hundreds of birds erupted from a line of woods. There were magpies, warblers, tiny honey eaters, sparrows, gulls and several hawks. The hawks ignored the prospect of an immediate meal and joined the flock as out riders. The birds rose en masse. They climbed in a great swirling loop. They then combined to form one vast array of birdlife slightly below the Airship. Cloudclipper was completely obscured from ground observation.

"How do they avoid flying into each other?" asked Ben .

"Each has his own place in the Great Flock," said Alaric. "There is no chance at all of a collision! Each bird knows exactly his or her point within the flock."

"How do you know that?" asked Ben.

"Like yourself, my Prince, I am an elf. However, I have my entire memory of elvish lore and such matters are elementary."

Elementary! This immediately activated the image of Shylok Homes. Ben said: "My dear elf, you may be expert on avian matters but I can assure you that I am not the prince you are seeking. I continue to ponder on the matter. "

Alaric made no reply.

The flapping of avian wings provided substantial additional lift and the airship began to climb more rapidly.

Three bombers, each marked with the logo of the UFO Hunting Group Commando appeared a few hundred feet below the airship. Each plane discharged a stick of six parachute commando.

The men were followed by larger parachutes bearing light mortars. The Commando landed and immediately fanned out to take up defensive fire covering positions. The mortars landed close by and were rapidly assembled, ready to fire.

"Monitoring short wave radio transmission," said CLEO.

Human voices came through:

"Red Hunter. Nothing in the field but I have an aerial"

"Red Leader.....Roger that. We have Hawkeyes on the aerial, it's a (expletive deleted) ...a huge flock of birds."

Red HunterWe see a large cave ... intend to investigate!"

"Good thinking, Red Hunter. Red One Leaderdo not take pot shots at the birds! Repeat: do not shoot at the birds! Any commando who fires at the birds will be charged!"

"Red Hunter...Birds are drifting away...are they migrating?"

"Red One Leader to all UFO Command! I have no idea what the (expletive deleted) birds are doing. They may be migrating or they

may be just enjoying an evening flyby! Never mind the birds -- we are hunting for dangerous aliens and the (expletive deleted) mother ship! Fan out and check the area...approach that cave with extreme caution...the aliens are armed and dangerous!"

The transmission ended.

Cloudclipper continued to gain altitude and distance.

By 7 pm Cloudclipper was some 15 kilometers south east of her launching place, out of visual contact with the commando.

The birds were obviously running out of wing power and many had dropped away.

Some distance below, UFO Command had entered the Crystal Cave. A careful recce of the cave, with guns cocked and drawn, showed no sign of life, alien or otherwise. An hour later a helicopter full of Generals, PR men and a representative of the UFO Society arrived to inspect the newly discovered treasure trove full of crystals. Key questions were immediately asked.

Were the crystals contaminated by some kind of alien bug? Were the crystals being grown to power a mother ship? Where was the mother ship? Where were the aliens? Commercial interests then entered the debate. Assuming the crystals were tested and found to be harmless should the newly discovered Crystal Cave be marketed as a tourist attraction? And, most importantly, do the Cave and its contents belong to the State Government, the Commonwealth Government or the Lilydale Shire Council? The stage was set for a long and acrimonious legal battle.

At approximately seventeen kilometers SSE of the departure point CLEO announced that the Airship was out of range. Alaric leaned out and made another weird "Ceeaww!" sound.

With a great cacophony, the remaining birds dived away. Shortly they returned, under the airship in perfect V squadrons. Each squadron wheeled in a brilliantly flown simultaneous 360 degree turn before diving away and returning to earth.

"They have honored you, my Prince, with a full Royal Airborne Salute or the Rooks ARS!" said Alaric, waving to the birds as the flock descended, wheeling back to earth.

Ben: "The rooks arse? Prince? I have told you I am not a prince! I am not an elf! I am human. I am a human being. The rooks have made a mistake! They most likely think this airship is a giant rook and they are honoring it!"

An aperture in Cloudclipper's table then opened. A stack of fresh elfen bread sandwiches along with five bottles of Twisty Water appeared. The five companions ate hungrily. CLEO's voice broke in. "Attention, Attention, Attention all personnel! This is computer CLEO! The Airborne Salute has been observed only twice before in recorded history! I have transmitted this new sighting to Nature Magazine via my Birdwatch Software and I would like to get your personal comments right now."

"Why now?" said Ben, munching his sandwich. "Why not later?"

"How can I get posthumous comments?" replied the computer.

"Previous salutes were all followed by shocking disasters. The observers were terminated. Valuable individual testimonies were

lost because recordings were not made immediately after the event. Surely, you do not want the Third RAS to be lost to Science? So act now, beginning with your observations, Grumpy?"

"My observations?" said Grumpy. "A bunch of noisy rooks flew around making a din and then a voice from Ben 's pack said we will probably croak! Aren't we lucky that computer CLEO is here to advise us? Of course, if I throw Ben 's pack off this airship, after an interval of about five minutes allowing for an uncontrolled descent CLEO will be reduced to a pile of broken chips!"

This threat terminated CLEO's proposed interviews re: The Third Great Airborne Royal Salute as recorded by Computer CLEO. The file was immediately and permanently closed.

Shortly, Cloudclipper floated through a layer of the very clouds she was named after. A thick, strange mist surrounded the vessel and Ben shivered in his thin jerkin.

Alaric suddenly reached into his front pocket and produced a small globe. The globe, mounted on a golden necklace, contained a minute amount of liquid which sparkled with a clear light, shining through the mist. The dwarves and Ben stared at the globe.

"Prize Only Virtue!" said Alaric. He gave the globe to Ben who closed his fist over it. His entire hand seemed to light up as if he was holding an incandescent light bulb. He opened his hand and looked at the globe again. It held only a minute quantity of liquid, forming a small pool of light at the base of the globe.

"Guard this with your life!" said Alaric. "This is your personal Virtue. It is the key to your Realm!"

"There isn't much of it," said Ben. "Who gave it to me?"

"You have earned it," said Alaric. "You earned Virtue when you defended the Oak tree above your prison. You earned more when you decided against allowing CLEO to destroy the Crystal Cave. And finally you acquired more Virtue when you defended the whole party by acting as the Rearguard against the attack of the trolls -- an action of great bravery!"

"Well, I had no idea I was gaining Virtue," said Ben. "I just did not like those trolls bums! But do I have enough Virtue?"

Alaric replied: "We shall find out enough very shortly."

As he spoke, Cloudclipper emerged into bright sunlight. The airships trim changed so that they seemed to float across the topside of a cloud, with the gondola skimming the sunlit surface.

All five travelers were looking through the portholes at an astonishing panorama. Above the sky was brilliant blue and the sun shone brightly. Ben clutched his precious vial of Virtue, gazing in awe at the scene. Strangely shaped clouds floated below and the dwarves began noting them.

"Look at that dragon cloud!"

"Hey, see that? It looks like a sailing ship! "

"Over there! That white cloud looks like a huge bird!"

High above the travelers, solar cells on the airship drank in sunlight and pulsed power to CLEO. The computer used the power to monitor transmissions and scan with her onboard radar

Shortly, CLEO detected an anomaly ahead.

"Storm warning!" said CLEO. "A mass of unstable air lies directly ahead. This vessel may experience severe turbulence! Please fasten your seat belts!"

Seat belts appeared and were clipped on. They all looked forward and soon were able to see a long, black thundercloud directly ahead. Flashes of blue lightening flickered from the strange cloud, almost but not quite reaching a white cumulus cloud which billowed to a tremendous height. While small clouds raced under the airship, neither of the large clouds seemed to move.

"In the Elvish tradition, the black cloud is known as Mile Long Sam," said Alaric suddenly. "The white cloud behind is Shining Glory. There is a legend that they were once two human ballet dancers who fell in love. However, this enraged a wizard who wanted the ballerina for himself. When his overtures were rejected he turned both dancers into clouds! Now they endlessly dance -- yet they are never able to touch!"

"Typical elvish rubbish" said Grumpy. "They are just ordinary clouds, made of water vapor! "

Chapter 21 Mile Long Sam

"If they are just ordinary clouds why don't they move in the wind?" asked Ben. For some strange reason he liked the idea that the clouds were once ballet dancers.

"It is probably due to an atmospheric vortex," said Stumpy. "The clouds are stationary in the vortex. With a bit of luck the wind will blow us around the vortex and we'll miss any big turbulence. If we were in a jetliner we could fly over the clouds – or in a shuttle we could get into space, where there is no wind."

"In space there is still the solar wind," said CLEO. "The solar wind is a phenomena believed to be caused by ..."

"Shut up!" said Alaric, fearing a long lecture from the computer. He continued: "I assure everyone that the two clouds we are currently viewing are not normal clouds. We must get between the two clouds in order to reach the Third Gateway."

"The Third Gateway?" asked Ben. "But CLEO said we would be rejected by Gateway Three because we have not actually visited Gateway Two! In any case, where do these Gateways go? Are they natural or artificial? What will happen to me on the other side?"

The elf did not reply leaving Ben fretting as Cloudclipper floated on serenely. The airship was approaching the increasing violence of an electrical storm which raged continuously between the two mighty clouds. There were no obvious signs of a vortex, and the airship floated on in a perfectly straight line.

Soon, the flattened, ominous bulk of Mile Long Sam filled the sky directly ahead. The wind began to increase in strength, howling around the airship. As they sailed closer to the grim, storm wracked black cloud the wind became savage, and the airship bucked and twisted.

"Digital systems are endangered!" said CLEO suddenly. "General electrical hazard! Do not use mobile telephones, electric shavers, hair dryers or battery radios. And do not watch television until this airship is clear of the storm hazard area. I may be obliged to hand over command to Ben O Zero."

As none of the passengers had any of the goods mentioned, the warning was somewhat superfluous. In any case, all the passengers were simply hanging on and praying for calmer skies.

CLEO now engaged in a short Monte Carlo program designed to resolve whether she should stay switched on in the interests of protecting her passengers or switch herself off until the storm was over. The odds were: PROBABILITY OF COMPUTER DESTRUCTION IF LEFT ON: 99.99998%.

Such odds were unacceptable.

"Ben O Zero is to take command," said CLEO. "I am obliged to retire due to the threat of electrical damage to my systems." A

steering wheel appeared in the center of the cabin along an ornate brass lever marked ship incline control.

The computer switched herself off, leaving only her electrical activity sensor in operation to advise when the danger was past.

Cloudclipper thus abruptly lost its powerful onboard computer and came under the command of a very inexperienced pilot.

Fortunately, CLEO had locked the airships exterior control surfaces before closing down so there were no immediate effects.

Ben grasped the steering wheel and tried to remember the basic elements of his lessons.

Cloudclipper flew on as before. But Ben was barely able to keep his seat as the airship drove a through the storm wracked sky.

All four passengers hung on as Cloudclipper rocked wildly before finally entering the aerial maelstrom called Mile Long Sam. At once, the air grew dark and violently oppressive. A bank of thick black fog shot hissing bolts of lightning at the airship.

A peculiar blue fire began to blaze around the gasbag and lit the whole scene with an eerie light. The wind seemed to gain in force, raging wildly around them and smashing at the airship with massive, savage blows. The fabric rippled and flapped, until it seemed certain that it must be torn asunder. The three dwarves, with beards jutting out horizontally were etched with blue fire. Everyone in the cabin was shedding trails of blue sparks. The only other light came from the small globe of Virtue which Ben held in his free hand. Suddenly the airship shot out from the hellish interior of the black cloud and entered a kind of canyon.

Mile Long Sam's massive lightning shot bulk now lay behind.

The serene, sunlit face of Shining Glory was straight ahead.

The cumulus rose in waves of white, towering above the airship, pillowed and burnished with reflected sunlight.

Directly overhead they could see a thin wedge of blue sky.

"She's a big girl for a ballerina!" said Stumpy. "I thought they were all little wispy things who starve themselves to stay thin!"

"Rubbish!" said Grumpy. "That is no ballerina! All clouds are just floating bundles of fog!"

As he spoke a bolt of lightening smashed into the cabin from the direction of Mile Long Sam. The hissing bolt narrowly missed Grumpy's head and left a black scorch mark on his hat. There was a deafening roll of thunder. The entire airship trembled from the force of the blow. Grumpy looked shaken. His beard, surrounded by blue fire and sticking out almost vertically waggled.

He said, "Mind you, I've nothing against ballet! I love Swan Pond!"

"Swan Lake!" shouted Little Sam. "It's Swan Lake and if that black cloud takes a pot shot at the gasbag we'll be falling from a great height and hoping we drop into a nice lake ourselves!"

Cloudclipper then appeared to pause suddenly as if the airship had been braked in mid air, by some unknown force. The propellers suddenly cut out and jet engine FIDO stopped pulsing. Blue fire clung to the entire structure. The wind dropped. They floated in an uncanny stillness. Ahead, the very air seemed to shimmer.

A large, shining, golden gate came into view directly before them. It stood a few meters from the side of the airship which continued to drift slowly towards it. The gate was closed.

The door on the side of the cabin suddenly opened. The golden gate was directly abeam. A few clouds scudded below.

Alaric turned to Ben.

"It is the Third Gateway, Your Highness!" he said. "Lean out and display your globe of Virtue!"

Ben took the chain holding the globe held it in his right hand. Grasping one side of the door with his free hand, he stuck out an arm, dangling the globe of Virtue from its chain.

"Open up Gateway Three!" he shouted.

"Open for the Prince Ben and Elf Lord Alaric," added Alaric, leaning out beside Ben.

The globe sparkled, and the gate seemed almost about to open. The two sides swung to a position slightly ajar but immediately closed up again with a distinct clang.

"It appears that you do not have enough Virtue to open the Gateway!" said Alaric despairingly.

Ben felt quite relieved. After all, the gate thing appeared to be totally unsupported and it had no solid foundation. It might lead anywhere – to some odd place with no regular meals and worse of all, no TV!

Also, railways inside the gate might prove to be mirages like the fake behind his former prison. And if, as and when they returned to earth they could all go train spotting and possibly cop every

steam engine in the world. He would become The World Train Spotting Hero, The Lad Who Copped the Lot!

"Well!" he said cheerfully. "The Gateway is stuck! It obviously hasn't been oiled or something! It won't open! We should go back and find somewhere to rest up so we can plan! CLEO can probably find another cave. FIDO can resume cooking services. We can go spotting as a group. We will get a special group fare! That will save a lot of money! Of course, we must find some way of getting money as soon as possible. Possibly, I am now old enough to get a credit card! Am I old enough to get one? I want a World Express Gold Card upgradeable to Platinum. That man in a pork pie hat says the Gold Card goes anywhere!"

Ben was obviously babbling. He was, after all, standing in an open door in front of some kind of magic gate somehow standing in the sky! The situation was enough to unnerve anyone!

Cloudclipper was absolutely stationary, motionless between two oversized clouds, which were supposed to be ex-ballet dancers. The dwarves were sitting at the portholes staring wide eyed at the closed Gateway.

Alaric was glowing, lighting the entire interior of the airship cabin. However, now there were now distinct bright red streaks shooting through his aura. "We can't go back to a cosy cave!" Alaric snarled. "Your previous underground prison has been blown up! Don't you understand? You are being pursued by trained killers and an insane wizard!"

Alaric was definitely angry. "This is not a game!" he snarled furiously. Ben stiffened with shock. Previously, the elf had appeared to take every setback in his stride and had treated Ben with great respect.

Now he was positively raging.

"We can't go back and we can't get through the Gateway!" cried the elf. "We are now up in the sky. This planet is subject to gravity! It's a long way down and we will probably all be killed in a crash! Don't you understand? We are all in mortal danger!"

As the airship plunged into an even more vertical death dive, CLEO's sensors reported that electrical activity had subsided. The computer took control. In less than half a second CLEO issued commands: more gas! increase engine lift attempt to stabilize ship. None of the actions assisted.

Cloudclipper was mortally wounded.

The priority shifted to saving the lives of the passengers;

"Don't parachute! Prepare to abandon airship!"

CLEO's terse command blared from Ben's pack.

He began to buckle on his parachute.

At the base of the airship, FIDO already had his parachute on. With a wild un-robotic shout of "Yeehaw" the robot jumped. His parachute opened and he could then be seen as a white mushroom floating down below.

Ben was ordered to "Put on your rucksack!"

CLEO was obviously considering her own safety.

However, once Ben had put on the rucksack and was wearing his parachute he moved to the door and froze. The dwarves pushed past and jumped. Three more mushrooms sprouted below. Alaric came over and attempted to talk Ben down.

"Your parachute is the latest super safety model. You will enjoy a great descent and you will probably get a Red Beret as a keepsake," he said.

Ben was still goggling at the earth far below.

"I may become a Roman bundle!" he croaked.

"Roman candle!" CLEO corrected him.

"Candle, bundle.....ahhh!"

He yelled in panic as Alaric pushed him out.

His parachute duly opened automatically and he floated to earth. It was a very enjoyable sensation, capped by the fact that he would now get a red beret and possibly be invited to join the US rangers or get a ride on the Space Shuttle.

Alaric followed him down.

They all landed in a small clearing and FIDO moved around to pick up the parachutes and pack them into a hastily dug hole. The hole was then covered with turf. The robot led them through a short section of woodland to a cutting. A steam train stood inside the cutting. The engine bore a nameplate: Spitfire.

Ben led the party into a coach. He flopped down on a leather seat and promptly fell asleep. Soon they were all asleep.

A few hours later, FIDO excavated a deep hole and recovered the sword Sting and a large dwarvish knife. Both items were cleaned and put next to their owners. The sleeping bodies had now been provided with pillows and blankets.

Some distance away, Cloudclipper finally reached earth. The great airship had been sadly lost on her maiden voyage, doomed by one rash action. She hit a live power line and exploded into fragments. Her flaming remains briefly lit the night sky and then she was no more.

End.

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[Ben O Zero continues in Part 2 Spitfire.](#)

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