

***Game of Aeons: A short novel***

By H.M. Forester

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Front cover painting: *Game of Skittles* (c. 1680), copy of 1660-68 painting by Pieter de Hooch in the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

# Dedication

*Dedicated to the late, great junior school teacher Gordon Sharpe,  
who first awakened and stimulated my interest in creative  
writing.*



*This place is a dream. Only a sleeper considers it real.  
~ Coleman Barks, Essential Rumi.*

*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts.  
~ William Shakespeare, As You Like It.*



# 1. McAfee's Poshe Emporium

The little brass chime tinkled gaily above the rickety wooden door as Robin Hargreaves pushed the door open and entered *Mister McAfee's Poshe Emporium*, a seedy looking second-hand shop off the high street. The paintwork had long since begun to yellow and peel off, and judging by the antique fittings, the layout of the shop had not been changed since it had first been established in some previous century. It was like entering through a time warp into some grey and dismal bygone era.

As he entered, a wizened old man behind the oak-topped counter laid his book face up to save his place and stood up expectantly.

“Yes, young sir? Mister McAfee, owner of the eponymous *Poshe Emporium* at your service. May I be of assistance to you?” the old man enquired in lilting tones, anxiously rubbing his hands together and then, as if catching this too-gleeful habit, quickly returning his arms to his sides.

“Thank you, I'm just browsing,” Robin smiled back, walking slowly around the shop to see whether any of the goods took his fancy.

He stopped for a moment, his attention caught by an ancient, top-loading washing machine, with a heavy pair of rollers mounted on top, along the back edge. Presumably they were designed to squeeze the water out of clothes when they'd been washed.

“Isn't she a beauty?” Mister McAfee called out across the empty shop. “They don't make things like that anymore, young sir.”

Thank God they don't make contraptions like that anymore.

“Things were made to last in those days, you know. Over forty years old, bless her, and she's still going strong. Nowadays, gadgets have no user-servicable parts and are designed to fall apart or be quickly superseded.

“And if you're like me, suffering from arthritis and beginning to lose your grip, then the motorized rollers really are a Godsend. She'd be ideal if you were setting up your first bachelor

apartment.”

Well, there really was no polite, diplomatic or dignified answer to that, and Robin wasn't sure how far the man's sense of humour might extend.

“Anyhow, were you looking for anything in particular, young sir?” the man prompted, venturing out from behind the antique, oak topped counter. “Somehow, you don't strike me as the domestic kind.”

Robin shrugged. “I'm just looking for something to occupy me when I come home from school and on an evening. My father thinks that it's high time that I took up a constructive hobby.”

“Well, reading is a pastime that you might enjoy now and which would also stand you in good stead in later years, if you don't mind me saying, young sir. We have a wide selection of used books at very reasonable prices,” Mister McAfee suggested, pointing to a wide, polished rosewood bookcase standing against the wall. There were a couple of wooden wedges jammed under the bottom at the front, most likely to stop the bookcase from toppling over on the bare wooden floor, which sagged a little here and there due to the sheer weight of the many goods on display. Perhaps the very foundations of the building had sunk and settled over the many decades?

Robin went over to the bookcase and, starting at the top left, he methodically scanned the titles on the spines, slowly working his way down to the bottom shelf. Needless to say, he recognized only a few of the authors' names. At one time he'd actually been quite an avid reader, but in the last couple of years he'd read almost nothing other than the web pages, blogs, news and status updates that he'd stumbled across online. One or two titles caught his eye and he pulled out the old cloth-bound books, had a look at the dust covers and read the blurb on the back; but, unimpressed, he returned the books to the shelves.

He turned away and was just going back to the counter to thank Mister McAfee, when he happened to see the book that the old man had been reading. Quite why he was drawn to the book, Robin couldn't say. He'd had these inner promptings since early childhood, and he'd learned to pay them at least a modicum of heed. Then again, perhaps he was just being nosey, he wondered, dismissing the thought.

“*Game – of – Aeons?*” he enquired, struggling to spell out the title, since the cover was facing away from him. “What’s that?”

Mister McAfee smiled. “It’s a marvellous read, young sir. I’m sure that you would enjoy it. However, that’s my own copy and I have yet to finish reading it myself.”

Robin looked crestfallen and was about to turn away when the old man spoke again. “Tell me, young sir, do you have a personal computer?”

“Yes,” Robin nodded. “It was my Dad’s old PC. It’s not very fast, though. And please don’t call me ‘young sir’: my name’s Robin.”

“Then bear with me for one moment, young Robin,” Mister McAfee replied, holding up a finger as if he’d been struck by a flash of inspiration from out of the blue, and he went behind the counter, stooped down and began to rummage about in some dilapidated cardboard boxes.

“Ah, yes, I thought it was here somewhere. I do believe that I have the very thing for a thoroughly modern and sophisticated young man like your good self.”

The old man pulled himself upright with an effort, mumbling something under his breath about his poor old back. Then he handed a plastic case to Robin and Robin ran his eyes over the cover. Now that was more like it. It was a computer game, based on the book of the same name.

“*Game of Aeons* again,” he queried. “I haven’t heard of that before.”

“The very same; based on the book, I’m told. It’s worth more, but I can let you have it at the specially reduced price of £4.95,” Mister McAfee offered.

Of course what he hadn’t told the old man was that his father was beginning to lose patience with him for spending so much time on his computer, playing games and surfing the internet, but he really was quite taken by the theme of the game.

Shall I, shan’t I, he pondered, dithering for a few moments; torn between the prospect of a good game, on the one hand, and possibly incurring the wrath of his father, on the other.

“I’m sure that the game would suit you to a tee, young Robin.”

He shrugged. “Oh, go on then. You’ve twisted my arm, as my

mother would say.”

Robin fished in his pockets and produced a handful of coins, which he proceeded to count. “Would you settle for £3.95 for the game? And I’ll buy one of the 50p books I saw earlier.”

That way he could sneak the game into his bedroom and pretend that he’d bought the book to take up reading.

Mister McAfee stood there for a moment, scratching his chin and pondering.

Robin thought fast. “Or I could come back next Saturday, when I get my pocket money, and pay you the pound that I owe you?”

“Very well, £3.95 it is,” the old man nodded at length, taking the game from Robin whilst Robin went back to the shelves to find one of the novels he’d been looking at. “There we are, then. I’ll just pop that in a bag for you. That’ll be £4.45, if you please, Robin.

“You won’t be disappointed by the novel, either. Robert A. Heinlein is the dean of science fiction writers, and as for the game: if it’s anything at all like the book, I’m sure that it will usher in a whole new, eye-opening world of intrigue, skulduggery and delight for you. My word, yes. Once you become thoroughly engrossed in the work, you’ll never see this world in the same light again.”

## 2. The installation

Fortunately, it was Saturday and Robin's parents would be off out that evening ballroom dancing and then they'd no doubt go for a pint at a nearby pub with some of their friends, so Robin bided his time, getting stuck into the novel he'd bought, *The Puppet Masters* by Robert A. Heinlein. Let's just hope that the drink didn't make Dad even more grumpy and irritable the next day.

One thing, at least: it was as yet only the beginning of the summer holidays, so Robin didn't have to cram his whole life into the weekend as he had to during term time. It was a pleasant day, too, so he spent a good part of the day outside in the garden, sitting in a plastic deckchair, basking in the sun as he read the book; moving round from time to time to stay in the sun as the blazing golden orb slowly swung across the sky; and every so often his mother would emerge from the house and bring him a cool, refreshing drink of fruit juice. Ah, this was the life.

The paperback was a bit dog-eared and as the spine had begun to crack, one or two of the pages had come loose, but then at fifty pence, you couldn't really expect much more. Dad was an avid reader himself and he often remarked that the content was more important than the container, though having said that, he had taught Robin to respect books and especially not to crack the spine of paperbacks so that the pages stayed open. To Dad, that really was one of the cardinal sins. One of a great array of cardinal sins, it had to be said. Dad was a tax inspector and it was debatable whether he had chosen that career since he was of a certain disposition and a stickler for rules, regulations and fine detail, or whether life in the inspectorate had made him that way. Perhaps it was a little of both? A matter of which came first: the chicken or the egg?

Finally, after their usual military rigmarole, Mum and Dad were ready, their taxi had arrived and they were off to the dance, leaving Robin in peace for a time, and he wasted no time in booting up the old PC. His father wasn't sure that it was a good idea for Robin to have the computer in his bedroom, spending so much time in there and treating the home like a hotel, but



fortunately his mother had backed him up, pointing out that Robin was a teenager now and he needed and should – within limits – be allowed a certain degree of privacy. Naturally, of course, this had been followed by a lengthy debate to more rigorously define such woolly terms as “within limits” and “a certain degree”. In such serious and weighty matters, his father really was in his element, and the man would stride up and down the room with his thumbs and index fingers grasping his lapels and his chest puffed out as if he were some lawyer addressing an assembled court. Yet for all of that *faux* pomposity, and to his mother's eternal credit, she was not easily intimidated. The eldest daughter of a fiery lay preacher, she had been taught from an early age to stand on her own two feet and to hold her ground. Of course, you could see that Father didn't like this much, maintaining that this undermined his authority, and from time to time under such pressure his unfortunate nervous twitch would peak, but there you go. He could like it or lump it.

Having said that, Mum did not like Robin talking back to his father, and at times she would rally to her husband's defence, or even lead an assault of her own volition. She, too, had her own strongly held principles.

Robin cleared a space on his messy desk for his coffee mug and sat down. Removing the contents from the plastic case, he studied the tiny, stapled instruction booklet. As well as the CD, there was some kind of hardware dongle, too, in a black plastic case about the size of a box of Swan Vestas (household or smokers' matches), and you had to plug this device into one of the sockets on the back of the PC in order for the game to work. This was designed to prevent piracy, presumably. Fortunately, the device came with an alternative inline adapter, and USB for more modern machines. He noticed, as he plugged the dongle into the spare serial port, that it vibrated slightly and emitted a low pitched and barely audible, almost subliminal, hum.

Then he carefully inserted it into the drive and waited anxiously for the CD to spin up to speed. The disk looked well used and it had a few surface scratches, and the last thing he needed now was to find that the installation failed because the system couldn't read the data on the disk.

As the installation began, Robin had another anxious nail-

biting moment as the program checked to see if there was enough free space on the old hard drive and worked its way through a long list of system requirements. All-too predictably, it baulked at the computer's graphics capability, planting a large red cross beside the entry for DirectX. Moments later, a dialogue box popped up, informing him that the program had detected an old version, DirectX 8, which was not compatible with *Game of Aeons*. At this point, Robin felt an awful sinking in the pit of his stomach and clapped his palm to his forehead, shielding his eyes. Oh, woe is me, he half laughed nervously and half groaned to himself. So near and yet so far.

Thankfully, when he'd plucked up the courage to again look at the screen, he saw that the dialogue went on to enquire whether he wanted to abort the installation or upgrade to DirectX 10. Robin thought that he'd chance it, clicked OK and gritted his teeth as the program performed the upgrade and set the screen aflicker as it tested various screen resolutions to determine the PC's graphics capabilities. As it turned out, the procedure continued without a further hitch, and Robin breathed a huge sigh of relief as the installation completed.

Dismissing the installation program, Robin clicked on the new desktop icon and the game launched in a large window that almost filled the small monitor screen.

After the initial fanfare, he was presented with a setup screen and required to fill in a whole list of personal details, game preferences and a multi-character code to activate the game. Taking slow, deep breaths, he went through the form carefully step-by-step. Though he'd been brought up in the age of computers, his nerves always got the better of him when he was filling out official forms, and he had to go through the details two or three times to painstakingly check that he hadn't made any mistakes.

User name: Okay, let's try *Robin*. Of course, the really smart ideas for things like user names invariably came only after you had hit Enter and committed yourself.

He clicked a button beside the moniker and the system confirmed that this alias was unavailable, listing a number of similar alternatives that had not as yet been taken. Eventually he resorted to numbers and Robin111 was finally accepted.

Real name: *Robin Hargreaves*.

Sex? There was no option to select “*Yes please*” or “*Chance would be a fine thing*”, so he settled on *Male*.

Email: *Robin@no\_such\_address.com*

Again the machine whirred and the network icon in the system tray in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen flashed a few times. After a moment, the system informed him that the address was inaccessible and that for various reasons, such as in the event of losing his password or to confirm the purchase of additional game inventory, he had to provide a valid email address. Okay. So far, so good.

Email: *RobinHargeaves@somesuch.domain*

A green tick appeared beside the email address and that went through okay.

Password: *\*\*\*\*\**

The system informed him that the password was not strong enough, so he selected another and went to his coat to retrieve his diary and add the password to the growing list, before he forgot it.

Age: *16*.

Address? He began to fill in a fictitious address, but when he came to add a fake postcode, he was curtly informed that the address was invalid and that he must input his real address for unspecified reasons. Again, he decided that rather than enter his own address, he'd use his granny's, but scanning further down the form, he noticed that he was also required to fill in details of his current account, and realized that the address he gave would have to precisely match the personal details held at the bank. Though the game itself was free, without access to the bank account, so he was told, he would not be able to purchase in-game accessories. Well, much as he was loath to supply so much personal information online, he really had to choice but to comply. Little did he know that the spamvertizing that inevitably filled his inbox would sooner or later prove to be the least of his worries.

After that, there were half a dozen annoying marketing questions asking where he first heard about the game, where he bought it and things like that. He was going to leave the fields blank, but it turned out that they were obligatory, so he typed in *Mister McAfee's Poshe Emporium* and randomly ticked the remaining boxes.

Finally, after triple checking the bank details, and especially faffing over the multi-digit debit card number, he hit the “*Send*” button and, after a short delay, the system reported that his account had been successfully activated, the form disappeared and he was presented with an inviting welcome screen.

### 3. Welcome

There was an ornate heading which read “*Welcome to Game of Aeons*”; a static scene depicting a bustling city street, and a number of useful links across the top of the screen.

Toward the bottom of the screen, there was a big green button labelled “*Begin*” and just above that was a panel with text that read:

*User name: Robin111*

*Social status: Unemployed vagrant*

*Available credit: 10 pennies*

*IQ: 80*

*Skills: None*

*Street cred: 5/100.*

*Level: 1 (Basic orientation)*

*Click here to see more details and possible options.*

*If you have any queries, use the text input box at the top of the screen.*

Vagrant? IQ 80? 100 was merely average and 70 was classed as being mentally retarded. Well, the Powers That Be at *Game of Aeons* certainly hadn't given his character much of a start in life.

He entered the question “What is a vagrant?” and hit the query button.

*A vagrant is the lowest form of human existence in Game of Aeons, a character without a home and possessing only the clothes and equipment he or she is able to carry.*

*If you wish, you may upgrade to the status of serf. To do this, you must purchase living space by visiting the game accessories and enhancements (A & E) page, or rent space from a landlord. You may also apply for council housing, but please be aware that such housing is means tested and that there is a lengthy waiting list.*

*To support yourself, you will have to take paid employment or purchase supplies to meet your daily requirements from A & E.*

Sure, that figures, Robin thought wryly. They make the game free and get kids hooked, but no doubt charge the earth for a whole host of suggested improvements and must-have

accessories.

Again he wasn't sure what a serf was, so he opened his web browser, went to Wiktionary and looked up the word:

*A partially free peasant of a low hereditary class, slavishly attached to the land owned by a feudal lord and required to perform labour, enjoying minimal legal or customary rights.*

*A similar agricultural labourer in 18th and 19th century Europe.*

*In strategy games, a worker unit.*

Well that hardly seemed an improvement on the life of a vagrant, thought Robin, letting out a deep sigh. Clearly, in *Game of Aeons* he'd have to claw his way up the social ranks to make something of his character.

Going through to the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee and raid the barrel for some of the biscuits his mother had freshly baked, and after much umming and ahing, Robin decided that he'd have a look round the game first and then decide on what his next move should be.

So, reseating himself at the computer, he had a sip of coffee, drew a deep breath and clicked on the button labelled "*Begin*".

## 4. Level 1 (Basic orientation)

As Robin clicked on “*Begin*”, the screen faded to black and there was a flurry of network activity as the program pulled data and graphics from the online game server; then the screen sprang to life. Well, it was a good job that his father had finally ditched the antiquated dial-up account and had broadband installed. This game was a real greedy guts.

On the screen was a wide paved square in the centre of a town or city, shown in 3D and when the scene had been completely rendered, a character popped up centre screen. A little blue label hovering over the character's head indicated that this was his own character, Robin111.

Well, hallelujah!

Looking to the heavens, Robin could see that it was a grey and overcast day, with a slight chill and a light drizzle in the air. Overhead, half a dozen urban seagulls were wheeling through the sky and squabbling over some morsel of food that one of them had scavenged from the streets. The air, too, was slightly hazy and stank of diesel fumes. He remembered now having once spent a day out in London, as a child, touring some of the many sights in the city, and how he'd been pooped on and mobbed by the pigeons in Trafalgar Square. Later, when he'd returned home and happened to blow his nose on a handkerchief, he was shocked to discover that it looked like he'd been sweeping the soot out of a chimney. And this was long after the era of the killer smog.

The wide square was fortunately pedestrianized, and on each of the numerous lampposts dotted across the square, he saw that the local council had fixed several large and invasive red, black and white signs, informing people that cars were prohibited and listing a whole string of official dos and don'ts and their associated penalties. Well, one thing at least: the council hadn't given way to the revenue-raising temptation to turn this square into yet another infernal pay and display car park. As for scenery, however, there was not a single square inch of greenery in the square, except that which was struggling to survive in the cracks between the paving stones; a few large stone or cast bronze

statues; and a large fountain in the very centre of the square. He hesitated to use the word “heart”, because really, the square had about as much character as an army parade ground, and it did not possess one. Well, he supposed that the place might inspire awe in primitive people or those who were forced to live in tiny back-to-back terraced houses and work in the sort of dark Satanic mills about which William Blake once wrote (the industrial works, in this case, not the churches), but it did not impress him much.

Anyhow, as an insistent dialogue box kept prompting him, it was time for him to turn to learning some of the rudiments of the game. Following step by step instructions in the basics, he was able to swivel around on the spot, take his first tentative steps, and also assign the character a more user-friendly screen name in place of “Robin111”.

True to the lowly social status that he'd been allocated – that of unemployed vagrant – he saw that his character was appropriately attired in a long, thick and dirty brown ex-army greatcoat and woolly hat, baggy trousers and well-worn walking boots, and the animators had also provided him with a shimmering aura, which indicated, presumably, that he stank as bad as he looked. Designer *chic*, this was not.

Another character approached Robin now, a gruff and stocky looking individual with a closely-shaven head and a stubbly jaw line that looked like it had been hewn from rough granite. Robin nervously turned and tapped out a friendly greeting on his keyboard. As he typed, the greeting appeared on-screen as a speech bubble and he heard his words through the small speakers attached to the PC. He anxiously awaited a response.

The other person not only barged straight past Robin, he made a point of shoulder-butting Robin and sending him sprawling onto the hard paving stones beneath his feet. And, strange as it may sound, Robin actually felt a twinge of pain as he landed on the unyielding ground. Presumably this effect was something to do with mirror neurons and empathy, or with identification? He'd read something about that in one of his father's scientific journals. The neurons not only fired when you performed an act yourself, they also fired when you watched someone else perform that act, producing the self-same sensations and feelings. That's why Robin couldn't bear to watch people



taking a tumble on television shows like *You've Been Framed!* He found the programme simply too painful to watch.

“Get the f--- away from here, Hobo,” the ape yelled at Robin as he went on his way. “We don't want you smelly vagrants around, begging and stinking up this fine neighbourhood.”

With an effort, Robin tried to pick himself up off the ground, but as yet unfamiliar with the keyboard commands, he had great difficulty.

Just then, another character appeared. A slim girl about his own age with an ankle-length, flowing floral dress and long, shiny black hair, she came running toward him. At first he feared another assault and he redoubled his efforts to bring himself back to a standing position, but his fears proved groundless. As the girl came up to him, he did a double-take – glancing at her, then looking away shyly and glancing at her a second time – for the girl looked strangely familiar to him, as if he'd seen her before, perhaps in some long lost dream?

“Sorry about that,” the girl smiled. Holding out a hand, she grasped his arm and, with unexpected strength, she hoisted Robin to his feet.

“Hey, thanks. You make it look so easy.”

“Like falling off a bike,” the girl laughed, “it's easy when you know how.”

Well, that moment of merriment certainly took the sting out of his fall. “I'm Robin, by the way.”

“Ellie,” she smiled back and shook his hand.

“So who was that?” he wanted to know.

“Sadly, that was Darius. At least that's what he calls himself. In real life, he's probably just some sad anorak by the name of Derek, who spends his time offline train-spotting or jotting down car number plates, but you know what people are like with these macho online personas. It can be a bit like the Stanford Prison Experiment in here at times.”

“The what?”

“The Stanford Prison Experiment. Look it up on Wikipedia,” she advised. “Tell you what, give me a minute and I'll send you a link. All you have to do is click on your inbox.”

“Later maybe, Ellie,” he replied. “I've only just arrived and, as you can see, I'm still finding my feet.”

“Sure, Robin. Anyhow, don't worry. Darius is not a part of the official welcoming committee, you'll be glad to know. Just one of the neighbourhood trolls.”

“Tell me about it,” he sighed. It was an observation not an invitation, but it looked like the girl was going to give him the low-down all the same. Still, he'd rather be doing that than hitting the ground, any day. As she talked, Ellie took Robin's arm and together they walked away from the centre of the square in the direction of the city streets. He still hadn't quite got the hang of the controls, and his progress was slow and awkward, though Ellie seemed happy enough and assured him that he was doing fine for a newbie.

“Well, a while back Darius took a fancy to me and began stalking me and he kept pestering me to go out with him – I mean, *as if*. When he ignored my requests to be left alone, I reported him to the moderators, but all they gave him was a caution and docked a few shillings from his account. Since then, I've tried to avoid the creep. You'd do well to keep away from him, as he has some unctuous friends in high places. Well, not friends exactly: he has a thriving business on the black market, stealing to order, and he supplies people in high places.”

The girl paused for a minute and peered at him with her big green cat's eyes. “I'm afraid you'll find that for all too many here, corruption is the name of the game.”

That sound ominous and, as delicately as she put it, Robin detected that it also hinted at his own naivety as a newbie.

“So what I'm saying is, steer clear of him and his kind. There's always the chance that if you rubbed Darius or any of his clan up the wrong way, he'd call in a favour or two and you could find yourself being shat on from a great height.”

The girl drew a deep breath.

“Anyway, enough about that.” Ellie looked him up and down and sighed as they moved on. “So, you're a new arrival?”

That much had already been established and was in any case patently obvious. He guessed that this was probably just the girl's way of leading into conversation. “I'm sorry, I've only just got here and I haven't had time to change into anything more respectable.”

“Yes, so I can see, Robin,” the girl laughed. “When you sign

up, the system is supposed to pseudo-randomly allocate you an initial social status, within certain bounds, but I'm pretty sure that the system is rigged."

Robin nodded. "Yes, apparently I'm an unemployed vagrant."

The girl sighed. "Yes, you're one of the Unlucky 98%. You know when you were on the welcome screen and the system listed your attributes – like your IQ, social status and street cred?"

"Sure," he nodded.

"And there was a link labelled 'Click here to see more details and possible options?'"

"Yes, I saw that. But I thought that I'd have a look around first before making any changes."

"Well, if you'd clicked on that, you'd have been able to spruce yourself up a little before you entered Level 1."

"Ah, I see," Robin replied. "And I presume that costs money? You see, in the real world, I'm also one of the Unlucky 98% with too little money to live on ..."

"Sure," she nodded in understanding. "Anyhow, let me buy you something at the café. You have to keep your strength up." The girl again took hold of his arm and guided him away from the square toward a row of shops. There was a café there, but Ellie walked straight past it.

"That place not good enough?" Robin wondered.

"I'm afraid that they're choosy about their clientèle," the girl reliably informed him. "Well, that's their loss, not ours."

Robin stopped for a moment and looked back. He saw now the large wooden sign by the door that read "No vagrants, chavs or hawkers."

"What's a chav?" he wanted to know.

Ellie gently tugged at his arm to get him under way again. "Uneducated, ignorant and amoral lower class youths from the council estates who dress up in designer wear and cheap bling. The girls are known as chavettes."

"Gross," he muttered.

"Sorry Robin, but you *did* ask.

"The chavs are so pig ignorant, they even have their own clans here and they're proud of it, and what's worse is that young kids look up to them as role models."

She waved her arms in the air as if in despair. "I guess it's a

kind of inverse snobbery.” Then she sighed deeply. “And of course, the mere fact that I’m talking in such disrespectful terms probably makes *me* a snob. We all have our faults and human frailties and, just like our shadow, we unfortunately take them along with us wherever we go.

“Anyhow, you can tell which clan or 'hood they're in by things like the colour and number of stripes they have on their track suits. Especially watch out for the ones with a single amber stripe down their legs and their pants so low their crotch is down by their knees, like they do in penitentiary. Those clansmen really are intent on trouble.”

Ellie gently guided him down an alley and through a warren of back streets until they came to an old café on the corner of one of the streets.

Just then, Robin heard a car pull up outside the house and reaching over the desk, he furtively parted the bedroom curtains and peered down at the street below. Evidently his parents had arrived back by taxi from their night out. Only then did Robin check the bedside clock and see how late it was.

He frantically tapped away at the keyboard. “Parents have just come back. Will have to sign off until tomorrow. Where can I find you again?”

He waited anxiously as the girl typed in a reply. “What's your user name?”

“Robin111,” he responded.

“Don't worry, Robin. Will add you to my friends list and will come and find you.”

Then she added: “If you right click on the screen, you can also bookmark the street outside the Corner Café and teleport here when you next log in. You'll find it friendlier here than Newbie Square. Don't bookmark the café itself, though, as they don't take kindly to a constant stream of people teleporting in there, and they might actually block you if you do it once too often.

He speed read her words. Jeez, girl. There's no time for long-winded instructions.

“Oh and while you're away, it might be worth your while reading through the help screens and familiarizing yourself with the basics.”

“OK, thanks again Ellie. Must dash.”

“Be seeing you, Robin.”

And with that, Robin clicked on “*Quit*”, waited anxiously for the PC to exit Windows and shut down, then grabbed his book, found his place, and dived onto the nearby bed.

“Hi, Robin,” his mother chirped up, sticking her head around his bedroom door. “I don't suppose you'd say no to a cuppa?”

“Oh, hi there! I was miles away with my head buried in this book,” he lied, shuffling off the bed and getting to his feet. “Actually, I'd prefer a coffee if you don't mind – or I could make a drink for you, if you like? Had a good evening?”

“Oh, would you?” His mother gave him a friendly kiss on the cheek as he passed her. “Thank you, you are a dear. And yes, it was a lovely evening. I think your father and I had one too many brandy and Babychams tonight, though: we're both just a little tipsy.”

Robin laughed as he headed downstairs. “I wouldn't worry, I'm sure you both deserve a drink every now and again.”

His mother followed him downstairs. “You know, you really should come with us sometime. A good looking lad like you wouldn't have much trouble finding their own dance partner. There are some lovely girls at the dance hall, you know, who would fall over one-another to teach you the steps ...”

Robin didn't answer that, instead making a beeline for the kitchen. As for dancing, though he had been gifted with fingers born to tap out a funky rhythm on a keyboard, he had definitely been allocated two left feet.

## 5. An offer he can't refuse

Robin was up with the larks the next day. After brushing his teeth, having a quick cat lick in the bedroom sink and putting on a change of clothing, then stuffing a few mouthfuls of breakfast cereal down his throat, he dashed back upstairs. He logged back into *Game of Aeons* and spent a few minutes running through the help files to familiarize himself with the keyboard shortcuts and basic features of the game, then clicked on “*Begin*”.

He did try to teleport to the café as Ellie had suggested, but he was told that he first had to complete certain basic tasks at Newbie Square. As a reward for successful completion, he would be given two more pennies in credit, *gratis*, and his IQ and street cred would be re-evaluated.

His first task, which involved a certain degree of manual dexterity, and which took up a good half hour, was to go around the square armed with a large black plastic sack and a brush and shovel picking up litter and whatever discarded objects he might find lying there, and deposit said items in the recycling bins, which were situated nearby.

Robin was initially disappointed to see that the city was again gloomy and overcast, but given the sweat that he quickly built up as he worked, it was perhaps a good thing that it wasn't a swelteringly hot day.

Judging by the amount of detritus that had accumulated, the system had been programmed with this menial task in mind, and some of the other characters who wandered this way and that across the square seemed to purposely discard their rubbish there: all too often in areas that he'd just swept clean to have been mere chance. This was, perhaps, all part of some kind of arcane hazing ritual.

Finally, though the task had not as yet been completed – indeed, perhaps like painting the Forth Road Bridge, never would – a small, rotund stranger in a black suit, fluorescent orange jacket, bright yellow hard hat and an official-looking clipboard appeared out of nowhere and came toward him.

“You've done a good job there young fellah,” the man

informed him, “and I'm pleased to say that this initial task is now complete. If I were you, I'd go and get something to eat before your next task. You need to keep your strength up.”

Robin motioned to the tramp's clothes he was still wearing and waved his arms in the air. “How can I get served with food to eat dressed like this?”

The man stood there, looking Robin up and down for some time and scratching his chin. “Well, let's not look at your problems here, Robin, daunting as they may be: let's focus on your options.”

The man pointed across the square into the distance. “You can always get something to eat at the soup kitchen near the Cloth Market. Just follow that road and keep on going for half a dozen blocks. There's also a hostel for the homeless there where you can rent a bunk on a night.”

Robin looked at the man askance. “Come night time all I have to do is log out. I have a bed of my own to sleep in while my character's offline.”

The man raised the peak of his yellow hard hat to scratch his scalp, and he laughed. “Son, there's one thing you should know – well a lot of things in reality, but first things first. You may go offline, but your character does not. And if your character is left sleeping rough on the streets, then others of a nefarious disposition are likely to come along, beat up your character and steal all his possessions. Hell, there was one poor old fella a few weeks back who was set alight one night and 'died' – that is, his character was terminated and the player lost all the accessories, enhancements and game experience that the character had built up over the weeks.”

“Really?” Robin found that quite shocking.

The man stood there, scratching at his crotch now. “Now, in a way he was lucky. If your character got beaten up, he might end up in hospital, and then you'd be faced with hospital fees to pay for the treatment your character received, and treatment does not come cheap.”

Again Robin looked askance. “You're kidding me, right? What if I couldn't afford to pay?”

The man waved his hands in the air. “It's all there in black and white, son. You check out the terms and conditions and be

sure to read the fine print. In such an event, if you couldn't pay or you refused to pay, then the Powers That Be at *Game of Aeons* have the authority to directly debit your account, in instalments if necessary. And if all else fails, you – and I mean you, not your character – could end up in court in the real world. You mark my words, son.

“Of course, you could decide to cut your losses and terminate your character. But you'd still be faced with the cost of a burial or cremation.”

“But I could simply terminate my account,” Robin protested.

The man shook his head vigorously. “You really need to check out the terms and conditions before you get yourself in any deeper, son. When you clicked “*Send*” after signing up, you agreed to abide by those terms and conditions. Backing out is no longer an option for you, son.”

Robin thought fast. “Okay, so what other options do I have?”

“Well, you could buy yourself some living space, rent from a landlord or spend your nights at the shelter for the homeless – assuming they have any vacancies that is. There's been quite an influx of newbies this last few weeks and beds are pretty scarce.”

“And to pay for that?”

The man sighed. “To pay for that, you either need to buy yourself some enhancements using your debit or credit card, or else you need to find gainful employment. You're not in Kansas or London any more, you know, and here in *Game of Aeons* there are no unemployment or disability benefits, and no free medical care. The Powers That Be here are ultra-conservative and everyone has to pay their way. It's dog eat dog, son; dog eat dog and do or die.”

Again the man scratched his chin and flipped through his clipboard. He was making Robin's skin itch just watching him scratching away. “Listen, son, I think we can do each other a favour here. It's not much of a push up the ladder, but it'll at least get you out of the dung and on the first rung, as they say.”

“What's that?” Robin enquired, pricking up his ears.

“You did a really good job cleaning the square this morning, but that was only a test. We could do with someone like you sweeping other streets in the city that don't get cleaned up by newbies.”



Well, Robin had to admit, that might be better than a kick in the teeth. “So what are the hours and what's the job pay?”

The man consulted his clipboard. “Well, we could start you on an hour a day, four days a week at four shillings for a week's work.”

“An hour a day? But I came here to play *Game of Aeons*, not slave away for hours on end,” Robin protested. “Hell, if I wanted a job sweeping the streets, I'd get a job doing that back home.”

“Well, that might not be a bad idea. Maybe help to separate your work from your play?” The man gently patted Robin on the shoulder. “Seriously, this *is* the way *Game of Aeons* works, son, and this is as real as it gets.

“Now bear in mind that this is your first step up the ladder, son, and that it would help you move on to better things as time went by.”

Robin shrugged. “Well, there is that.”

“And the hours are flexible. I know some who work a four hour shift and get the week's work over in a single session. And there's always plenty of overtime if you need the money. That's not a bad deal, you know: a morning's work and six and a half days time off to play. In the real world, folk would give their eye teeth for a deal like that.”

“True.” He said that, and yet at the same time he couldn't help but think that in some way he'd just been taken for a mug.

*It's a mug's game, alright*, he heard that familiar voice whisper knowingly in his ear. *My advice to you would be say “Thank you very much, but no”, then turn my back and walk away.*

When I want your advice, I'll ask you for it, thank *you* very much.

The man shrugged his shoulders apologetically. “If you're stumped for money, son, you could always get work – a part-time paper round maybe? – back home, and then you could buy enhancements to improve your employment prospects here. I was looking through your records and there's room for vast improvement. I'd love to offer you a better job, but given your metrics – like the IQ of 80, just by way of example – I'm afraid that's out of the question right now. Each job has its own requirements and a minimum set of metrics to meet those

requirements.”

Again Robin sighed. “Okay, okay, I get the picture. Where do I sign?”

The man consulted his clipboard, pulled out an official looking form, fastened it to the front of the clipboard and filled in a few details. “I can pull the rest of the details from your records, son. All you have to do is sign right here on the dotted line and the job's done.”

Robin complied, though he had the greatest difficulty trying to sign his own name on the form using the virtual pen. “So, what next, Mister ...?”

“Mister Carter,” the man replied. “If I were you, I'd get myself something to eat – everything you do here reduces your strength, you see, and hence your ability to carry out physical or, for that matter, mental tasks. And eating and drinking replenish your stocks.”

“I see.”

“And then I'd find shelter for the night and take the rest of the day off. You can begin work whenever you next log in.”

“Where do I report?”

“The council works.” Mister Carter pointed into the distance, across the square. “Two blocks down there, then take a right onto Dean Road and keep going: you can't miss the place. Just report in at reception and tell them that Mister Carter sent you their way, and they'll take care of the rest of the formalities.”

“Thanks,” nodded Robin as Mister Carter turned to walk away, then he had a last minute thought.

“Oh, there's one last thing, Mister Carter.” He pointed to the shabby greatcoat.

“Yes, of course: you'll want a fresh set of work clothes,” the man nodded.

“I meant for just walking around in. People around here seem to take objection to me, thinking me a vagrant.”

“Yes, shame about that, son. Just between you, me and this lamppost, I reckon the system allocates people's initial social status based on their credit rating.”

“Well, I'm proud to say that I've never been in debt, Mister Carter,” Robin chirped up. “My father taught me that it's best to live within one's means and, wherever possible, to pay in hard

cash.”

“That's it, then,” the man returned. “You see, credit ratings are not based on your ability to stay out of debt, however laudable that may be, but on the history of managing your finances when you do.”

“Ah, I see.” Robin sighed deeply. “So I don't have a credit rating, then?”

“Exactly, son,” the man nodded. “You're an unknown quantity and, sadly, it would appear that they're not willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. Of course none of the Knobs have to suffer such indignity. As ever, there's one law for the rich and another for the likes of us.”

To be honest, Mister Carter didn't exactly look like he was short of a bob or two, but Robin made no reply. He was simply grateful for all the help he could get, and the last thing he wanted to do right now was push his luck.

“I suppose that there's a certain logic to it, if you look at things from the point of view of the Authorities,” the man added as an afterthought: “in that you actually wouldn't be able to afford to live the high life here, were you to find yourself suddenly elevated through the ranks. And then again, they couldn't run their operation successfully with too many chiefs and not enough Indians. You see my point?”

“Of course, it's sad that it has to be you who is burdened by all this, son. But – alas – that is the name of the game here, and nobody said that life was going to be easy. 'Every rose has its thorns', and what have you.”

Sure. Whatever, Robin grumbled under his breath. We all have our cross to bear. It's just that some are a darned sight heavier or more cumbersome than others, to parody the infamous line in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

*It's not for nothing that the donkey is referred to as a beast of burden,* the voice added cryptically.

Oh yeah? And what's that supposed to mean? You been at the fortune cookies or something?

*It was merely an observation, Robin. A master takes good care of his donkey.*

Well, all I can say is that I wish Master would take better care of me.

*Oh ye of little faith. If you did but know ...*

Mister Carter flipped through his clipboard and produced a small sheet of paper, on which he wrote Robin's name and user name. "When you've eaten, go along to the council works like I told you and tell them that you're due to start work later in the week, but that I've authorized them to issue you with a set of overalls and a fluorescent safety jacket. They're not exactly tailor-made, but they will at least see you right until you have enough money together to buy yourself a decent set of civvies. And that, in turn, will stop the locals taking offence to your presence. You'll probably find the café across the square will make you welcome, too."

"The one which doesn't allow vagrants, chavs and hawkers, you mean?"

Mister Carter smiled and nodded. "Yes, that's the one. I'm told that they cook a fine full English all day breakfast. That would really set you up for the day."

The man consulted his watch. "Well, I really must be going, as I have other newbies to see. But good luck to you ... um ..."

He hastily consulted his clipboard, having clearly forgotten Robin's name already. "Good luck to you, Robin."

"Thank you for your time and help, Mister Carter. And good luck to you, too."

At that moment, the heavens opened and it began to rain quite heavily, and by the time he arrived at the council works to get kitted out, Robin was drenched to the skin and feeling more than a little sorry for himself. He was, however, grimly determined not to let the system grind him down, but to get both feet firmly planted on the social ladder and heave himself out of this mess.

## 6. Meeting up again

Robin slowly made his way back up town from the shelter for the homeless, having picked up the overalls and jacket at the council works and hastily changed. Thankfully, he didn't have to faff about with all the fiddly buttons: all he had to do was pick up the item, then flick through his inventory in an on-screen menu and select the items he wanted to take off and those he wished to don. It was only later, of course, that he did wonder whether it was the done thing to simply change one's clothes in public or whether this might have been a terribly embarrassing *faux pas*.

Thankfully, too, the rain clouds had passed over by now, the sun had come out, and it was actually quite a pleasant day, with just enough of a breeze to wake one up and blow a few of the old cobwebs away. Even the birds that flew around the square and pecked at the scant offerings were busily chirping away melodiously, perhaps having taken the opportunity to have a bath in the puddles, and intent on making the most of the bright new day.

He wouldn't have to check into the shelter until early evening, but he wanted to be sure that he had his directions right and both places bookmarked, so that he could easily teleport there when he needed to. The game did have a search facility, but it was quite rudimentary and not exactly on a par with Google or Bing.

On his way back across Newbie Square, he went out of his way to pass by the recycling bins and added the filthy greatcoat and baggy trousers to the clothes bank and the worn-out boots to the shoe bank, in the faint hope that some other poor soul might find a use for them, though whether there was any point in doing so, he really didn't know.

Just then, Robin detected a shimmering close by, out of the corner of his eye, and for a moment he did wonder if this was the beginnings of scintillating scotoma, the psychedelic patterns in his eyes that were often a prelude to and accompanied his occasional migraine attacks.

All of a sudden, a figure appeared beside him, however, and he instantly recognized it as the girl, Ellie. True to her word,

though as yet she hardly knew him from Adam, she had returned to the game to seek him out.

“Hi there, Ellie!” he beamed, stopping for a moment and turning to face her.

“And hi to you, too, Robin,” she smiled back.

“Do you like the change of clothing?” he enquired, waving his hands in the air and doing a twirl.

The girl's face dropped. “Well, Robin,” she said at length, “The work clothes are certainly an improvement over your tramp's attire – I mean, that was so rank, it's a wonder it didn't crawl away of its own accord – but what are you doing back here and what on earth have you done now?”

Robin explained about having to carry out the initial orientating tasks before being allowed to teleport elsewhere, and that raised a knowing nod from Ellie.

“Ah, I see. Yes, now I think about it, the Authorities were talking about making changes to the induction process, but being a veteran, I didn't pay much attention. The developers, too, are forever fiddling about with the system, practising change for the sake of change, and it can be quite disconcerting.”

She stood there with her hands on her hips. “But what's with the navy clothes?”

“What's a navy?” he enquired.

“You know what I mean: someone who carries out menial, manual work.”

“Ah, well I met a council official who oversaw my initial task of clearing litter and stray objects from the square, and he told me a few home truths about finding a place to live and the necessity of gainful employment, in lieu of funds to upgrade my status.”

“A little fat fellow with a yellow hard hat and a clipboard?” Ellie queried, narrowing her eyes.

“Yes, that's the chap: some council official,” Robin nodded earnestly. “Said his name was Carter.”

Ellie stood there and shook her head. “Council official, my arse,” she retorted. “Your Mister Carter works as an agent for the council. He's a salesman, basically, and he gets paid a fat commission for anyone who is dumb enough to fall for his spiel and sign up for work.”

“Ah, so I've made a fool of myself, I gather,” Robin sighed.

“Yes, Robin, I would go so far as to suggest that you have been taken for a sucker.”

“Oh dear.”

*Don't say I didn't try to warn you,* insisted a voice in Robin's head.

Alright, clever clogs, he silently retorted.

Ellie smiled and gently patted his arm as they walked across the square in the direction of the streets. “But don't worry too much: you're not the first, and you certainly will not be the last. And it's all a part of the learning curve.”

“Yes, I shall just have to put this down to experience,” he sighed, finally able to meet Ellie's intense gaze once more.

“So, where are you planning on sleeping on a night?” she wanted to know.

“I've just been to check out the hostel for the homeless,” he told Ellie. “I hadn't appreciated that a character sleeping on the streets could get beaten up and even hospitalized whilst its player is offline.

“Did I do right?” he wanted to know, peering into her big green eyes to try to get a sense of her reaction.

She raised her eyebrows.

“Um ... or did I do wrong? Oh, hell, there's so much I need to learn, isn't there?”

Ellie didn't reply to him for a few moments as they crossed the busy street and headed toward the Corner Café.

“Well, I guess it's alright if you don't mind the company and the lack of privacy. Many of the street people are perfectly decent folk who've fallen on hard times or who can't cope with the pressures of modern society or civilian life after war. Sadly, people with big hearts are often the most vulnerable. But there are a minority, especially the addicts, who would sooner rob you blind as look at you.

“And then there are the bed bugs ...”

He shrugged his shoulders apologetically. “But I have no other options, Ellie.”

Ellie took his arm and led him down an alleyway. “We'll have a think about that later, Robin, but first let's find somewhere warm to sit down and a decent coffee to drink. I'll treat you to a

slice of cream cake, too, or a sticky bun. They're not quite the best, but as good as you'll get this side of the city.”

They sat there in the back garden of the café, bathed in glorious sunshine, listening to the birds and watching the bees busily visiting the fragrant red, white and yellow roses, the rhododendrons and the hydrangea. Ellie reliably informed him that the hydrangea originated in southern and eastern Asia, and that its flowers would go from blue in acidic soil, through lavender and mauve, to bright pink in neutral or slightly alkaline soil. She possessed a wealth of knowledge about a whole host of topics, whilst he knew so very little, yet fortunately this did not drive a wedge between them.

The girl engaged him in all manner of conversation that afternoon, indeed she was so inquisitive and vocal, Robin was left a little nonplussed.

“Forgive me interrupting, Ellie,” he spoke out at last, “but right now I'm feeling as if I'm facing an inquisition.”

Ellie tossed her head back and laughed. “Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition,” she replied, mimicking the Monty Python sketch.

“No, seriously,” he replied, attempting to keep a straight face. “I meant facing an interrogation.”

“Bear with me, please, Robin: there's method in my apparent madness. You see, I'm trying to build up a picture out of all of these dots. I need to know what your strong and weak points are; how best we can capitalize on your strengths and minimize the impact of your weaknesses; and also to get a picture of the best directions you might take in your life here. Unless you give matters some consideration, then you're unlikely to formulate an appropriate intention; and without an intention, you'll be forever blown this way and that at the hands of seemingly random events, perhaps achieving your fate but not your destiny, let alone what treasures lay beyond your destiny.

“You see, there's something you must know. Every item of data in *Game of Aeons* is mined by the system and passed on to official and commercial enterprises working here. They can use this on you, for example to shape your destiny or to sell you things, but you can also use this to your own advantage. Enhancements to factors like IQ, empathy, skills and experience



can be partly bought through A & E, but they can also be earned, and you can to an extent take advantage of certain crudities in the system.

“So if you want to bump up your IQ a little, then you can do that here by engaging in supposedly intelligent, intellectual conversations, and if you want to increase your empathy or emotional intelligence, you can achieve that by engaging in sharing and caring or simply by smiling and saying sweet things when you encounter a mother and baby. The influence of an individual encounter is nominal, but over the course of days, weeks, months and years, these things will have a significant positive – or negative – effect on your metrics or stats.

“And the same goes for practical skills. I know that it is so much easier to tie your virtual shoelaces by clicking on a menu item, rather than struggling to learn to tie the laces yourself, but clicking on a menu item will do little to enhance any factor other than computer skills, whereas each effort you make will, for example, enhance factors such as determination and manual dexterity. And these enhancements in turn will slowly but surely increase your ability to perform, and increase your actual performance in the game, and make you that much more attractive to others here, such as potential employers or partners.”

“Wow, these things make the mind boggle,” he whistled.

“It would be far better if they gently stirred a little life into the heart,” Ellie countered.

“Just like the real world,” the girl continued, “in *Game of Aeons*, tomorrow never happens and life is all too often full of regret over missed opportunities. So the best time to set these balls in motion – the only time in fact – is right here and now. So that, dear friend, is the method in my apparent madness.”

Ellie paused for a few moments while she had a few more sips of her tea, then added: “And not only will these enhancements through conscious work benefit you in *Game of Aeons*, so you will increasingly find that these things will effect you in what we commonly call the real world.

“However – and this is an important corollary – there is also the possibility of the converse happening, for example through habitual or unconscious action. In such cases, these actions will weaken you and aggravate issues and bring about demerit.”

Again Ellie pause to sip her tea and waited for him to empty his mouth and wipe away the whipped cream from his lips with a paper serviette.

“In such matters, Robin, for good or ill, the choice and any merit or blame attached is almost entirely yours,” she said with a certain finality. “The very fact that you emerged in this world in such a destitute and unregenerate condition says more about your actual state in the real world than it does about the undoubted machinations and manipulations that go on in this game.

“You may feel that there are terrible injustices in this game, as there are in the real world, and yet the more awakened to the reality that you become over the years and decades, the more you see a benign and guiding, hidden hand at work in all that we go through and sooner or later become. As the writer and thinker Idries Shah once wrote: No experience is ever wasted and at the end of the day, everything fits into place.”

Ellie reached across the small, round table and touched her hand to his for a few moments. “Please believe me, Robin: this is not a lighthearted game of skittles, and – for you, for me, for the man in the street, in fact for anyone on God's earth – the stakes have never been higher.”

“That sounds rather ominous,” he replied, drawing in a deep breath and blowing it out slowly through pursed lips.

“Yes, it is, Robin. And that is not all there is to tell – far from it – but it is as much as you could handle in your present condition and with your lack of experience, without collapsing in a useless heap or suffering some kind of emotional or mental breakdown.”

“Hey, hey. Now you're scaring me, Ellie.”

Ellie squeezed his hand tightly. “I'm sorry, Robin, that was insensitive of me. Please rest assured that you're in safe hands and that I will do all I can to help you get through this unharmed and intact.

“You know, you're actually luckier than those of high birth or those having fame or fortune, Robin, for they have so very much further to fall; and there are many who will unfortunately have to face the wrath of others whom they passed on the way up, on the way back down.”

Ellie withdrew her hand and rose from the table, taking out

her purse ready to pay the bill. “And now, Robin, if you'll forgive me, time is moving on and I have some 'Real Life' obligations that I must see to. I should be able to get back online on Monday evening, or Tuesday at the latest. So until then, I will wish you all the best and bid you a fond *adieu*.”

“Oh, forgive me,” she added, turning back for a moment. “I'll also give some thought about where you might live, but in the meantime, all I can practically suggest is that you eat all your food before you go to bed; make liberal use of the powder provided for the bed bugs; stuff your wallet down inside your pants; and sleep fully dressed, with your boots on, and with one eye open.”

Ellie couldn't have spelled it out more graphically and clearly than that.

## 7. A good deed for the day

Robin had a few household chores to do and errands to run for his mother after he got up, and that took up the better part of the morning, so it wasn't until early afternoon that he managed to log-into *Game of Aeons*.

As he'd wandered around the city, he'd seen a number of flyers pasted to lamp posts and hung in shop windows, advertizing a tournament. Tomorrow there was to be a mass shoot 'em up in the city centre, and it was open to all comers, including newbies.

Of course he was in no fit state to take part himself, not as yet having mastered hand-eye coordination and having no combat accessories other than his fists and his feet, which were not exactly lethal weapons, but it should make for spectacular viewing, hopefully from a safe distance.

That being the case, Robin had decided to go to work and spend the afternoon sweeping the streets, in one long four hour session, so that he could have the rest of the week free to better explore the city. Fortunately, weather-wise the outlook for the next five days was looking good, though he wasn't as yet sure just how accurate the met office's predictions were. Ellie had told him that as well as general trends and seasonal variations, there were fluctuations and random elements built into the system. They'd even modelled some of the effects of global warming.

This was Robin's first shift working for the council and he had no idea what might lay in store for him.

“Hi there,” he greeted the middle-aged and pleasantly proportioned lady in reception, forcing a smile. She reminded him a little of his grannie, with her blue rinse perm, weak chin, aquiline nose and hawk-like eyes, but she was probably only half Granny's age.

“Yes sir, may I help you?” she enquired, looking up from her paperwork and peering at him over the top of her half moon spectacles.

“I hope so. Mister Carter sent me. I'm due to begin work for you.”

“Is that so? And what is the nature of the work?”

“Street sweeping,” he replied hesitantly.

“That would be a PSCO: a probationary street cleaning operative,” the lady informed him.

Same difference, though he'd been hoping for something a little more flowery.

*Look on the bright side, Robin. You could have been an apprentice street sweeper or an ASS,* the voice chuckled.

Hey, look at me. Am I laughing?

“Well, for now, that is. It's just to tide me over until I find my feet here. I'm actually quite good with a computer, and physics was my best subject at school, but these are hard times and I guess we have to take whatever is on offer.”

“I see,” replied the woman, her terse reply and the emotionless expression on her face indicating that she was not in the least interested, nor impressed.

“Indeed, I'm afraid there there's not much call for rocket scientists in the council,” she added without the flicker of a smile.

“Hey, lighten up, lady, this is only a game,” he retorted, and yet even as he spoke those words, Robin realized that she, too, might merely be playing her part.

“A game, you say?” she queried, looking up sharply. “Well, if that's your attitude, young man, the way out is over there. You know, there are plenty of other candidates who are willing to take the job seriously.”

He hastily backtracked. “No, please, I do need the job.”

“There's a four week probationary period, you understand?”

“Sure.”

The woman turned to her desktop computer, rolled the mouse around and clicked a menu item to bring up the appropriate program, then she went through a series of questions, tapping away at the keyboard as he provided the answers.

“Right then, Mister Hargreaves,” she replied at length, turning back to him. “I see that you've already been allocated work clothes, so what you need to do now is go to the yard, find the foreman's lodge – that's a little wooden hut at the far end of the yard – and report to Mister Entwhistle.

“Your shift will not begin until you arrive at the start of your allotted round, wherever that may be, so it's in your own interests

not to dawdle.”

“Thank you,” he nodded, spinning on his heel and making for the front door.

“Oh, one more thing:” the woman called across the office, just as he was leaving. “Though overtime is not compulsory, your chances of passing the probationary period would be greatly enhanced were you to volunteer. There are plenty of other applicants who do show willing.”

*Of course, you can see what she's saying, if you read between the lines,* the voice advised him.

No comment, came the grim reply.

As chance would have it, the council wanted the streets in the city centre to be given a good sweep ready for tomorrow's shoot 'em up and there were three other newbies already at the hut as Robin arrived, so after being given a cursory briefing by Mister Entwhistle, they set out in close convoy for the city.

He fully expected them to break out into song at any moment. Maybe *It's a Long Way to Tipperary* or a rousing hymn like *Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!*

The foreman went along with them to provide any further instruction that they might need, such as the intricacies of scooping up dog poop, regurgitated takeaways and fiddly items like discarded cigarette stubs, and to generally offer moral support.

One of the first things that Robin noticed that he'd been pretty much oblivious to before now, was all the discarded chewing gum which had been trodden and ground into the pavement. It was more prevalent than shit from the starlings that lined the narrow ledges of the tall buildings. You know, he sometimes wondered if the critters bombed the pavements on purpose and, really, who could blame them? He did make a fumbled attempt to scrape some of the chewing gum off the pavement using his shovel, but Entwhistle shook his head and advised him that the only way to shift the stuff was to bring in teams armed with industrial sprays and that even then they were fighting a losing battle.

“If I 'ad my way,” Entwhistle informed him, “I'd take the little beggars to court and give 'em a hundred hours of community service down on their hands 'n' knees with a scrubbing brush,

cleaning the blessed stuff off the pavements themselves. That'd soon put a stop to their shenanigans.”

If I 'ad my way, I'd bring back National Service, the birch and hanging, he mimicked the man under his breath.

“I don't know what this world is coming to, lad, with all these hoodies hanging around the streets, not to mention the gormless parents what bring 'em up to be so delinquent. I really don't.

“A short, sharp shock's what they need to set 'em back on the straight 'n' narrow, if you ask me. Not that the High and Mighty or the La-di-da are ever going to ask the likes of you or me or take any ruddy notice of what we have to say. But there you go: that's life in Goa.”

“Goa?” Robin queried.

“*Game of Aeons*. That's all this world is: games in ruddy games in ruddy games, with rules that favour the Toffs and the Ne'er-Do-Wells written all the way through life like the words 'Blackpool Rock' in a stick of sickly candy.”

“Oh, right.” He should have guessed.

“Ga-ga, more like, if you ask me. And the likes of us? There's nofink that we can do 'bout it. For all the flowery words posh folk come out with, that's it in a nutshell, lad. Ours not to reason why, ours but to do and die. You know, I sometimes think that we'd have been a whole lot better off if the Germans had won the bloomin' war. You can say what you like: they knew a thing or two about infostructure and national pride and service to your homeland.”

That would be *infrastructure*. Then again, maybe Entwhistle was right the first time? The Nazis had been highly adept at using information technology, such as it was at the time, to spread their seductive and hate-filled propaganda.

Just then, as Robin was struggling to catch a cigarette butt with his long pincers, he heard a high-pitched scream. Turning around sharply, he saw a youth in a hooded top struggling with a young woman to snatch her bag. The youth slapped the woman across the face with the back of his hand, yanked the bag from her hands and made a dash for it.

Without thinking, Robin let go of the handle of his dust cart, snatched up his broom and dashed up the street after the youth. He called out loudly “Stop thief!” several times, hoping that other

passers-by might halt the youth in his tracks or join in the chase, but the people just kept on walking, mostly pretending that they hadn't heard or didn't know what was going on. There was just one old chap a few yards ahead who stuck out his walking stick and momentarily tripped the hoodie, but the youth was soon on his feet and away, now ducking down an alleyway between two of the shops, to make his getaway.

As Robin ran down the alleyway after the hoodie, he saw now that the youth had made a big mistake. A few yards ahead, the alleyway was blocked by a wooden gate. Clearly, he wasn't the brightest star in the galaxy.

The youth did think of leaping up and clambering over the gate, but there were loops of barbed wire along the top of the sturdy framework. Not to be outdone, the youth frantically tried to kick open the gate and shoulder charge it, but the gate stood firm.

Robin drew a deep breath and slowly advanced on the youth. His heart was beating heavily in his chest. It was not so much due to the exertion of the chase, but more to do with the adrenalin that was now pumping through his system having cornered the rat. And it was his not knowing whether the rat would give up without a fuss or turn on him.

“Okay, hand it over.”

The youth stood his ground, but tossed the bag down on the ground between them.

“You'll pay for this,” the youth spat. “I never forget a face.”

Again, without thinking through the consequences, Robin crept closer and momentarily knelt down to pick up the bag whilst keeping a close eye on the youth.

In that brief moment of indiscretion, the youth suddenly dashed toward Robin, bowling him over and knocking the air out of his lungs. Then he ran back down the alley and out onto the high street. For a few moments, Robin lay there fighting to regain his breath and clutching tight hold of the woman's bag. Finally he slowly got up on his feet and staggered back onto the street.

Seeing Robin, Entwhistle came trotting toward him and helped him down the street to where they'd left their dust carts. The young woman was still there, being consoled by an elderly lady, and the old man who'd tried to trip the mugger, presumably



her husband, was by her side. There was a policeman there, too, and he was patiently waiting for the young woman to recover sufficiently to take a statement from her.

“The youth got away,” Robin panted, holding out the bag. The young woman reached out and took it from him, quickly checking inside the bag to make sure the contents were still there.

“Oh thank you so much,” the woman replied, forcing a smile. “You don't know how much this means to me.”

The woman fished in her purse, brought out a ten pound note and thrust it in Robin's direction. In *Game of Aeons*, which still traded in old pounds, shillings and pence, that was a *lot* of money.

Robin was adamant. “No, no. Thank you so much, but really, I couldn't accept that.”

“No, thank *you*, sir. I'm sorry it's not much. You deserve far more.”

“No, really. I couldn't. A good deed is its own reward.”

Entwhistle raised his eyebrows and quickly intervened. “That's a very kind gesture, madam. If the lad here won't accept it, then I'll gladly take it for the Council Workers' Benevolent Fund. Rest assured that the money will go to a good cause.”

The young woman readily parted with the money and Robin didn't argue. It seemed fair enough.

Robin turned to the policeman now. “I expect you'll be wanting a statement, officer?”

The policeman checked his hand-held tablet. “No, that won't be necessary, sir. The crime was caught on CCTV and we've collected all the data we require. Don't worry, the youth won't get far before he's apprehended. Anyhow, thank you for your help. It's much appreciated.”

Robin shrugged. “Okay then. But if you need me, you know where I am. My user name is Robin111.”

“Thank you again, sir.” The policeman made a note of that and turned back to the young woman.

Entwhistle patted Robin on the back as they walked off to retrieve their carts. “Well done, lad. Now, let's be getting back to work or else Bryson, the manager, will be docking our wages for idleness. She's probably already wondering why our carts have been stationary for the past ten minutes. Everything's electronically tagged in this damn place, except black market

goods, thank the Good Lord. But don't worry, I'll put in a good word for you.”

“Thanks.”

Entwhistle slapped him on the back. “And tonight, my friend, I'll take you and one or two of the other lads out to celebrate with our winnings.”

“Winnings?” Robin queried. “But I thought that you told the woman that the money would go to a good cause? The Council Workers' Benevolent Fund, you said.”

Entwhistle laughed out loud. “And so it shall, lad. And so it shall. I can think of no more worthy and benevolent cause. You know, if I'd only thought on, I'd 'ave asked 'er if she couldn't stretch to a twenty.”

Robin was livid, and he had to make a special point of clamping his lips together for fear of saying something uncouth.

“Now let's get back to work before Bryson shoots us.”

Entwhistle pointed across the street. “Over the other side, lad. I see that some maggot has emptied his effing car ashtray out in the gutter. Y'know, if it wasn't for the fact that people like that keep us in paid employment, and that in a sense we are their servants, I'd strangle the bleeders if I caught 'em. And besides: if we don't collect our quota, then Bryson will cut the Christmas bonus. These days, they don't give a bonus out of the goodness of their hearts, you know. Alas, the Age of Chivalry and Compassion is at an end. Welcome to the Age of the Ruthless Profiteer.”

Really, what could one say in the face of such blatant and galling hypocrisy?

## 8. A night out on the town

As soon as the tiring afternoon shift was finished, Robin, Entwhistle and a couple of the other lads from the council yard headed back across the city not far from Newbie Square to eat their fill at a café affectionately known to local workers as *The Greasy Diner*. You could get anything you wanted there, from an all day full English breakfast to bangers, beans and extra large portions of chips – anything at all as long as the cooking involved frying in large dollops of lard; and the coffee there was so thick and strong, you could almost stand your spoon up in it.

“Right then, lads,” Entwhistle announced, standing up as Robin stuffed the last chip in his mouth and dutifully lined up his knife and fork on the large oval plate. “It’s time to hit the town. For our first port of call, I suggest we adjourn to *The Tickled Trout* for a couple of pints to put us in the party spirit.”

As it turned out, *The Tickled Trout* was not quite as quaint and rustic as its name might imply. It was an old-fashioned town pub with a bar for the working class and a plush lounge for the more discerning and socially elevated clientèle, or the posh gits as Entwhistle was wont to call them.

As for the bar, there was no carpet, just bare floorboards sprinkled with sawdust to absorb any spit and used chewing tobacco that failed to hit the bar’s only spittoon. The main thing that the pub had going for it – other than the lively, down to earth and unpretentious conversation, the darts and dominoes and the welcome absence of a jukebox or slot machines – was that, according to Entwhistle, it served the best, most potent and most affordable real ale this side of the river. If you wanted music, then you had to make it yourself, and if you wanted to gamble, then you bet on the darts, dominoes and cards; on whose whippet would win the next big race; or on which would win the dog fight.

*The Tickled Trout* was also a good place to buy snout, he was told: that is, cheap, contraband hand rolling tobacco. Whether these and other goods on offer were illicitly manufactured, smuggled in, or had fallen off the back of a lorry, you didn’t ask,

Entwhistle warned him, looking furtively around the bar to make sure he was not overheard.

“A word to the wise, lad,” Entwhistle continued, breathing in Robin's ear and speaking in hushed tones. “The less you know about the goods or deal with the often unscrupulous and dangerous people who trade in them, the better for all concerned. So, if you're in need of anything like this, you would be wise to use me as a go-between and steer clear of direct involvement.”

*That probably means that Entwhistle takes a cut for acting as a middleman,* the voice advised Robin.

Entwhistle left their table for a few minutes, going to sit with one of the other men in the bar. Shortly after that, both men were apparently struck by an urgent call of nature and headed off to the back yard to use the outside lavatory.

When he returned, Entwhistle bent over Robin and slipped a small package into his jacket pocket. “A little gift for your good work today,” the man whispered. Then he stood up straight. “Right lads, time for another pint, then I suggest we all 'ead for the club to make sure that we get ringside seats.”

Robin pulled out the package and examined it under the table. It was a small pack of rolling tobacco, with a packet of gummed cigarette papers tucked inside.

He looked at Entwhistle as the man returned from the bar with four fresh pints on a battered old enamel tray. “But I really don't see the point of it, Mister Entwhistle.”

Entwhistle stifled a laugh. “You'll see soon enough, lad,” he whispered.

“But I just don't get it. Apart from the fact that cigarettes are bad for your health, what is the point of doing something like smoking in the game when you can't possibly derive any enjoyment from it?”

Entwhistle didn't answer that. He brought out his own tobacco, quickly and expertly rolled a couple of thin cigarettes, then passed his tobacco to the other two men. Sticking one of the roll-ups into his own mouth and lighting it, he passed the remaining roll-up to Robin. Entwhistle waited until Robin took the hint and held out a lighted match as Robin accepted the light and drew his first breath.

Oh, my God! The smoke tasted that acrid, he nearly choked,

and all the others could do was watch with much amusement.

“So, what do you think now?” Entwhistle wanted to know.

“I think it's bloody disgusting,” Robin told him in no uncertain terms.

“Oh, the disgust will soon go away as you get used to them, lad,” Entwhistle assured him. “It's just a bit of a shock to the system at first.”

And then it dawned on Robin. “But I don't get it. Why on earth should the cigarette taste of anything at all?” he wanted to know.

Entwhistle beamed at him. “You enjoyed your meal, didn't you?”

He realized now that he had enjoyed the bangers, beans and chips.

“Yes, now I come to think about it, Mister Entwhistle.”

“And the ale's made you feel quite tipsy and take away some of your inhibitions, 'asn't it lad?”

Again that was so true. It didn't make sense, but it was true enough.

“So why should the cigarettes be any different?”

“But I still don't get it.”

Entwhistle patted him on the back as he took a second drag on the cigarette and involuntarily coughed.

“In a nutshell, lad, it's all to do with expectation and with mind over matter.”

“I see,” Robin nodded.

Entwhistle laughed. “You don't as yet, lad, but you will, soon enough. Until then, I suggest you just think of it as some kind of as yet unexplained magic.”

One of the others, Barry Holdman, spoke up now. “Maybe this will help, lad. It's not just you playing *Game of Aeons* ...”

He paused momentarily to check the foreman's reaction and Entwhistle nodded his head slightly.

“*Game of Aeons* plays with you, through thoughts and feelings. When you drink beer, for instance, the game makes it feel like you're actually getting drunk. It's a truly interactive experience.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Robin. “Now I *do* think that I'm beginning to understand. That's amazing.”

“And,” Barry added. “When you immerse yourself in the game more fully, you'll find that it's ...”

Entwhistle looked up sharply at this and surreptitiously shook his head, but Barry reiterated his point and finished his sentence.

“When you immerse yourself in the game more fully, you'll find that it's every bit as real as what you think of as your everyday waking life.”

“You mean the real world?” Robin queried.

“What we think of, and conceive to be, and perceive as, the real world, lad. There comes a point when you stop thinking of you playing the game, and you simply become a part of – and merge into – and become lost in – the game.”

Entwhistle looked at his watch and stood up abruptly. “Right then, lads. I think it's time we headed for the club if we want to get decent seats.”

“Oh my God ...” A sudden realization hit him like a freight train as he stepped outside the pub into the cool evening air, and Entwhistle and Barry had to catch hold of him under the arms to stop him falling over or collapsing in a heap.

“Now that was a big mistake, Mister Holdman,” the foreman hissed over Robin's shoulder.

“With all due respect, gaffer,” Barry responded, “I firmly believe that people are entitled to know the stark facts before they get too embroiled in the game. They should be told that like life, the game is not all beer and skittles.”

“Too embroiled?” Entwhistle laughed. “Don't make me laugh.”

“Who's laughing, gaffer? This is serious business.”

“Mister Holdman, I'm only laughing because it is so tragic. I mean so tragic that we, too, are up to our necks in the cesspit and as such there ain't nothing that any of us can really do to 'elp. Talk about the blind leading the blind. Now do you see why I laugh? If I didn't laugh, then I would cry my 'eart out.”

“There must be something we can do, gaffer.”

Entwhistle shrugged. “Sure, I'll just phone my good friend Mahatma. No, in all seriousness Mister Hartman, I think that it's a little late for second thoughts at this juncture. Our young friend 'ere has fallen for the lure and swallowed it 'ook, line and ruddy sinker.”

## 9. The club

What happened over the next few minutes was largely a blur to Robin. By that time he'd pretty much forgotten what his sudden realization had been all about, and he put his unsteadiness down to the potent effects of the tobacco and the real ale. Entwhistle suggested that he pace his drinks in the club and maybe intersperse the ale with something non-alcoholic like cola or perhaps drink shandy, a mixture of ale and lemonade in equal measure.

By the time they got to the club, after a long walk, Robin was beginning to perk up again and he was quite looking forward to what the club might have on offer. He'd asked Entwhistle what entertainment there would be in the club, but the foreman had told him that he wouldn't be disappointed and that he'd simply have to wait and see.

As they entered, Robin quickly surveyed the dimly-lit club. Along one side of the large room was a long bar, with a railing in front of it. There were a number of scantily-clad young ladies in stockings, suspenders and high heels, between the rail and the bar, and it turned out that these were waitresses. So rather than go up to the bar oneself to order drinks, you spoke to a waitress and she would act as a go-between. He asked Entwhistle about this and the man informed him that the nominal "waitress service" was a ploy to get around the city's strict licensing laws. Tempted as he was by these beauties, Robin was embarrassed and didn't know where to place his eyes.

Most of the space in the club, including the bar, was on a raised podium that arced around the room, taking up three sides; in the centre there was a dance floor; and at the far end of the club was a small stage, a stand occupied by a DJ, and a hatch through which they served fast food like chicken and chips or bangers, black pudding, mushy peas and mash. There were a number of small tables filling the sticky-carpetted podiums and spread out across the dance floor, too. And again Entwhistle explained that this, too, had been arranged in order that the club could exploit certain loopholes in the licensing laws. Acts could perform on the

stage with impunity that evening, but for arcane reasons known only to the authorities, the patrons themselves were not allowed to dance.

As for the ambience in the club, the music was loud, vying with the excited and raised conversations at the tables; it was pleasantly warm; and there was a thin layer of blue-grey tobacco smoke hanging in the air at about shoulder height. The smoke occasionally wafted around as folk went to and fro, and it stretched across virtually the whole room. There were coloured lights above the dance floor and stage, and these lit up the smoke in bright red, green, blue and yellow and in many secondary hues where the beams from these ever-shifting and twinkling lights met and intermingled. Some of the smoke, too, had a peculiar, sweet smell, and Robin thought, perhaps, that it might be marijuana, though not having smoked the stuff himself, he could not say for sure.

“Ah, the delightful aroma of the Afghan campfire,” Barry observed, sniffing the air. He leant close to Robin and whispered in his ear. “Of course the reason that the Authorities have banned the stuff is not so much the detrimental effect on one's health, however genuine that might be, but rather that those who regularly partake in the illicit herb tend to lose all interest in playing the game by other people's rules. And that is in direct contravention of the Commandments, the first of which is: Thou shalt play the Game by the rules; the second being: Thou shalt not drop out of the Game.

“Having said that, the use of drugs is not an effective means of facilitating real escape. It merely gives that erroneous and illusive impression. Well, illusive with an I and elusive with an E. At best, narcotics do no more than promote *bonhomie* and give you a temporary taste of what freedom might be like; and drugs take you into another sub-level of, or sub-culture in, the same old game. The same old game, but with additional consequences. And at worst, well ... suffice it to say that you really, really do not want to go there. So yes, without the shadow of a doubt: this is a game of consequences; and if you take a wrong turning, sooner or later you might find yourself having to pay a terrible forfeit. And I don't mean having to drop your pants and perform a moonie out of the window in a game of strip poker, either.”



Robin could feel the colour draining from his face as Barry spoke, and he swallowed hard.

“But anyway, Robin,” the man concluded, breaking into a broad smile and clapping him on the back. “The night is still young, so enjoy yourself while you can. Come tomorrow, most likely, you'll have forgotten we ever had this conversation. As wiser men have rightly pointed out, the secret protects itself.”

Harold, the other member of their party went off to the bar at this point. He'd hardly spoken all evening, though Entwhistle had confided in Robin that this wasn't some kind of anti-social trait. Apparently, Harold was simply the shy and bashful type who had to get a few beers down his gullet before he overcame his inhibitions and finally metamorphosed into a party animal, just as Bruce Banner became the Hulk. Anyhow, while Harold was away at the bar, Entwhistle found a small table not far from the stage and had them park their behinds so that they wouldn't lose their seats.

Once the majority of the crowd had gathered, a compère announced the first act, a local pop band. They were good enough for the pubs and clubs, really, though most of their songs were covers rather than original songwriting and the bassist appeared to be having occasional problems with both his tuning and his timing.

However, you could tell that the audience were growing impatient to see the main acts and after enduring fifteen minutes of rude and vulgar heckling, the lead singer decided she'd had enough and the band decided to hastily pack up their equipment and leave the stage.

As Robin scanned the hall, he noticed that the audience were all men, with just a couple of exceptions in the crowd, the waitresses and one of the staff behind the bar. He mentioned this to Entwhistle but the foreman merely raised their eyebrows and replied: “Well, I never did.”

While the band cleared the stage, two other stage hands wheeled a tall stand onto the stage, the sort of brightly-coloured, curtained booth you'd see at the seaside. It was indeed a *Punch and Judy* show, though a rather more racy rendition, and it certainly wasn't a truncheon that the Constable had in his hand, but what Entwhistle indelicately referred to as a “mutton dagger”.

“*That's* the way to do it!” Punch would call out in his characteristically squeaky voice, and poor old Judy would get yet another jolly good rogering from one or other of the characters. And some of them really weren't choosy at all, if you get my drift.

It wasn't what you'd exactly call good, clean fun – least of all family entertainment – but this certainly kept the punters happy while the stage was cleared. Well, that probably answered his question about the lack of women in the audience.

That was the first thing he noticed and it came as little more than a surprise, but the second thing he noticed came as a great shock and he quickly turned away. Over to the right were three larger tables, on a slightly raised podium, and who should be seated at one of the tables but the spitting image of the youth that he'd chased up town earlier that day. Now that was bad enough. What really worried him was that at the head of the same table sat Darius, the troll with friends in high places that Ellie had warned him about. Fortunately they didn't appear to have seen Robin and, doubly fortunate for him, Robin was sitting with his back to the podium.

“What's up, lad?” asked Barry, noting his discomfort. “You look like you've seen a ghost.”

He'd much rather that he had merely seen a ghost.

Robin leant into the table so that he didn't have to speak out loud. “Don't look now,” he warned, “but I swear that the guy on the podium in the black and white hoodie is the mugger I chased after earlier today. Just before he decked me and ran off again, he told me 'You'll pay for this. I never forget a face.' Hence I'm hoping that he doesn't see me.”

Of course, what do people do when you warn them not to look? Exactly. Like moths attracted by the light of a candle, they just can't help themselves.

“I see,” nodded Barry, looking away sharply. “Well he won't try anything in here: the bouncers are built like brick shithouses or pocket battleships and they won't stand for any nonsense.”

Entwhistle stole a furtive glance. “Yes, that's the youth, and I don't like the company he keeps, either.”

“Darius, you mean?”

“The one and only. I take it you've had a brush with him, too, then?”

“You could say. It was my first day picking up litter on Newbie Square. He walked straight through me, sending me flying, and told me that he didn't like filthy, stinking vagrants in his neighbourhood.”

“Yes, that’s him all over,” Entwistle concurred. “He has a reputation for being a troll, and he has his fat fingers in many pies.”

“Up to no good, you mean?” Barry queried.

Robin nodded. “A girlfriend warned me that he has a lot of friends in high places who might cause grief, and to steer well clear.”

“Sound advice,” Entwistle agreed. “But what was that you said about a girlfriend? That's the first I've heard. Bit of a goer, is she?”

“Bit of a goer? That's not very politically correct, gaffer,” Barry piped up, echoing Robin's own thoughts.

“Hark at you!” Entwistle laughed out loud. “If any of us were bothered about political correctness, then we wouldn't be sitting 'ere right now in this club, would we?”

“When I said girlfriend, one word, I really meant friendly girl, two words,” Robin explained. “We're just friends, that's all.”

“Well, you know what they say: if you can't be good, be careful ...” Entwistle advised.

“And if you can't be careful, buy a pram,” Barry laughed.

Robin could feel his face abruptly flush with embarrassment. At least that's what he thought it was.

“Don't look now,” Barry whispered, “but I think that youth has just clocked you.”

“Clocked me?” Robin queried.

“He's spotted you, and he's having a word with that thug, Darius.”

Robin's ears were literally burning by now, and he had an awful leaden feeling in his legs and his guts.

“This is not looking good,” Barry whispered and Robin could see now that he, too, had gone as white as a sheet.

“What's up, Barry?” Robin wanted to know.

“Darius was just using sign language.”

“And?”

“And he pointed at you, then drew the blade of his hand

across his throat. That's not a sign of endearment.”

“You're kidding me,” Robin spluttered over a sip of beer. Of course he knew that Barry would never joke about such a thing.

Entwhistle was unmoved. “Don't let them get to you, lad. The troll's probably just showing bravado. Sit back, relax and enjoy the show. The next turn should be on in a minute. Trust me: nobody's going to do anything until the curtain goes down at the end of the night.”

That was easy for him to say.

When the seedy music began to play on some old tape machine that wasn't quite running at an even speed, and the lady came on stage in a long silk gown, elbow-length black gloves, black stockings and high heels, Robin suddenly realized why all the men in the club suddenly became so vocal and why virtually all the people in the audience were men.

So this was the worthy cause that Entwhistle had in mind when he'd taken the young woman's money: a striptease show.

Politically incorrect or not, there was no doubting the fact that the woman was a turn on as she peeled off her clothing one item at a time. It wasn't so much what you saw as how she tantalized you with the prospect of what lay beyond. The black stockings and the interplay of the stockings and the flesh beyond were actually sexier than the pale and slightly flabby flesh that lay beneath. Even the fact that the dancer was untouchable and the minor torment of her being inaccessible heightened one's response.

Just then, however, Robin was jolted back to reality. Sensing that he was being watched, he turned toward the podium and saw that the youth was not watching the show but had his eyes fixed on him. Seeing that he'd been spotted, the youth clasped one hand to his throat, tilted his head to one side and stuck his tongue out, in a grotesque mime of a hanging.

“I'm sorry, I have to go,” Robin hissed, catching Entwhistle's attention.

“Sit down, lad, and listen carefully,” Entwhistle requested, grasping tight hold of his arm before he could rise from his seat. “I just caught sight of the youth's gestures and I can see that you're deeply worried. Wait until the intermission and head for the loos. They're over there on the left, away from trouble.”

“Okay. Then what? I mean, he's going to follow me, right? Maybe Darius, too?”

“Darius won't want to get his own hands dirty, lad. He'll probably send a couple of his goons instead.”

“Oh, that's reassuring.”

“Once you're out of sight, you need to teleport out of here. Your best bet is to hit Control H on your keyboard and that will take you straight home. Or Control X to log you out and exit the game. You'll be gone before they get across the hall, and I'll try to hold 'em up to give you a chance to get away.”

Robin thought fast. “I don't know if I *can* hit those keys,” he croaked. “I feel so detached from my player. It's like he's in another world.”

Barry and Entwistle exchanged worried glances.

“Well, if that fails, then all I can suggest is that you hoof it. It's possible that the adrenalin rush might wake you up.

“Left past the loos is a set of crash doors. Push the bar to release the lock on the doors and hoof it. Don't worry: they're not wired to an alarm or anything.

“Just run and keep on running until you get back to Newbie Square. Near the centre of the square, not far from the fountain, you'll find an obelisk and on each of the four sides, there's a brass plaque about chest height from the ground. It doesn't matter which side you pick. Just go for the one nearest to-hand. On the brass plaque, you'll see the engraving of a hand, and two buttons. Place your right hand on the appropriate symbol and hit one of the buttons. The green button with a 'H' on it will take you to your home – that is, assuming that you changed your home from Newbie Square to some other location. The red button with an 'X' on it will log you out and exit the game. Take my advice: the state you're in, you probably need to spend some time out of the game, so hit the big red button.

“Even if your player can't be roused, that will take you back to real life. You may find that you've fallen asleep at your desk and you may wake up straight away or in a few hours time, but that's nothing to worry about. If you have fallen asleep, you'll wake up when you're good and ready or when someone like your mother calls out your name.”

“Her face is a bit too chubby for my liking,” Harold piped up,

breaking the intervening silence and abruptly changing the subject. He seemed to be in his own little world and didn't seem to have taken in Robin's predicament.

Entwhistle disagreed. "You don't worry about the mantelpiece when you're stoking the fire."

Then Entwhistle turned back to Robin, noting the look of disbelief and disdain on his face. "Don't worry about old Harold here: he's away with the fairies."

"One can short of a six pack, if you ask me," Robin mumbled under his breath.

"None of us can really talk," Barry interjected. "If the truth be told, at times we're all just one wave short of a shipwreck. The only difference is that some of us are sometimes aware of this, and sometimes we're blissfully unaware and asleep to it. There are only a very, very few who are able to stay awake 24/7. In fact, I've been here over twenty five years now, and I've yet to meet a single one of the so-called Elect. But then again, that might just be because I'm too unregenerate to recognize them in our midst."

"Are you into mysticism, then, Barry?" Robin wanted to know. He'd read a bit about such things, though he knew very little.

Barry shook his head and whispered in his ear. "No, I've spent some time in the old-boy's network."

"Come again?"

"They're the ones with the funny handshakes, to you. The Oddfellows, to be precise. We date back to before the French Revolution, when we were forced underground. Long before the establishment of the welfare state. Hence the secrecy and the philanthropy."

"Ah, I see."

"You should look us up on Wikipedia, sometime. Maybe become involved. It would do you good."

"Another time, perhaps?"

"Of course. There's no rush, nor obligation. Anyway, Robin: best get ready to make your move."

The artiste was about done by now, having removed most of her clothes. She'd turned away from the audience now and bent down, pretending to pick up some discarded item, and the way she waggled her bottom suggestively left little to the imagination.

Robin just hoped that she wasn't going to leave the stage and begin to wander through the audience. Being so close to the stage, their table had to be a prime target, which is possibly why Entwhistle had picked it in the first place. Frightened enough already, the last thing he needed right now was the embarrassment of the woman rubbing her breasts in his face or straddling his lap.

Robin sat on the edge of the seat, biting his nails and anxiously waiting for the act to reach its climactic conclusion, and as soon as it did and everyone was up on their feet demanding to see more naked flesh, he made his move.

“Good luck, lad,” Entwhistle called after him, and the man got ready to obstruct anyone who followed Robin out of the hall.

## 10. The chase

As soon as Robin reached the corridor he paused for a moment, in the vain hope that back home, his player would come to his senses and teleport him to safety. Or maybe his player, too, was in his own little world thinking: “Hey like wow, man, this is an awesome game!” That it was he who was awake now and the player who was in the Land of Nod? What was it that the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tse had once observed when he awoke?

*“Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man,”* the inner voice reminded him.

Just so.

Maybe like the never-ending stories within stories of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, life is dream within dream all the way through?

*You mean it's turtles all the way down? Hey, haven't you spooked yourself enough, already?*

Robin was not altogether surprised when the awakening did not happen. However it nevertheless come as a shock, so he had no sane option but to make a frantic dash for it. He came to the crash doors, to find to his horror that the doors were securely padlocked, in contravention of safety regulations. The padlock should have been removed when the doors of the club opened earlier that evening so that the premises could be speedily evacuated in the event of fire or to facilitate the exit of patrons at the end of the evening.

Robin glanced around and caught sight of an illuminated sign at the very end of the corridor, a bright green arrow clearly labelled “Way out”, and that's where he headed, as fast as his legs would carry him. Behind him he could hear raised voices and the soft thud of several feet on thick carpet, but he dare not look back.

Robin slowed momentarily as he left the corridor and crossed the foyer to the main entrance, not wanting to alarm or aggravate the door staff, but as soon as he was outside, after briefly pointing himself in the right direction back into the city, he broke into a



fast trot down the road.

Only then, as he found himself staggering along, did Robin realize just how drunk he was. At one point he all but did a nose dive and hit concrete.

Moments later, however, a figure appeared out of nowhere and loomed large in front of him. He instantly recognized Darius and a great wave of adrenalin flooded his system, heightening his fear. He tried to run around the stocky man, but the man teleported again, blocking his path, and there was nothing he could do to get away. The others, too, led by the hooded youth, had run up behind him now, preventing him from escaping back toward the club to summon help.

“I thought I recognized you from Newbie Square. And still only one step up from a vagrant, I see, Filth,” Darius spat, pushing his face up close to Robin'ss. The man's eyes were bulging with anger and he looked fit to bust a blood vessel.

Darius caught him by the arm now and dragged him round to face the hooded youth. “So, what would you like me to do with him, Ratty?”

“Give 'im a good kicking, Darius. And don't call me that. You know I don't like it. My name's Ratcliffe.”

“Listen, you impertinent imp, I'm doing you a big favour here, so if I want to call you Ratty, then I shall call you Ratty. Is that clear, Ratty?”

The youth stood there with his fists clenched, muttering under his breath.

“Is that clear, Ratty? Unless you'd like to take on this Filth here yourself.”

“No. I mean yes Darius, it's clear,” the youth was at length forced to concede.

Darius caught hold of Robin around the neck now and used his free hand to twist Robin's arm behind his back. Robin grimaced with the pain, hoping that the hulk wouldn't twist his arm any further or it might pop out of his shoulder socket. “I gather you gave my friend Ratty a hard time today, Filth.”

Robin gritted his teeth and made no reply.

“I said, I gather you gave my friend Ratty a hard time today, Filth.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Yes what?”

The man twisted Robin's arm still further until the pain was unbearable and he was having to fight back the tears.

“Yes, Darius.”

“Yes, Mister Darius to you.”

“Yes, Mister Darius. I'm sorry. It won't happen again.”

Darius let go of Robin and Robin wiped his tears away.

“You're damn right it won't happen again, Filth. What are you?”

“Filth,” he muttered.

“Filth what?”

“I'm Filth, Mister Darius.”

“Too damn right, you are. But I'm not at all convinced that you'll stay away from us and not meddle in our affairs. What do you think, Ratty?”

The youth nodded vigorously. “I think he may forget, once you let him go, Darius.”

“Then we shall have to give him something to remember us by,” the hulk decided. He pushed Robin toward the youth and the other two clansmen and they caught hold of Robin and held him there. Darius approached him slowly, rolling up his shirt sleeves as he came. Then, quite without warning, the thug began to rain a series of blows on Robin, pummeling him in the stomach to make him convulse and duck down in pain, then aiming a powerful blow to the face as the others pulled him back upright.

“Okay, Darius. I think he's got the message now,” the hoodie spoke up. He maybe wasn't quite as tough as he made out, and there was an anxious quiver in his voice.

“I'm not finished with him yet. He still needs a good kicking,” the thug retorted forcefully, aiming several more punches at Robin's stomach. Robin was suffering from shock by now. His head was swimming and he was on the brink of passing out.

“Darius, that's enough,” one of the others agreed. “If you're done for GBH, the beak could send you down. We could all go down for aiding and abetting, and that would be bad news for the clan. Leave him: he's not worth it.”

“Wha-what's GBH, Len?” the hoodie stammered. The violence of the assault had clearly rattled his cage.

“Grievous bodily harm, Ratty,” the other hired hand explained. “There's assault, then actual bodily harm, which would probably just get you a slap on the wrist. Then there's grievous bodily harm. If they catch you for that, you're in a shit load of trouble.

“And as for murder, it's *sayonara*, baby. You do know they still have the death penalty?”

“I'm out of here,” the youth replied, letting go of his hold on Robin, and in an instant he was gone.

“Lily-livered little runt,” Darius spat.

“Darius, for God's sake. Enough already.”

“Okay, maybe he's had enough for now. We can always come back and finish him off another day,” Darius decided at length. “Jeez, would you look at that. He's gone and sprayed his filthy blood all over my clean white shirt.”

With that, the others let go of Robin's arms, letting him slump to the ground, and in that instant, Robin awoke with a start and yelled out involuntarily.

For a moment, Robin was totally disorientated, and then he realized that he must have fallen asleep at his desk. His hand still shaking from the shock of the beating he had received, he held down the Control key and repeatedly stabbed at the 'X', then he sank back in his chair and waited breathlessly as the system mercifully logged him out of the game and the desktop came back into view.

Finally, he clicked on the Start button, brought up the Windows menu and clicked on Shut down. After whirring away for a few seconds and clearing the icons from his desktop, the machine shut down and the screen blanked.

Only then did Robin realize that he still felt drunk and that his stomach and jaw were hurting. Getting up from his chair, he staggered across to the dressing table to check himself out in the mirror, and he was shocked not only to find that he had double vision, but also that his bottom lip was cut and was still bleeding. If he had a fat lip in the morning, that would take some explaining to his parents. Still, it could have been worse. He might have been hospitalized.

## 11. The rose garden

Robin didn't get out of bed that morning until his parents had gone to work, and so he was late logging-into *Game of Aeons*. Fortunately his lip had healed, but it was still bruised and swollen and could not be wished or explained away. His abdomen, where Darius had landed a few mean punches, was also causing him some pain and he was feeling distinctly hung over, but at least he could hide these things.

By the time he teleported to the Corner Café, he found Ellie already there and apparently waiting for him. He realized then that he'd found a good friend and that he was growing quite attached to and fond of her.

“What on earth has happened to you?” were Ellie's first words to him, almost before he'd fully landed. “You look like you've been in the wars.”

“Hi to you, too, Ellie dear,” he responded, forcing a smile.

“Anyhow, hi back to you,” she replied, coming to examine him more closely. “So what's with the fat lip?”

“Ah. I was vainly hoping that you wouldn't notice. My lip's so swollen that I had to wait until my parents had gone off to work before I dare venture downstairs.”

Ellie stood back and looked him up and down.

“Actually, you needn't have worried. You and I will see the bumps and bruises at a psychic level, but your parents would most likely be oblivious to them.”

“Ah, that's a relief.” He hastily sought to change the subject. “Do you fancy a stroll somewhere? I know of a great pub. There's a guy who comes round selling little trays of seafood, like pickled mussels, from a hand basket.”

“Sure,” she retorted, but it did not signal agreement, it sounded more like a challenge. “They allow these hawkers to go round the pubs because all the salt in the seafood makes you drink more.”

He shrugged. “I guess there's a reason for everything. All I know is that they taste good.”

“Anyhow, not so fast, buster. Nor has it escaped my eagle

eye that you look like shit warmed up. Of course, you've already unwittingly given me a big clue – not least by the nauseating stench of stale tobacco on your clothes – but I want to know in your own words what on earth you've been up to, Robin.”

Robin swallowed hard. He absentmindedly fumbled in his jacket pocket, produced a box of matches and a cigarette that Entwistle had rolled for him at the club, lit up and took a few puffs. He grimaced at the noxious smoke and coughed a little, but as the foreman had assured him, it was an acquired taste and it wasn't half bad.

“And since when did you smoke tobacco, for f---'s sake?”

Ellie moved close to him and gave him a good sniffing. “As I said, your clothes reek of stale tobacco *and* that's alcohol on your breath.”

“And, and, and ...” Robin held his hands up. “Hey, one thing at a time, sister. One thing at a time.”

Robin took another couple of drags on the bedraggled roll-up, then he had a coughing fit.

Ellie snatched the cigarette from his fingers, tossed it on the pavement and ground it under her foot.

“Hey, missie,” Robin chided her, picking up the cigarette butt and taking it to a nearby rubbish bin. “I work long and hard cleaning up after the likes of you, I'll have you know.”

“Ah, well at least you haven't lost all your good sense,” she was forced to concede. “Anyhow, let's park our butts on that bench over there for a minute or two. I think you'd better tell me the whole story, and don't skimp on the detail. You never know what might prove significant.”

So Robin ran through the events of the previous day and Ellie was tickled pink when he recounted his tale of bravado, chasing after the mugger.

“Okay, you did a good job. That's worth a few brownie points in my book,” she grinned appreciatively.

Then she wiped her hand down over her face, taking her smile with it. “But that's not all, is it? So carry on and tell me the whole story.”

Gosh, she was running hot and cold that day.

When he told her about the pub, she began to shake her head and as for the club and the ... um ... exotic dancers, she clapped

her hand to her head and let out a long, deep sigh.

“Robin, please tell me it doesn't get any worse than that.”

“Whoops,” he replied, a look of anxiety and half-feigned trepidation etched across his features. “Ellie, I wish I could.”

And when the story was finally told, Ellie nodded to signal her understanding. “Darius again. Yes, that figures.”

“So what do you think?” He had to know, though he didn't want to know, for he was quite scared of Ellie's reaction to the events of the previous day.

“Well.” Again, Ellie sighed, and she seemed to be lost in thought for a few moments whilst she decided on the right words, or on a few choice words.

“We have to talk, Robin.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “But we are talking.”

Ellie rose to her feet and held her arm out to pull Robin up. “I have to tell you a few truths about life here in *Game of Aeons*, and then the folly of your behaviour will become a little clearer to you, at least for a time until you again fall asleep and forget my words,” she replied at length. “But not here.”

“Why not?”

Ellie took hold of his arm and led him off down the lane. “Because it's not safe here.”

He frowned. “How do you mean?”

“I mean walls have ears, Robin.”

Robin shook his head. “Aren't you a little paranoid?”

Ellie remained silent for a time as she guided him across a main road, then she stopped and peered into his eyes. “You don't get it, do you? You really haven't got a clue. As the wise hippie saying has it: 'Just because you're paranoid, this doesn't mean that they're not out to get you,’” she finally replied. Then she brought out her smart phone and spent a few moments checking it out and tapping away at the on-screen keypad. He tried to get a glimpse of what she was up to, but she turned away, then pocketed her phone.

“Right, that's settled. Come with me. I'll take you to a lovely spot away from prying ears and eyes where we can talk freely.”

“I'd rather go for a pint. I found a great little pub on Merchant's Row, *The Tickled Trout*. Spit and sawdust and earthy conversation, but they serve a wicked pint.”

“That den of iniquity, Robin? You have to be joking, right? Did you learn nothing last night?”

“No, I'm being serious.”

“Robin, I can see you've been mixing with the wrong sort of people, and it's high time you learnt a few truths about life here in *Game of Aeons*.

“What was it your friend Harry said?”

“Barry,” he corrected.

“Harry, Barry, whoever. You told me he advised you that 'like life, the game is not all beer and skittles'. Right?”

Robin scratched his head and racked his brains. “You know, I'm not sure now. Did he say that? I really can't quite remember now.”

Ellie sighed again. “Oh, Robin, what are we going to do with you? That is precisely how it begins.”

“How do you mean?”

“Do you remember the tale of Pinocchio?”

“A little.”

“Well, he falls in with the wrong set of people and starts smoking and drinking.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“And he doesn't notice at first, but bit by bit he begins to grow long ears and a tail and finally he's changed into a braying donkey.”

“Yes, I remember now.”

“It's a metaphor, Brian. You see, that is what may well become of your own life if you carry on down that road much further. As your friend said, in a lucid or unguarded moment: like life, the game is not all beer and skittles. Occasionally people say these things with conscious knowing, but more often than not what they say is unconscious, and they quickly forget that they've even said or heard such things, let alone understand the true significance of the words.

“You say that you remember now, Robin, but you don't really. Slowly but surely, you're slipping away and forgetting, and what you must do – above all else – is remember your real self.

“But anyway, we'll talk more about this later. As I said, it's not safe to speak of such matters here.”

They walked down the road some way, then turned off down

a narrow, rutted lane, following that until the lane gave way to a narrow dirt path. On they went, leaving the houses behind and crossing a stretch of grassy common. Ahead of them now, at the far end of the common, was a long, high redbrick wall and the path continued on for some way beside this wall.

Finally, just as they were passing an unmarked green door set into the wall, Ellie stopped. Then, looking furtively around, she opened the door, thrust him in through the archway, entered herself, and hastily shut the door behind her.

What Robin saw greatly exceeded his expectations, for as they entered the door, he found himself standing in an expansive garden. To his right was a long wooden fence where a number of animals such as llamas were wandering about freely, and he and Ellie spent some time making their acquaintance before venturing further into the garden. Ahead of them was a tree with a children's swing hanging from one of its stout branches, and beyond that was a partly paved, grassy area where round, white tables had been set out.

Ellie took his hand and guided him along the paved path toward an open-fronted summer house made of wood and painted white. There was a long counter inside with a glass front and an impressive, shiny black granite top.

A pleasantly curvaceous lady in a long floral dress and crisp, white pinafore came forward as she saw them enter the summer house.

“Hello there Ellie, my dear,” the lady greeted them with a smile. “And hello, sir. I see you've brought a young man with you today.”

“Hi there. Gwen, this is Robin. He's a new arrival here whom I've taken under my wing. Robin, meet Gwendolyn. She brews the finest tea and bakes the best cakes in the city.”

“Hi,” he beamed back at the lady. Her pleasant disposition appeared to be infectious.

“Now, what can I get you, my lovelies?”

“I'd rather have a coffee,” he whispered in Ellie's ear.

Ellie ignored him. “Two large teas and a couple of your buttered scones will do nicely, thank you, Gwen.”

He was expecting the tea to be served from a huge urn, but it came in its own brown teapot and rather than mugs, the lady



presented them with two oversized porcelain cups with dinky little sugar spoons.

When they'd been served, Ellie led the way, tray in hand, to one of the nearby tables and they began to chat again while she let the tea brew.

“Back to business,” Ellie announced in earnest as she poured out the tea. “Your friend Barry told you that like life, the game is not all beer and skittles, and I reminded you of the cautionary tale of Pinocchio. With me, so far?”

“I think so,” he nodded, helping himself to the sugar.

Ellie coughed. “In polite company, young man, it's considered good manners to first pass the sugar bowl to any ladies who may be present.”

He could feel his face blushing. “Sorry,” he said, hastily pushing the bowl in Ellie's direction and waiting patiently for her to pass it back.

“And as I said earlier,” Ellie continued, “it's actually dangerous to speak of certain matters about the true nature of the game.”

“Why's that?”

“Because the Powers That Be largely oppose such views, holding them to be nonsense at best or heresy at worst. And many of them have a vested interest or derive enjoyment from the subjugation of the people here.”

“Subjugation?” he queried.

“Well, I'll tell you this once, Robin, but for your own good it would be better to cultivate the habit of looking up words that you don't know, in a dictionary. And eventually there will come a point when you no longer have to look up the meaning of most words.”

“Ooh,” he replied, feigning indignity “Well, that's me told.”

“Robin, if you can't see the inherent value in such a pursuit, then at least consider the possibility that it will help to enhance your metrics.”

“Okay, point taken,” he conceded.

Ellie raised her eyebrows. “It's not about scoring points, Robin, it's about self-development. We're practising cooperation here, not competing.

“So, back to your recent behaviour. As Buddha once said:

'We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think. When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves.'

“And it's not only our own self that is shaped by thoughts – for good or for ill. Our whole world is similarly shaped. Thus, an angry man will find himself in an angry world, and a swindler will find himself in a world of thieves whom he dare not trust. Like attracts and mirrors like, Robin.

“And the world is also shaped by our wishes, by our desires, again for good or ill. So be careful what you wish for.”

Ellie paused for a few moments to take a bite or two from her scone and to wash it down with tea. There was a wasp hovering around and pestering her, too, and it took some time to shoo it away. Not being at all fond of aggressive wasps, having been once stung as a child, he was grateful to leave that valorous task to her.

“Oh damn it,” Ellie muttered peering up at the sky when the wasp had gone on its way. “There are clouds rolling over now. I do hope it's not going to be another overcast day.”

She clapped her hands together briskly, breaking their momentary reverie.

“Anyhow, back to our conversation before I lose my thread. This law of attraction applies not only in the real world but also here in *Game of Aeons*,” Ellie continued. “As I said when we first met, though you've perhaps already forgotten: every item of data in *Game of Aeons* is mined by the system and passed on to official and commercial enterprises working here, and they will use this to their own advantage.

“I also said earlier that walls have ears. What I meant is that everything we do here is monitored by the moderators, the spooks and the enforcers, and there are certain things that ring alarm bells in the corridors of power.”

Robin thought about that for a moment. “Then isn't it dangerous talking about this kind of thing here?” he queried.

“That's perceptive, Robin,” she nodded in appreciation. “But we're quite safe here.”

“How's that?”

“If I told you that,” Ellie replied with a deadpan expression on her face, “I would have to kill you.”

“No, seriously,” he laughed when he caught the joke.

“I'm sorry, I'm not at liberty to tell you that right now, so simply take my word for it and rest assured that we are safe here.”

He frowned. “But why not just tell me, then? Don't you trust me?”

Ellie took a sip of her tea, returned her cup to the saucer and smiled benignly. “Do you trust yourself after last night and after what I've told you thus far? I mean, let's say that Darius were to twist your arm again. Can you tell me, in all honesty, that you wouldn't blab about any secrets?”

He cast his eyes down. “No, you're quite right.”

Ellie reached across the table and gently stroked his hand. “Please don't take this personally, Robin. I'm acting in your best interests, believe me. Again, this is a matter of self-development, and you're still a fledgling. If it's any consolation to you, there will hopefully come a time when I *will* be able to confide in you.”

“I see.”

Ellie smiled. “You don't really see yet, but you will, sweetie. You will.”

A sudden thought occurred to Robin: “Isn't it said that the secret protects itself?”

Ellie looked up sharply. “Well, that certainly came out of the blue. Where did you hear that?”

He shrugged. “I suddenly remembered my father saying it to my mother one day, when I was knee high to a grasshopper. And I seem to recall Barry saying something along similar lines last night, though the details are hazy.”

“Really? That is interesting and significant.”

“Now I think about it, though, Ellie, I don't really know what it means.”

“The adage only applies to certain truths, in certain circumstances, Robin. Don't worry, you'll understand when you're further down the path. And until then, we'll have to be careful. 'Trust in God and tie your camel', as the Sufi mystics say.”

Then Ellie let out a deep sigh.

“Why the sigh and the long face?” he enquired.

“Oh, because sadly, Robin, I'll have to tell you things that you don't really want to hear but need to hear.”

“About me, you mean?”

“No, no. As I said, try not to take this personally. I simply

mean things about the dire predicament that we are all in. But don't worry, we'll take this gently, one tentative step at a time.”

“Now you're scaring me,” he said, drawing in his breath sharply and reaching out for Ellie's hand. Again, he was reminded of things that Barry had mentioned the previous night, but already it all seemed so vague and distant.

Ellie just smiled, polished off the last of her buttered scone and took another sip of her tea. “Fancy another?” she enquired, waving her cup in the air.

He nodded solemnly.

“And another scone? Or what about some Black Forest gâteau? Can I tempt you? Go on, be a devil.”

“Sure, why not?”

They left the garden café some thirty or forty minutes later, after she'd had a quick natter with Gwen, by which time the sun had once again come out from behind the clouds.

Since it was a pleasant day, they then headed into the city to look around some of the shops. As they passed a jewellery shop, Ellie spent a few moments peering at the display in the window before moving on, then stopped in her tracks, took Robin by the arm and went back to again check out the display.

He was quite baffled, of course, but then he'd found that where the fair sex was concerned, this was often the case. And no doubt the converse applied.

“Follow me,” Ellie requested, and she led him inside the shop and approached the counter.

“Hello there, may I help you, Madam?” the middle-aged lady asked, putting down her knitting and rising to her feet.

Ellie smiled at her. “Yes, I hope so. I noticed that you have a friendship ring in the window. The squiggly white and yellow gold one with two interlocking parts. I wondered if it might fit my friend and I?”

“If you'll just excuse me for a moment, Madam, I'll have a look,” the lady replied. She rummaged around in the drawers under the counter and produced a padded back velvet tray full of rings.

“As you can see, we have the ring in various sizes, and we sell them in pairs, one in white gold and the other in yellow, but you're free to choose whichever pair fits you. Whatever size you

pick, the rings are cleverly designed to interlock. Do you know the sizes you're looking for?"

Ellie got the lady to check with a set of ring gauges and after carrying out the necessities, she and Robin left the shop and emerged back into the glorious sunshine. Ellie found a bench nearby and they sat down.

"Hold out your right hand," Ellie requested, and she gently eased his ring onto his finger and past his knuckle.

"So far, so good," the girl enthused, handing him the other ring. "Now it's your turn."

Taking her delicate hand in his own, he slipped her ring on, and they spent some time admiring the way the rings gleamed in the sun. Ellie gently touched her ring to his. "There we are then, Robin. Now we're friends for life."

He nearly said "forever", but he was feeling a little bashful as it was. "Thank you, Ellie, that's a deeply touching thought," he replied instead, reaching over and planting a kiss on her cheek.

## 12. Technical impediments

It had been a couple of weeks since his unfortunate encounter with Darius and his thugs, and Robin was feeling the strain. Sweeping the streets to earn his keep and keep the metaphorical wolves from his door was bad enough, as he felt so self-conscious doing this in public. It was a regular reminder of his low social status and it was demeaning.

*So, you think that these things are beneath you? Or that you're above such things?* his inner voice asked in challenge.

This remark stung him, but he pretended that he hadn't heard. That's really not what he meant at all.

Of course some people, especially the shopkeepers and the elderly appeared to be quite sympathetic to him and friendly, but there were always some who gave him filthy looks or went out of their way to avoid him.

*That's their problem, not yours,* the voice in turn consoled him.

It's all very well you saying that, he countered, but I'm the one going through this, and these people *make* it my problem.

*They can hurt you only to the extent that you take these things on board and accept them for yourself,* the voice insisted, adding: *Unless there is any truth in what they say or do.*

But what made matters worse was the thought that one of these days he would bump into Darius and his pals again. This might be sooner, it might be later, but either way, it was inevitable.

“That really worries me,” he told Ellie the next time he saw her. “Of course, the more I worry, the more self-conscious I become, and the more self-conscious I become, the more I worry.”

“I understand. It's a vicious circle,” Ellie nodded.

“Sure, I know that Ellie. They do say that knowing about a fault is half the battle – like knowing and admitting that you have a problem with alcohol. But in this case, knowing appears to be one thing and actually doing something about it, is quite another.”

Ellie thought about that. “No, I think you were right the first

time, Robin. Firstly, you know that you have a problem with self-consciousness, a lack of self-confidence and an inability to handle stress. And secondly you've confided in me and admitted that you need help. As you rightly say, that really is half the battle."

"So, what now? Should I seek psychiatric help? Is that what you think?" he wanted to know, growing a little flustered. "Lord knows, I've only just managed to scrape together sufficient money to buy a decent set of clothes, but I couldn't afford the fees for psychiatry or therapy."

"Who said anything about psychiatry, Robin? Or about fees, for that matter. That's just you worrying unnecessarily and counter-productively about something that probably won't happen."

"So, what do you suggest, Ellie?" he replied, making a deliberate effort to lighten up, and it did require real effort. "The last thing I want to do is burden you with my problems."

Ellie playfully poked him in the ribs. "Who said it was a burden to me, eh?"

He shrugged. "Sorry, that's just me worrying again, isn't it?"

Ellie nodded vigorously. "Yes, that's precisely my point. Remember what Buddha said? That we become what we think? Well, in my book, worry is wishing upon ourselves all the things we don't want to happen."

"*Touché!*" he laughed. Of course, what she said made perfect sense. But then things weren't always motivated by rationality.

Ellie raised her eyebrows. "Again, remember that we're practising cooperation here, Robin, not competing for Brownie points or some Gamer of the Month Award."

"So what do you suggest?" he reiterated.

The answer appeared to suddenly dawn on Ellie. "Come with me, I know the perfect place."

"That's music to my ears!" he enthused.

"Do you always talk in clichés?" Ellie asked him.

"What a strange question. I don't know, I haven't thought about it much, really. Words like that just feel comfortable and familiar. They emphasize our common heritage and promote fellow feeling, I guess. You know, we can't all be budding playwrights and speak wondrous lines with our every breath."

"Ah, I see. Anyhow, come with me."

“The garden café?” he asked hopefully. “And, by the way, while I remember to ask: how come they don't have a flashing neon sign on the wall? I'm sure they'd get a load more custom that way. There wasn't even a plaque on the gate to tell you that it was a café.”

“It's quiet, yes.”

“Don't they advertize?”

“No, it's all done by word of mouth,” Ellie replied. “Gwen and Hubert like it that way. The café is off the beaten track away from all the straights for a very good reason, and they run it for love, not for money.”

“Away from the what?”

“Away from the straights.” She drew an expressive shape in the air with her hands. “The squares. People who don't understand what's going on or who are asleep to reality.”

“I see. At least I think I see.”

Ellie nodded vigorously. “That's right, Robin: you've got the idea. Most people – by which I mean most squares and dreamwalkers – *think* that they know, and other dreamy types *feel* that they know, but they don't *really* know. Those are the three main modes of knowledge: using the intellect, using the emotions – or being used by these things – and really knowing and understanding. Most of what passes for knowledge in the world or in *Game of Aeons*, for that matter, is either misguided or nothing more than opinion or belief. And these things are poor substitutes for real knowledge.”

“So how do you acquire real knowledge?” he wanted to know. The words were out of his mouth before he'd consciously registered that he'd opened it.

“My, that was fast Robin. I do believe that things are stirring inside you.” Then Ellie added, with a laugh: “I'm not quite sure what, mind, but something is definitely stirring.”

Ellie paused to stroke her chin thoughtfully before concluding. “I should also add that there are several human traits that act as obstacles to such progress. Some religious types would call them vices or sins, but really they are technical impediments.”

“And these are?”

“And these are things like ignorance, impatience,



unexamined assumptions, habit, conditioning, selfishness, greed, vanity, pride, lack of empathy, attention-seeking, hypocrisy, delusion, anger, shame, over-emotionality and primitive thinking.”

“Sheesh, that's quite a list to roll off the top of your head, sister,” he laughed out loud.

“Oh, I've had a lot of time to ponder and to practice. Anyhow, those aren't my words, Robin: they're the words of my teacher and of the teacher before him.”

“Crikey, I bet he was the life and soul of parties.”

“Yes he was, actually,” Ellie laughed. “No, I mean it, sweetie. Hamish could be tough, sure, but it was tough love. At his own admission, he was an old-fashioned kind of a guy, but he was never afraid of embracing the new and using it to update the perennial work. Hamish was a fun and challenging guy to be around, and though he had his detractors, he was much respected. And Hamish spoke and acted with authority not because of any book learning or diplomas, funny handshakes or fancy titles, but because he'd actually walked the path himself and returned to help others walk that same timeless path themselves.

“Yes, it *is* a long and daunting list and I could actually go a lot further, Robin, but I'm sure you get the picture if you join up a few of the dots. Many people we come across are full of themselves and, like a full pot, you can't put anything better in unless you first empty the pot of things that are base and selfish. These things get in the way of what would otherwise occur or develop quite naturally, such as wakefulness, awareness, inspiration and infallible intuition. Things that should be our birth right.

“This preliminary stage, then, we call learning how to learn. Well, I say learning, but you'll find that a lot of it consists of unlearning what has previously been incorrectly taught or picked up from the corrosive environment.”

Robin nodded. “Yes, that makes sense. And I guess there are plenty of crackpots, too?” It was a rhetorical question.

*One more than you might think*, the voice chuckled quietly.

“Yes, we also get our fair share of cracked pots, and these defects need to be sorted out early on, too, or else anything we poured into the pot would run away and be wasted. There are

some who are so cracked that they cannot be helped. Now that's sad and tragic, of course, but it's also a simple fact of life, and we need to accept it as such. And then there are some who are incorrigibly misguided, deluded or darn right evil. Sometimes these deep-enders have to be tackled. Sometimes avoided like the plague.”

“We?” he queried. “You said 'we also get our fair share of crackpots.' Does that mean there's more than one of you, or were you using the royal 'We', as in Queen Victoria's famous reply: 'We are not amused'?”

“Oh, friends like us,” Ellie replied cryptically. “As for Victoria, she may have been talking not only for herself but for the other ladies in the court.”

“And am I a deep-ender, Ellie?” He had to know.

Ellie laughed. “You're floundering in deep water out of your depth, Robin, I have to tell you that. However, rest assured that help is at hand. And in your case, what matters most is that you are not incorrigible. You're learning now, if you did but know it. And I don't mean learning facts, which you might call *know-what*, I mean *know-how*. This is not something that is *taught*, so much as *caught* or *sympathetically induced* through presence and experience.

“Now, just give me a minute, then we'll be off.” Ellie brought out her smart phone and spent some time tapping away and swiping across the screen. Finally she put her phone back in her shoulder bag.

“Right, that's settled, so off we jolly well,” Ellie beamed, taking his arm and dragging him off down the road, not that he was complaining, of course.

“But this isn't the way to the garden café, is it?” he observed as they crossed the city.

“Did I say that's where we were going?”

“Ah, okay,” he nodded thoughtfully, and then it dawned on him. “I guess that's what you'd call an unexamined assumption, eh?”

Ellie playfully tickled his ribs as they strode down the street. “Yes, that's quite right. I do believe that you're catching on, young man.”

“So where *are* we going?”

“Patience, Robin. You'll see soon enough.”

“So, I'm being impatient now?” he asked rhetorically.

“You said it, sweetie.”

“Gosh, if today is anything to go by, I have a whole ship load of work ahead of me.”

“As I said earlier, we'll go step by patient and careful step, Robin. And I'll walk beside you all the way. Once you're over the worst, if you want to keep a path clear of weeds, all you have to do is make a useful habit of pulling out one or two each time you use the path. As Aleksandr Orlov, the meerkat in the television advert would say: 'Simplez.'”

## 13. Stress relief

Ellie led Robin away from the bustling urban centre, the incessant honking of horns and the noxious diesel fumes, and they criss-crossed the city through a series of back streets until Robin was utterly lost. If Ellie hadn't been with him, he'd have had a devil of a job retracing his steps and, unlike her, he didn't have a smart phone with sat nav (satellite navigation) or whatever simulation they ran in *Game of Aeons*.

Finally, passing along a row of boarded up and near-derelict terraced houses, Ellie paused for a moment to check her phone and look furtively around to make sure they hadn't been followed. These were very old houses and their doors opened directly onto the narrow pavement, with no front garden or forecourt. Striding to the nearby door, Ellie opened it and pushed him unceremoniously inside. Entering herself, she quickly shut the door behind her.

As Robin had expected, the place was largely empty inside, with the exception of a rusty old perambulator half blocking the hallway, presumably discarded by the previous occupants when they left or were forced to leave. The décor, too, was yellow and faded with age, and here and there, where there were damp patches, the wallpaper was growing mould and had peeled away from the walls. Even the old lath and plaster in the ceilings had begun to crumble and give way, sprinkling onto the bare wooden floorboards below, which were thick with years of accumulated dust.

“This is it?” he unthinkingly blurted out.

“Oh ye of little faith,” Ellie retorted with a wry smile. “Follow me.”

And, thus saying, she led the way down the hallway past the pram and up a steep flight of narrow stairs until they came to the landing above.

“Well, hello there Eleanor!” a voice exclaimed as Robin reached the top of the stairs. “Welcome! And your friend, too. Welcome. Do come into our humble abode.”

“Greetings to you, too, Master Bupposo,” Ellie replied,

exchanging a warm hug with the man. “Robin, this is Master Bupposo, one of my own revered teachers.”

Robin exchanged greetings, receiving not a hug but a rather firm and enthusiastic handshake and a pat on the back. “Bupposo?” he queried. “That’s an unusual name.”

“It’s the name my teacher gave me,” the master explained. “And the name derives from the Three Treasures of the path that I am on – Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. That is, our Lord Buddha, the Teachings and the Community.”

“Ah, I see. Is that Zen?” he asked.

“Of a sort,” the master nodded. “Now, please come in and make yourselves at home, and I’ll have one of the students bring us some tea. Then we must have a little chat.”

The master stood to one side and bade them enter a room to the left, and as Robin entered, he marvelled at the transformation. Whilst the rest of the house was so derelict, when you stepped inside that room, you might have stepped into another world or another era, though it wasn’t at all as he had imagined it might be. The room wasn’t large, of course, but what was lacking in quantity was amply made up for in terms of sheer quality.

As the master re-entered the room, a student, a lad about Robin’s own age, sprang to his feet and bowed. The master said something to him and the lad went away into another room, presumably to prepare some tea.

The master noted the slightly puzzled expression on Robin’s face and explained. “This is my home, Robin, and – given the necessity for secrecy under which we are now compelled to work – I felt it prudent not to fill it with appurtenances of an Oriental or Buddhist nature. Hence the antique European furnishings and décor. I’m sorry if you find this disappointing.”

“No, not at all, Master Bupposo. Again, I guess I had expectations and made incorrect assumptions. But the craftsmanship and the attention to detail I now see is astounding.”

“Ah, I see that you’ve begun coaching our friend here, Eleanor,” the master observed astutely, and he and Ellie shared a quiet laugh. “You’ll be pleased to know, however, that the essential practise itself, which anyone anywhere can thankfully do in the safety and privacy of their own home or even in a shelter for the homeless, for that matter, remains as ever

unchanged.”

Did he have “V for Vagrant” indelibly tattooed across his forehead or was this comment merely coincidental, he wondered.

*Perhaps the Master Bupposo is sensitive to such things?* suggested the voice hopefully.

When the student returned, he poured and delivered their tea patiently and carefully, but there was no major ceremony as Robin might have envisaged, and they drank their tea in silence, then waited whilst the student cleared away the pots before engaging in light conversation, catching up on one-another's news.

“So,” said the master, clapping his hands together and breaking Robin's reverie, “What brings you here, my dear Eleanor and Robin? Not simply to 'shoot the breeze' with old Bupposo, eh? Now speak up. Don't be shy.”

Ellie explained about Robin's worries. “And I thought perhaps that a rudimentary form of *zazen* might help him deal with the stress, Master Bupposo,” she concluded.

“I hope I'm not butting in, but what's *zazen*?” Robin queried.

“Basic meditation, Robin, just sitting and counting the breaths.”

“Ah, I see. Thank you.”

“Of course,” Ellie continued, “I realize that it wouldn't be safe for Robin to come here on a regular basis.”

“Yes, that's a sound assessment, Eleanor,” the master nodded. “I am sure that *zazen* would help. However, I see no reason why you shouldn't teach him yourself.”

“I thought it best to check with you first, Master Bupposo, and I also thought that you might show Robin the best way to sit and to breathe, if you'll excuse my presumption. I understand the importance you place on getting that basic foundation right. And yes, with your blessing, I'm more than happy to take it from there.”

“Right then, to work!” Master Bupposo announced, clapping his hands together. That was the second time that day that the master had caught Robin lost in reverie and the master and Ellie exchanged knowing glances.

The master went into a cupboard to one side of the old fireplace and came back with three thick cushions. “*Zazen* will

certainly help with your stress, Robin,” the man informed him, clearing a space and arranging the cushions near the centre of the room. “But you should understand at least intellectually, that it has far more to offer than that. Ultimately, the aim is to awaken you to direct perception of reality ...”

“To achieve nirvana?” Robin suggested. “I’d have as much chance of doing that as winning the National Lottery.”

Master Bupposo laughed.

“Did I say something funny?”

“No, no. Firstly, such considerations might be putting the cart before the horse, as it were. But what made me laugh is that your mention of winning the lottery reminds me of the joke about the guy who is up to his eyes in debt. So on Sunday when he goes to church, he gets down on his hands and knees and earnestly prays: 'Oh, dear Lord. I'm up to my eyes in debt and in grave and imminent danger of losing my business, my house, my car, and maybe my wife, too. Please let me win the National Lottery.'

“So there he is, biting his nails to the quick with worry, watching the lottery draw, and stone the crows if someone else doesn't win it.

“Anyhow, next Sunday there he is praying again and he says 'Oh God, why didn't you let me win the National Lottery? I was up to my eyes in debt, and now I've lost my business, my house, my car, and my wife, too.'

“And all of a sudden there's a bright flash of lightning that lights up the sky and an almighty peel of thunder that shakes the church to its foundations, and a mighty voice calls out to him: 'Jethro! Next Saturday, meet me half way and buy a blessed ticket!'”

Well, give Bupposo some credit: that certainly lightened Robin's spirits.

“No, seriously, Robin. The aim is to achieve nirvana and to experience the truth that lays beyond that; then to return from that farther shore to 'just do it'. That is, to bring compassionate work back into the world for the benefit of others, indeed of all sentient beings, who are in need.”

“Like a Bodhisattva?” Robin queried.

“Just so,” Master Bupposo nodded. “But first we'll try some baby steps. So please take a seat.”

“Do you think that you could manage a full lotus?” the master enquired when Robin was seated on his cushion. He tried his best, but found himself unable, unless perhaps if he dislocated his hips or his knees.

“Then how about a half lotus?”

Again Robin struggled valiantly, but had to admit defeat. This was not the most auspicious of beginnings.

“Perhaps you might practise the half lotus with Eleanor later?” Master Bupposo suggested. “It may take you some time to master it.”

“It's not so much getting into position as managing the pain,” Robin replied. “Is it possible to simply sit cross-legged?”

The master thought for a moment. “For now, let's try a chair,” he decided, bringing over a hard backed chair from a corner of the room and placing the cushion on top of that.

“Now, sit forward on the front third of the cushion. That's right. Place your legs apart, about as far apart as your shoulders, and plant your feet firmly on the ground. That's it. The aim is to provide a sturdy triangular foundation, using your two feet and your backside.

“Good. Now push your bottom back and your lower abdomen forward a bit. Excellent. If you just swivel your upper body around from one side to the other in gradually decreasing circles, you'll then find a natural position to rest in. That's it. So far, so good. Okay, and just let your shoulders sag a little and relax. Head forward with your chin tucked in slightly and with your gaze focussed on the floor maybe four feet away if you're in a chair, or three feet away if you're on a floor cushion. Your eyes should be half open. If they're closed, you may find yourself falling asleep or be distracted by visual effects; if they're fully open, all manner of objects on the room might distract you. If that really presents a problem for you, though, you may have no option but to open or shut your eyes; these things sometimes depend on our individual peculiarities. That's it. Bravo.

“Now, the hands. This is an important bit, which we call the *mudra*, and this is where the Buddha sits. Open your hands, palms down. Now place your right hand under your left. That's the ticket. Bring your two thumbs together now, so that they touch at the tips, to make an oval space. Good. And finally, place your



hands in your lap, just touching your lower abdomen. Fabulous.

“Now, I want you to breathe in and out slowly through your nose. When you inhale, silently count one, and when you exhale, count two, and so on until you get to ten, then start again at one. Every time you lose count, start again at one, and if stray thoughts arise, don't try to push them from your mind, or pay them any heed, simply make a point of returning to counting your breaths. Got that?”

“Sure,” Robin nodded. It sounded like a tall order, though.

“Do you want to give that a try?”

“Okay.” He took a couple of breaths and that's as far as he got.

“Ah, now, do you see what you're doing, Robin? You're breathing by inflating your rib cage. What you need to do is breathe using the diaphragm in your lower abdomen. Like this, see? Yes, this may take some getting used to if you've spent a lifetime using your rib cage and gasping for air.

“Also, that is where you should place your attention. Pay attention to your breathing at the point where your mudra is placed. Western and modern man has it all wrong you see. They believe that the seat of consciousness is inside the head, but this is a fallacy. It only seems to be there because that's where our eyes and ears and nose and mouth are situated and that's where we tend to give our attention and view the world from.

“In actual fact, the seat of wisdom is where your mudra is placed, and that is where your spiritual energy or power is generated.

“Okay, enough talk. Now, let's see you breathing using your diaphragm. You'll find this a lot easier if you pay attention to the way your abdomen expands and contracts, and soon it will be like riding a bike and you won't have to make an effort to breathe in this way. That's right. But unlike so-called normal breathing, when you exhale, don't make a half-hearted effort and start inhaling again straight away. Breathe out fully and slowly and pause a little when you've fully exhaled. That's better. You see, it's when you're exhaling or your breathing has paused and your diaphragm is in tension that your thoughts are more likely to be inhibited.”

“Now, have a go at that for the next ten minutes or so, and I'll

watch you and try to correct your posture if it begins to slip. But pay no attention to me. You just pay attention to your mudra and on counting your breaths.

“Later on, you can dispense with the counting if this begins to detract from 'just sitting', and of course you can also meditate on *mantras*, or special phrases that we call *koans*, as you breathe. And there's also 'walking meditation' that you can practise just about everywhere you go in your everyday life. But for now, let's try some baby steps 'just sitting' and counting your breaths.

“Right, off you go. Breathe in and count one, breathe out slowly and fully, and pause, as you count two. You may find that if you count 'one, one, one, one' and 'two, two, two, two', that this helps with your timing.”

Half an hour later, having thanked Master Bupposo profusely for his time and his help, Robin set off with Ellie and they headed back across the city with a spring in their step and their energy renewed. Robin noted this fact and Ellie agreed. “Yes indeed. Just spending time working with a master like Bupposo does fill you with fresh energy and vigour. So in a few weeks, when you've made some progress on your own, I'll take you back there. I'm sure Master Bupposo won't mind: he's always glad of the company and the opportunity to help with the work. He says that it brings great joy to his heart. And sometimes tears of joy to his eyes.”

“Master Bupposo said that we're all Buddhas, is that right, Ellie? I don't feel like one.”

“*Intrinsically*, yes. So intrinsically there is no path to tread, nowhere to go and nothing to become. Intrinsically, we don't practise to become enlightened but because we are enlightened, as the Zen teacher Bernie Glassman has written. But ...”

“Sounds like a big 'but' to me.”

“You sayin' I've got a big fat butt?” Ellie retorted, feigning offence.

“No, seriously Ellie.”

“OK, seriously. But – or 'and' if you're not fond of butts – *experientially* there is a lot of practise to do. Practise, practise and yet more practise. And also very importantly, there's grateful giving to do. Giving, giving and yet more giving.”

“Speaking of butts, Ellie, have I told you that you have a

delicious shapely butt?”

Now it was Ellie's turn to blush and for a few minutes she appeared quite lost for words. In her case, this had to be a first.

Finally, she spoke. “I'm speechless, Robin. I truly am. I mean, you'd be forgiven for referring to me as Motormouth.”

Then, some time later: “You know, appearances can be deceptive in *Game of Aeons*. If you've got the dosh, you can buy any amount of beauty enhancements like nose jobs and fake boobs and other virtual plastic surgery.”

“I'm not looking for the kind of grotesque blow-up Barbie doll they get on *Snog Marry Avoid?* Ellie.”

“Well, thank heavens for that, Robin. That's so reassuring. But for all you know, I could be an absolute dog in real life.”

Robin pulled a face.

“Hey, I'm a woman, and I can get away with saying things like that,” she said in her defence. “Now don't kid me that this thought has not crossed your mind. I'm not, as it happens – I really am WYSIWYG – but I could be.”

He laughed. “Wizzy what?”

“It's an acronym. What you see is what you get,” she explained. “You know, I can see I'm going to have to buy you a dictionary for your next birthday.”

He was a little slow on the uptake. “Ah, I see!”

As for Ellie, presumably she'd swallowed a dictionary in her formative years.

*No, you're wrong*, his inner voice told him. *She digested it, one tiny piece at a time, beginning at an early age, and you would do well to take a leaf out of her book.*

“Well, I'm glad about that, too, Ellie. Truly I am. I am so grateful to you, I don't have the words to express my admiration. Thank you.”

Ellie smiled and hooked her arm under his. “No, Robin: thank *you*. I really enjoy your company and for the opportunity to serve the work. And ...

“And I am well aware that all work and no play makes Jill every bit as dull a person as it does Jack.”

## 14. The meaning of life, the universe and everything

Ellie was away visiting relatives for a couple of days over the next week and though Robin didn't at all think that he was taking her friendship for granted, it was only when she was absent and he was at a loss for something to do, that he truly realized how much he enjoyed her company and how attached to her he had become. These feelings seemed to have crept up on him and caught him unawares.

As Ellie was away, he used up the whole of the two mornings sweeping the streets, to bring in a few extra shillings and fill in time. Clocking off a few minutes after the town bells chimed noon on the first day – since he was only paid up until the moment he downed tools and set off back to the council works – Robin did his best to retrace their steps to the garden café. It would be quiet enough there for him to relax without feeling like a wallflower or a bit of a prune – someone who is thought to be uptight or weird – sitting there all on his lonesome ownsome.

After a couple of wrong turnings and finally plucking up the courage to ask strangers for directions to the common, he managed to find the rutted lane, and from there it was just a matter of following the dirt path until he inevitably came to the redbrick wall. The wall was so expansive that if he'd simply pointed himself in the general direction, sooner or later he'd have come to it.

Sure, he found the wall, alright. But though he worked his way along the wall from one end to the other, there was no sign of the green gate. He even asked a passer-by, a local who was out walking her adorable and attentive collie dog, about the green door and the garden café and she shook her head, said that she'd never seen a door in the wall in the thirty-odd years she'd lived near the common, and walked on by. She was probably wondering what planet he'd beamed down from.

It really made no sense whatsoever.

On the third day, he logged-in and teleported to the Corner Café. He was momentarily disappointed to find that Ellie wasn't

there when he arrived. Not that she was under any obligation to him. She must have her own life to lead, much of which would not be centred around his whims and desires. The world certainly did not revolve around him, and that had to be a good thing, really. But then he caught sight of a shimmering figure close-by and he was almost instantly relieved to see Ellie emerge in the scene, looking as vibrant and resplendent and adorable as ever. She must have seen the notification that one of her friends had just logged-in.

“Hi there,” Ellie lilted as she came trotting over to the bench where he was sitting. As he rose to his feet, she reached up and planted a kiss on his cheek. It wasn't sensual or anything, just a sloppy wet peck, but this was still a turnout for the books.

“And hi to you, too,” he beamed, feeling as if he were hovering a couple of inches off the ground for a moment or two.

“Have you missed me, then?”

“Yes I have, actually,” he nodded.

There was one thing uppermost in his mind right now and that was what had happened to the green door and the garden café. He told Ellie that he'd gone looking for the café and searched the wall from one end to the other without finding the door, and about the local who'd lived there for over thirty years and had never seen such a thing.

“Well, that's strange,” Ellie replied. “You know, sometimes *Game of Aeons* has technical glitches. Anyhow, why don't we go there now and we can catch up on a little chat, and then I want to show you a few more things.”

He shrugged. “Fair enough.”

As they retraced their steps and crossed the common, Ellie pointed into the distance. “There you are, see.”

A few hundred yards ahead was the wall, there was no mistaking that. And there, set into the wall, as clear as the light of day, was the old green door.

“What did I tell you? Most likely a glitch with the game servers. Happens all the time. Of course, it's worse if it happens when you're actually in a location and everything around you vanishes into thin air. Now that *is* weird.”

“What happens then?” he enquired.

“Oh, you either need to teleport to another location, or sit it

out until technical support fix the issue. Sometimes they beam you back to Newbie Square or occasionally they have to log you out of the game for a while. It varies.”

As Robin sat there at the café, simply enjoying the sunny day and savouring the delicious aroma and the sights and sounds of the garden, Ellie seemed to be mulling something over in her mind, and she looked slightly troubled. This was quite out of character for her and that, in turn, was a source of concern for him. There are some things that you surely can't realistically reduce to the action of brain chemicals and hormones and the firing of neurons, not even the firing of mirror neurons, albeit that this is a slight improvement on metaphors from a prior mechanistic age that involved the whirring and clanking and gnashing of cogs and pistons.

“What's wrong?” he wanted to know.

“Nothing,” she replied, though he wasn't particularly convinced.

“Don't give me that, I know you, Ellie,” he pressed her.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Okay, there's something I'd like to tell you, Robin, but it involves an element of risk, not just for me, but for you as well, and also for other friends like us.”

“I'm listening,” he nodded, leaning over the table so that they didn't have to raise their voices.

“It's okay, Robin. As I said, we're safe from prying eyes and ears here. In fact ...” Her voice trailed off mid-sentence.

“In fact?” he prompted.

“Sorry, I was just thinking. I was going to say, in fact the reason that we are safe here and that we were safe at Master Bupposo's home, is exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. And that's why I didn't mention it earlier, when we were at the Corner Café.”

Robin thought fast. Either that or the response simply came to him out of the blue, without him thinking. “So what you said about the technical glitches, was that true?”

“Ooh!” she laughed. “My, we are quick today, aren't we?”

“Well?”

“Such technical glitches do happen from time to time, yes.”

“But it wasn't a technical glitch the other day when I couldn't find my way back here, was it?”

Ellie shook her head. “No Robin, it wasn't. You see the garden café and other locations like Master Bupposo's home are special places. Secret places. Slightly elevated places, you might say. They are *in* the world and yet not entirely *of* it.”

He felt bemused by this news. “How's that?”

“There are a number of people like me – let's just call them Friends with a capital F, for the sake of convenience. And some of the more technically minded Friends have found a way to run simulations on their own game servers and a means of attaching those simulations to the official simulation run by *Game of Aeons*. Do you follow my drift?”

“Nearly, but not quite.”

“The redbrick wall exists in *Game of Aeons*, and that's why you were able to find it.”

“But the green door into this café doesn't? Is that what you're saying, Ellie? Correct me if I'm wrong.”

“That's half of the story, yes. The other half is that the portal – in this case a green door – and the location – in this case the garden café – are running on our Friends' game servers. The portal is patched into *Game of Aeons*, though hopefully their system administrators and the Powers That Be are blissfully unaware of this, and access to the portal is available only to a select few.”

“And I'm not one of the select few, I take it?” he replied rhetorically.

“Not as yet,” she admitted.

“Is that why you were tapping away at your phone before we set off here?”

Ellie nodded. “Yes, you're as bright as a button, Robin. I have full access and I set up the system to grant you temporary, visitor access. Hence: now you see it, now you don't. It's not all technological, actually. There are other ways of gaining access to these locations, but then we are venturing into the realm of metaphysics, beyond your current capabilities.”

“You mean that you don't need to be granted technological access rights to enter, you can just beam yourself in any time you want?”

“Any time I need to, yes.” She paused for a moment, then added: “Having said that, there are many locations that even I do

not have access to; and no doubt yet more that I am simply not privy to. There are wheels within wheels, you see, and I am just one tiny cog. No, those aren't the words that I'm looking for: let's say that I am just one leafy twig on the branch of an evergreen tree in the depths of a great and ancient forest.”

“So, tell me about these secret places.”

Ellie laughed. “They wouldn't be secret if I told you, now would they, Robin?”

She straightened herself up in her chair.

“Okay, I can tell you some general things. The first is that sometimes locations have to be shut down because of security breaches or potential breaches. Or, as is more often the case, the portals can be moved around. If, for example, anyone happened to catch sight of me apparently disappearing into the wall – they wouldn't see the green door, you see – then we'd have to move the portal into the garden café.”

“To answer the question on your lips, Robin, though we are vigilant and we have our own means of monitoring the system: no, we are not perfect and, yes, there are occasional slip ups. Even, dare I say it, they sometimes catch us. That is, of course, one of our greatest fears.”

Robin wasn't sure whether he dare smile, given the serious nature of this issue. “You must be a mind reader, Ellie. That's precisely what I was wondering.”

Ellie feigned a deadpan expression. “Yes, I am actually. It's a useful by-product of the self-developmental process.”

“You were telling me about the portals,” he reminded Ellie.

“That's right. Let me tell you about the door in the wall – or the more generic 'portal to another world'. It's an age-old idea, really, and it's to be found in stories like Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, which was first serialized in 1910 and in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and other books in the series about Narnia; but as far as we are concerned, it was H.G. Wells who gave us the idea here in *Game of Aeons*, with his short story, *The Door in the Wall*.

“You would be surprised by how many great and creative people are actually 'in on the secret' and are counted amongst us as Friends.”

Robin raised his eyebrows. “There's a lot packed into those



last few sentences,” he remarked.

“Indeed so!” Ellie nodded vigorously. “In fact there's really so much to tell that it's difficult to know where to begin.”

“Okay, let me help you Ellie. H.G. Wells was born when exactly?”

“1866 if I recall correctly, and he died in 1946. If it's vital that you know the precise details, I could always google it for you. I'm quite an adept Wikipedia scholar, you know.”

“You jest, surely.”

Ellie laughed. “Of course I do, though it is truly said that there is many a true word spoken in jest.”

“And when was *Game of Aeons* released?”

Ellie held her finger up in the air. “I know where you're going with this, you know, Robin. The first commercial release was in 2005, and it was designed to run on Windows 95 and later machines. The first beta testing – in which I took part, I might add – was in 2001. But there were a huge number of glitches, hence the lengthy delay before final release.”

“And these Friends came along when?”

“We were exploring the system from the very start, in 2001. Three of us were chosen to beta test the system, along with umpteen other spotty youths and computer nerds, that is.”

“So how can you say that H.G. Wells and others are 'in on the secret' and 'counted amongst the Friends'? God rest his soul, the man was dead and buried long before either of us were born.”

Ellie sucked her fingers and made noises by wagging her finger between her lips as she quietly blew out her breath.

“There are some things that I can tell you, Robin, and some things that I can't. Perhaps I'll never be able to tell you some things, because you'll simply have to find them out and verify them for yourself. We don't much go in for dogma, and there's nothing like first-hand experience.

“One thing I can tell you without giving away any secrets, and which is possibly already in the public domain in fields like quantum physics, is that you are assuming that time is linear. That is, that the present moment proceeds in an orderly fashion in a straight line from some point in the distance past, let's say as far back as some Big Bang, and on into the future, perhaps to the point when all the stars are exhausted and the universe finally

dies. Let me tell you, Robin: that is a fallacy. So, in a sense, it is meaningless to suggest that the first person in time who wrote about such portals into other worlds was the first person to actually come up with the idea. And, just for the sake of argument, this does not take into account the possibility that advanced beings – human or otherwise – have not seeded such ideas over the ages.

“As for H.G. Wells, or for that matter, the High Adepts of ancient Egypt. These people did not live in a distance time. In a sense and under the right conditions or circumstances, they are as close to us now as any others from any other time; even as close as those whom we consider to be of our own time.”

Robin didn't know quite what to say.

Again, Ellie sucked her fingers. “And now, here is another key piece in the jigsaw for you to mull over, Robin. Have you ever wondered why the game should be called *Game of Aeons*?”

“Not really,” he was forced to admit.

“Do you know what an aeon is, then?”

“A long, long period of time? Ages?”

“Well, an aeon is itself an immeasurably long period of time, so if I were being pedantic or a grammar Nazi, then the plural is sort of redundant in one sense, if we think of a single earth in a single universe. And yet, in a way, if there were more than one earth in a multiverse, then we could rightly speak of aeons in the plural, I guess.”

“I see,” Robin nodded, then he had second thoughts. “Or rather I think I see.”

“Just as the idea of a portal into another world is timeless, Robin, so too is the idea of a game played out on a cosmic scale over a period of aeons. We could call that 'The Big Game', and I'm not referring to the lesser game that spies of various nations play against one-another. And the computer simulation, *Game of Aeons* is simply an interpretation of that timeless game ...”

“Right.”

“... And a contemporary portal into The Big Game, or at least into certain aspects of that game.”

Robin shook his head in a mixture of excitement and bewilderment.

“However, Robin, that's not the only meaning of the word

aeons. Any idea what else it might be?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "You're the one who swallowed a dictionary, Ellie, so it's no use asking me."

"Aeons are divine powers and natural forces or energies which play roles in the operation of the universe. These emanate from the Source or Reality or the Supreme Being or whatever you want to call it. And the aeons also play a part in those facets of creation that we call The Big Game."

"Again, Ellie, a lot of this is way over my head and you've lost me."

Ellie laughed. "That's probably not such a bad thing, Robin. Folk have sent themselves crazy trying to figure out the meaning of life, the universe and everything. In any case, this is all on a need to know basis, and if you don't quite understand, most likely at this moment in time you simply don't need to know. However, there may come a time when it all begins to make perfect sense."

Then she added: "In a nutshell, you could say that *Game of Aeons* is a contemporary and simplified expression of certain facets of The Big Game. Does that help?"

"Not really," he was forced to concede. "But thanks all the same."

"Then let me add one final point, Robin, and it is this. It is possible to forget your real self and become trapped in the game, until there comes a point where you actually believe that the game is real and that there is no world beyond it. How's that grab you?"

"To tell the truth, that scares me, Ellie," he said, blowing out his breath. "I'm already finding it difficult to remember that I'm a player and not a character in a simulation. The other night I fell asleep at my desk whilst still logged-in and it wasn't until Darius really clouted me on the jaw and I hit the dirt that I suddenly woke up. And I've not only started dreaming about the game in real life, I've found that I can actually fall asleep in the game itself and start dreaming. It's all rather confusing at times."

Again Ellie raised her eyebrows. "And yet still you carry on playing."

He nodded. "Yes, I know that something's not quite right, but I simply can't stay away."

"Oh dear. Well I guess that *I'm* not helping in that regard ..."

“No, no. Please don't get me wrong, Ellie. I'm really glad that you're here. Your help is greatly appreciated. It's invaluable.”

“Are you still practising your zazen?” Ellie wanted to know, apparently changing the subject.

“Sure, every day for fifteen minutes first thing on a morning.”

“I don't mean in-game, I mean when you're offline.”

“Sure, that's what I meant.”

“That's good, keep it up. And if you can find ten to fifteen minutes on an evening before you go to bed, that would be a good idea.”

“Right, I'll try that.”

“I know you might think that meditation is airy-fairy nonsense and that it's unrelated to the apparently concrete and practical issues you're experiencing in the game, Robin, but the two are very much related.”

“Really?” He could see the value in promoting a peaceful mind, but he still wasn't convinced that he'd ever achieve nirvana, let alone return to help others.

“Really. Intimately linked in fact – as within, so without. As Mahatma Gandhi once advised, you need to 'Be the change that you wish to see in the world.' And if you don't like the way it is, then you have a lot of work to do – work on your own self.”

“Okay, that I can understand.”

“Robin, dearest. If you can't see the benefits in yourself – and these are early days for you, my little fledgling friend – then without wishing to sing my own praises or have you place me on a pedestal or anything like that, have a look at me and attribute any success I might have had to the practise, to the working of compassion, and to any Grace that I have been fortunate enough to be gifted. Or I could point you to a number of other Friends who follow the path, who are far more 'advanced' than I am, and who would attribute their own success to the same factors.”

## 15. The habit

As they spoke, Robin unconsciously fumbled in his jacket pocket, brought out his tobacco and began to roll up a cigarette. He was just about to light up when Ellie reached across, quick as a flash, and snatched the cigarette from his lips.

“Don't you dare smoke here!” she hissed at him. “Not now, not ever, do you hear?”

“I just need the one,” he protested, holding out his hand, but Ellie had already left the table to cast the crumpled roll-up in a nearby litter bin.

“Just the one?” she echoed.

He shrugged. “To calm my nerves.”

Ellie shook her head slowly from side to side and tut-tutted.

“If you meditate and you stay away from impediments like the smoking habit, you won't need to calm your nerves. And as far as cigarettes are concerned, there is no such thing as 'just the one'. Fifteen minutes later, when the rush has died down, you'll be craving your fix of nicotine all the more. With another 'I' emerging from the ranks of the squadron of simpletons in your head and taking charge – the wily Addict winning support against the Repentant Sinner – you'll be lighting up again.

“And then later, in a few years time, when you're struggling for breath and fighting a hopeless battle with yourself against the addiction, you'll discover that there is no such thing as 'just one last cigarette' – except the last cigarette that you've already had. If you live that long.

“You know, there's a reason that they call cigarettes coffin nails. Smoking is suicide by instalments.”

“Take my word for it, Robin: it's a long, slippery, downhill slope that you're embarking upon.”

He flushed bright red and hung his head, feeling suitably chastened. “Okay, I'll remember that,” he muttered at length.

She shook her head sadly. “No, Robin, I don't think you will. This time tomorrow, when I'm not here to stop you, you'll have either forgotten all about the impact of this conversation, if not the words themselves, or else you'll light up anyhow and have

'just one more.'

"Do you speak from the voice of experience?" he wanted to know.

"I'm not a born-again and evangelical ex-smoker, if that's what you mean, Robin, no. Nor am I a puritan or a prude, by any means. Thankfully I was never tricked or lured or enticed or pressured into taking up the disgusting habit. So no, I don't pity or revile smokers as hapless sinners. However, I do know what it is like to see someone slowly succumb to the dark side and begin to destroy themselves and the lives of those around them."

Ellie paused for a moment. "In fact, speaking of the dark side, Robin, I think perhaps that it's high time I took you some place so that you can see for yourself that, even for the Friends, life here in *Games of Aeons* is not all peaches and cream."

"Peaches and cream?" he queried.

"Peaches and cream, beer and skittles, a fairytale romance: they all amount to pretty much the same thing. I mean that life here isn't always a pleasant experience, Robin."

"Well, I guess that's down to circumstances," he offered, though even as he uttered the words, he felt that they had a rather dull ring to them.

Ellie shook her head firmly. "No, no, no, no, no, Robin. I know of Friends and other brave souls who've never had a mystical thought in their lives, who have lived and triumphed in the most squalid conditions and the most adverse circumstances. That really is a lame excuse, and somewhere deep down inside, you know it."

"Oh, sorry," he mumbled, again hanging his head.

Ellie drew a deep breath. She reached out and gently raised his chin. "I'm sorry, too, sweetie. I know that life must be tough for you. And if I occasionally growl at you, or even give you a little nip on the backside, please remember that I really do have your best interests at heart. I just don't want to see you taking any more wrong turnings in the path and ending up in a yet greater pickle, that's all. Believe me, I've seen this happen on countless occasions, and it is the cause of much suffering and heartbreak."

*You'd better listen to the lady if you know what's good for you*, an insistent voice seemed to echo in his head.

"Thank you, Ellie," he finally replied, after giving the matter

some serious thought. “Thank you. I'm sure that you're right.”

“Damn right I'm right, buster!” Ellie laughed, rising from her seat and grabbing hold of his arm. “Now stir your stumps. Time is marching on relentlessly and there are places we need to be and people we need to see.”

## 16. The enclosure

Letting go of Robin's arm and pausing for a moment, Ellie brought out her smart phone and tapped away at the screen.

“What are you doing now?” he enquired.

“Just setting the coordinates,” Ellie replied. “I was going to suggest that we take the scenic route, but then I remembered that there *is* no scenic route.” She laughed, and yet Robin could see that there was something behind the laugh that was altogether more serious.

“It's a long way – right across the other side of the city – so, much as it does us good to walk around, I think that on this occasion, we'll cheat.”

“Right.” He said right, but if the truth be told, he hadn't got a clue what Ellie was on about.

Still holding onto the smart phone, Ellie held out her right hand. “Good, now hold on tight and whatever you do, don't let go.”

He just caught sight of Ellie dabbing her left thumb on the screen of her smart phone, and in that instant, the garden café where they'd been sitting just moments ago began to shimmer and vanish before his eyes.

And the next thing he knew, the ground appeared to rush up at him and he fell down on his backside with a hefty thump and went sprawling.

Ellie had landed on her feet a few paces away and she dashed over and helped him to his feet. “Sorry about that,” she apologized. “Slight miscalculation.”

She looked him up and down. “Still, no bones broken, just a little wounded pride.”

“Where are we?” he wanted to know, looking all around him. He could see that they were standing by the leaf-strewn roadside with row upon row of long-abandoned houses and derelict industrial buildings stretching out as far as the eye could see.

“We're on a disused industrial estate to the north of the city,” Ellie explained to him.

“What an eyesore, Ellie. I see now why you said that there



was no scenic route.”

“Yes, I must admit that the place is even more of a mess than even I remember.

“But look! Just look at the bushes and trees already breaking through the remains. Good old Mother Earth has begun to reclaim even this otherwise bleak and barren landscape. Even if it takes a couple of hundred years, you know, she'll get there in the end.”

“Yes Ellie, that shows great promise. Anyhow, what are we doing here?”

“You'll see,” Ellie replied, as if that explained anything. Getting her bearings, she took his arm and led him down the long cobbled road.

“This must have been around for a while,” he noted, surveying the crumbling buildings as they passed by. “It's like something out of Dickens.”

“Out of the Dickensian age, certainly,” she agreed. “And if you think that life is tough for you sweeping the streets of the modern city centre, then spare a thought for the poor lost souls who spent their whole lives toiling here or in the workhouses. As more and more farms brought in machinery to replace manual labour, so countless folk came to the city looking for work and for a better life. Little did they know what they were letting themselves in for. The mills and workhouses must indeed have looked dark and satanic to them, even though they had led poor lives in the country and in the villages and smaller market towns.”

“That's the storyline, I take it,” he suggested. “The scenario.”

Ellie stopped for a moment to again check her bearings. “Oh no, that's the grim reality. And every bit as real and tragic as the fate of the Tolpuddle Martyrs and those caught up in the earlier Peterloo Massacre. You know, many of the Tolpuddle Martyrs were simple, God-loving Methodists – not, as you might imagine, proto-Marxists.”

“But it's all part of the game, right? A game that was written in the post-industrial age. 2001, didn't you say?”

Ellie didn't answer that. She tugged at his arm and led him along another long, straight, heavily-rutted road to the left, and they carried on down that road for a couple of hundred yards. Ahead of them was a wide open space, full of unkempt grass, bushes and the occasional stunted tree, and at the far side, Robin

could make out some kind of high wall, cutting right across the landscape.

“What's with the wall?” he asked Ellie. “Have we reached the outer boundaries of the game?”

“You'll see, soon enough,” Ellie responded. Presumably she didn't want to spoil the surprise.

As the high wall loomed ever closer, he could see now that it was made of steel and in places the green paint had begun to peel and crumble and become stained with brown rust. But the most ominous thing about the wall was that it was topped with coils of wire. As they came up to the wall, he could now gauge the height. It stood at least twelve feet tall. And he could also see now that the coils were cruel razor wire. Barbed wire was bad enough, yet it was more defensive; razor wire, though, that was something else.

“Is that to keep us in or keep others out?” he enquired.

“As I said, you'll see soon enough, Robin. You must try to cultivate the habit of patience. But if you really must know, it depends on your point of view, and the shortest answer I can give you is *both*.”

As they walked along a rough and weedy gravel track alongside the wall, Ellie checked her smart phone. He reached out his hand and rapped on the steel wall and judging by the dull sound which did not reverberate in the least, it was rock solid. Well, not *rock* solid. As solid as a thick steel wall could be.

“Ah yes, here we are,” Ellie finally announced.

Then, apparently seeing something up ahead, she began to walk faster and with purpose.

Robin could see it now, though it should really have come as no surprise. Perhaps twenty feet ahead of them, he could just make out the oblique outline of a door. It was painted the same colour as the steel wall and appeared to be simply let into the wall, with no obvious framework, no visible hinges and no handle. It was even rusty in places, in keeping with its surroundings. If you didn't know that the door was there, you wouldn't find it in a thousand years.

## 17. Followed

Darius had been watching the girl, Ellie, all that day. He'd set up his options to alert him whenever she logged-in and had already discovered that the first place she invariably teleported to was a place called the Corner Café. So all he had to do when he received the notification was teleport to a nearby location and hang out there, at a discreet distance. These last few days the girl had been meeting up with some other bloke, but he'd been too far away to get a clear look at the guy to see who he was. One of these days he'd have to waylay the guy and, not to put too fine upon it, persuade the guy that his amorous intentions were not in his best interests, if he knew what was good for him. People like that usually took the hint, and if they didn't? Well, then they'd have to face his wrath. Somewhere between a good thumping, the city hospital and the morgue, such pussies would eventually see sense, and this guy would probably be no different.

Today, the guy got to the café first and Darius was sorely tempted to go over there and tell him to sling his hook, then wait for the girl to arrive, but after some umming and ahing, he decided instead that it would probably be better to bide his time and wait for the right opportunity.

A few moments afterwards, the girl did indeed appear, just as he had predicted, and she and the guy spent a short time chatting on a nearby bench before moving off through the city, with him trailing on behind. Those two were so engrossed in one-another's company they really didn't have a clue that someone might be following them.

Now, judging by the direction they were going, they were heading toward the common. He'd seen them go that way before, but each time they'd somehow managed to give him the slip. One minute they were there, he blinked and when he opened his eyes again, they were gone. Of course, his first thought had been that they must have teleported somewhere else, but when he'd tapped in the girl's user name to check her location, the system reported that her coordinates were temporarily unavailable. Quite what that meant, he couldn't say, but it was mighty peculiar and this, in

itself, warranted further investigation. If the girl had some means of hiding her current location, then that nifty trick alone would be worth a few bob to a lot of folk who valued their privacy. Or, for that matter, worth a few pounds to the authorities if he reported it as a possible breach of security or terms of service. The authorities and advertizers liked to know exactly where their players were at all times and they took a dim view of anyone attempting to game or outwit the system.

*Rule 1: Thou shalt play the Game by the rules.*

*2. Thou shalt not drop out of the Game.*

*3. Thou shalt not hide nor obfuscate your online presence.*

*4. Thou shalt not hide nor falsely report your current coordinates.*

That day, however, Darius witnessed something extraordinary. He could see the two of them up ahead, as plain as day. There they were walking alongside a redbrick wall near the common, then they paused for a few seconds and turned to face the wall, and in the next moment, they were gone. They'd simply vanished into thin air.

Of course, he double checked the girl's current location and he was reliably informed by the system that the coordinates were temporarily unavailable.

Anyhow, he dashed across the common and, stopping at their last known position, as best he could judge, he made a note of the location. Then he carefully checked the wall, wandering along it for a few paces in one direction, then retracing his steps and checking in the other direction, tapping the wall with his knuckles as he went. He found nothing unusual.

Again, he wasn't quite sure what to do now. And then he had a brainwave. The authorities often advertized for information about abuse of the system, offering an unspecified but 'substantial' reward. Pulling out his mobile phone, he hunted through the technical support pages until he came to a link which explained how to file a report.

He went to the girl's profile and clicked on the button to report her, but he soon discovered that all you could do was select a few options like "This user is harassing me". There was nowhere to type in a descriptive report.

So he went back to the support pages and eventually he found

an email address, and he spent the next few minutes laboriously typing in his report and copying and pasting the coordinates where the pair had disappeared off the radar. If it was actual abuse, rather than just being a glitch in their system, then he might well be due a reward.

Darius kept watch on the location for an hour or so until he could no longer bear the boredom, but the pair didn't show up there again, and he also had his mobile phone on the girl's profile, refreshing the page every now and again to see if she'd show up once more.

At last his patience paid off. The girl had appeared again in the old industrial estate not far from the Compound. What the hell she was doing there, he had no idea. This had to be the last place on earth that you'd take your girlfriend for a leisurely walk or a bit of how's your father.

Well, there was only one way to find out. He gave the pair a few moments to move on, then he teleported to their last coordinates. As he landed, he saw that the pair were not very far ahead and quickly ducked out of the way, hiding from view and hopping from one doorway to the next, again at a discreet distance.

Finally, the pair approached the wall of the compound and Darius did think perhaps that they might be heading there. Entry to this forbidden zone was supposed to be severely restricted, but you could always bribe the guards to issue a temporary visitor's pass to gain access. The people there were always in need and he'd built up quite a thriving black market business with them over the years.

Yet again, though, the pair thwarted him. One second they were walking alongside the wall in the direction of the main gate and in the next second they'd done a David Copperfield and they were gone. He didn't know how the hell they'd pulled off a stunt like that, but he was pretty sure that if they'd come all this way, then they must have been heading for the compound and found some way in.

He dashed across the road and stopped at roughly the place where the pair had disappeared. Again, there was no sign of a breach in the wall. The steel plate was as thick as the armour on an old battleship and being maybe four metres tall and topped by

razor wire, there was no way over it. He checked the ground, too, but there was no signs of excavation. Indeed, he'd been reliably informed that the wall went another four metres underground and that below that was a foundation of reinforced concrete. Even vibration sensors and microphones, so it was rumoured.

Well, there was nothing else he could do but make a note of the coordinates, send a second email to report the abuse, bribe his way in through the main gate and have a look around.

Just like the old joke, they were absolute thugs at the compound, and some of the inmates were as bad, but they were always willing to listen to the rustle of paper and the tinkle of silver, delight in the sweet aroma of wacky tabaccy or snort the odd line of coke. Though it required an initial investment on his part, he always made a point of liberally adulterating his free samples so that the suckers would become punters and keep coming back for more.

## 18. The enclosure

As they approached the door, Ellie grabbed hold of his hand and dragged him through, before he had a chance to complain. One minute they were on one side of the wall, then for a brief moment as they passed through the door, he experienced a most peculiar and slightly nauseating feeling, and then they were out through the other side.

He stopped for a few moments to look around him. They were on a rise beside the steel wall and they could look out over the area from this vantage point. Stretching out almost as far as the eye could see, was a sprawling shantytown, with a warren of narrow paths between row upon row of small houses, huts and lean-tos. Most were just single storey, but in places some had been built on top of one-another and over deep gulleys that, judging by the stench that occasionally wafted their way, were used to convey raw sewage.

In the far distance he could see huge mounds and, pointing them out, Ellie explained that these were the city's rubbish tips. The wagons were driven up ramps and simply tipped their waste over the wall into the enclosure. "The wood, the stone, the old bricks and corrugated iron that make up the houses here," she went on to explain. "They've all been scavenged from the tip over the years.

"Did you know that even discarded plastic bottles have surprising uses? You fill the bottle full of water, with some bleach to prevent green slime growing in it. Then you cut a round hole in your roof and cement the bottle in place, half poking out above the roof and half poking into the room below. And when the sun shines down on the bottle, it lights up the room, just like an electric light bulb.

"And did you know that you can make musical instruments from waste thrown on a rubbish tip? Truly, there is no shortage of inventors and entrepreneurs here. In certain respects, life and traditional ethnic culture here is actually better for these people than a half life in the city."

"Fascinating," he replied enthusiastically.

Ellie pointed into the distance, over to his right. “You see all that greenery? Those are allotments where they grow vegetables and fruit. And, if you take a look around, you'll see that a great many of the houses have rows of vegetables growing on their flat roofs. Many, too, keep small animals like hens and goats and lambs. There's hardly an inch of ground here that hasn't been put to good use. Even the raw sewage that you see flowing through gullies along the streets, yes even that is returned to the earth as nature rightly intended.”

“Gosh. So who lives here?” he asked her.

“Many perfectly decent people who have fallen on hard times,” she replied, “And a great many more who have simply known no other life.

“Then there are those who have found themselves unable to handle life in the game and have either opted out or been rejected. And finally, there are those who have been forcibly cast out from what the Powers That Be like to think of as 'civilization' – certain criminal and terrorist elements; the uneducated; the handicapped; the mentally afflicted and the insane; and quite a number of incorrigibles and dissidents who could not or would not play by the game's rules.

“And just to put this in perspective, Robin,” she concluded. “There but for the grace of God go you and I.”

Ellie clapped her hands together, waking him from his reverie. “Right then, let's go and explore the shantytown.”

Robin hesitated, thinking about what she'd just said. “Are you sure it's safe to venture there?”

“Yes, I'm sure it is,” replied Ellie, grabbing hold of his hand. “Now come with me. Stay close by my side, and if there's any trouble, let me do the talking, right?”

“Right,” he readily agreed. “You're the boss.”

“Damn right I am, buster!” Ellie laughed.

They half-clambered and half-slipped down the high grassy mound by the wall. As Ellie had intimated, there was hardly an inch of the vast compound that wasn't put to good use and here and there in the long grass, thistles and dandelions, there were goats and lambs chomping away merrily.

Leaving the mound, they entered the shantytown, walking down a rough dirt lane between two rows of houses. There was a



man coming toward them now. For a moment, Robin tensed up, ready for anything, but the man just carried on walking by with a blank expression on his careworn features. But that is not what really spooked Robin.

“My God,” he whispered to Ellie when the man had safely passed and was out of earshot. “Did you see that?”

“See what, sweetie?” Ellie asked.

“That guy. He had these really cold, unblinking eyes, set way back in dark eye sockets. The lights were on but there was nobody home, as the saying goes.”

“Yes, it is sad to see,” she nodded.

“Sad to see? It's like something out of *Village of the Damned*,” he protested.

“I think you have the wrong movie, Robin. More like *28 Days Later*, but I do take your point. That's the state the man is in at a psychic level. If you could see your own true state, you know, you might be equally shocked, if not more so.

“But don't judge the others by that man,” Ellie added. “He's particularly unfortunate.”

“Yes, like a zombie,” he echoed.

“Well, these ideas that writers have aren't plucked out of thin air, you know. No, let me rephrase that: in a sense these ideas often *are* floating around in the ether. People write about these things for a reason, even if they're unaware of the real reason. Or at least the original writers do. Those who come after are often simply copying other people's ideas. More often than not, the details vary; but nevertheless, these writers get the overall pattern right.”

“How do you explain it?” he wanted to know.

“What? The sleepwalkers or ideas floating around?”

“The sleepwalkers.”

“Well, people can fall, or they can get stuck in the ethereal and astral realms. I mean, we wouldn't even be here had we not fallen ourselves at some point in time. Think of *Alice in Wonderland* and consider the possibility that it was, in part, a cautionary tale. In some cases, people get a taste for an altered state of being – or for the low life, for that matter – and they get hooked on it. Or, put another way, they were on a train journey and got off at the wrong station, perhaps distracted and bewitched

by the glittering sideshows, or thinking that they'd arrived at the final destination.”

“So, what does it mean, seeing people like this?”

“It could mean one of two things, Robin: that you've either stirred in your sleep, if not as yet woken up; or that you find yourself in the same kind of lowly state or on the same plane as such people. Like I told you: an angry man will find himself in an angry world, remember? There are universal laws at work, even here. The Law of Attraction; the Law of Correspondence; and the Law of Karma. That is: like attracts like; as within, so without; and what goes around comes around. So you need to do a whole lot more than dotting your Is and crossing your Ts, or minding your Ps and Qs.”

Now that was a sobering thought, and it rattled him a little to hear Ellie state these truths so baldly.

“Yes,” he replied, sucking in his breath. “I remember.”

Ellie just smiled at him and as he peered into her big green eyes, the strangest thing happened. As he watched, her features seemed to change subtly into those of a fox.

He shook his head and opened and closed his eyes, and the next time he looked, all he saw once more was Ellie, the same as she'd ever been.

This happened a second time, too, a few moments later. A shapely young lady in a long, full floral dress came up the lane toward them with half a dozen children merrily skipping along by her side, greeting him and Ellie warmly as she passed. And again for a moment, he could picture the scene as if it were out of some fairytale and she were Snow White herself.

He wasn't sure whether he dare mention this to Ellie, in case she thought that these things were tell-tale signs of drug taking or psychosis or something equally or more dire than that.

“As Hamlet once remarked, Robin: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'”

Ellie must have read his thoughts.

“Oh, you mean the foxy chick and Snow White?” she added.

“What can I say?” he asked. “I'll admit that I'm gobsmacked.”

Then: “Does that mean that you can read my every thought?”

Ellie shook her head. “No, sometimes I just tune in and pick up things, I mean things in general like feelings or specific dangers. Sometimes, only sometimes, I can hear other people's thoughts in my own mind. Never if I want to, though; only when for some reason I need to. Anyhow, don't worry: your thoughts won't tell me something you really don't want me to know; unless, as I say, there is a pressing need. So, if you get the urge to play with yourself in the bathroom, any time, don't mind me, you just got right ahead.”

Well, you could knock me down with a feather, he gasped, flushing bright crimson and averting his gaze.

“In this case, perhaps it happened because you need to know that there really is more to this world than meets the casual or untutored eye? All those old myths and legends and fairytales didn't just appear out of nowhere for no good reason, you know. They came about because there really is such a thing as magic or that it once flourished in the world. Or at least there is something extraordinary that people commonly refer to, or dismiss, as magic.

“Why does there appear to be so little magic in the world these days? It is because people have stopped believing in it or lose touch with it as they grow up. It is because we have become so sophisticated and lost our ancient and natural roots. It is because religion, science and education have taught us that magic does not exist. That even supposing it does exist – which to many is far too big an 'if' – then it couldn't possibly work. Their self-fulfilling sophistry complete, they then turn round and say 'There you are you see, there *is* no magic in the world, just as we said.' And we and the world are all the poorer as a result of this. I mean, what are we left with? Santa, the Easter Bunny, Harry Potter and the Tooth Fairy.”

Ellie seemed filled with great passion as she spoke. Clearly this was something that touched her heart deeply.

“Yet now, sorcery rules the world. Of course, most don't call it sorcery; indeed, many would be horrified by such a notion. Instead, they use words like ideology, politics, defence, security, patriotism, commerce, industry, marketing, consumerism and belief. But where there is power-seeking, especially power over others or *for* oneself, though also *over* oneself, and be it wittingly

or unwittingly conjured up, make no mistake: there is sorcery afoot. It just comes in different shades and colours, that's all.

“You know, when a famous former statesman dies and the social networks are alive with calls of *Ding dong! The Wicked Witch is dead!* – albeit in poor taste – then that really should tell the elite something. But it doesn't. The message either falls on deaf ears or is readily dismissed and it is lost amidst the many touching eulogies and rhetoric.”

There were a lot of kids in the shantytown and Robin was worried that he and Ellie would be followed around and pestered for money, as tended to happen in many tourist locations, but he was pleasantly surprised to find them well behaved.

He and Ellie passed through a thriving street market, full of overflowing with fruit, vegetables, meat and all manner of hand-crafted items, from useful household utensils to beautiful and creative ornaments, to colourful clothes and sturdy walking shoes. Almost without exception, as they zig-zagged through the bustling market, the people greeted them, but it didn't seem to be in their cultural DNA to aggressively hawk their wares or beg, let alone sell their bodies or the bodies of their womenfolk, as was all too common elsewhere. Whether Ellie bought or not, or gave out some small change or not – and she did from time to time – the welcome that these people gave was freely and equally given. It was a part of their basic humanity and fellow-feeling, rather than simple pride or part of some sales pitch.

They finally made it through the far side of the market, with Ellie making a special point of checking out each and every one of the stalls and then retracing her steps to make the best purchases. She wasn't looking to haggle for the best prices, but rather for the best quality. Of course, Robin did think that in doing this, she'd disappoint some of the traders whose produce she declined, but then had she bought something from every single stall, they'd have had to hire a removals van to transport the goods. As it was, by the time they left the market, they were both weighed down by bulging carrier bags and, to be honest, Robin was more than a little bemused at her excess.

“Right then,” Ellie decided, striding off along the lane. Every so often, she'd turn off to the left or right through the vast shantytown, until quite soon Robin – who was bringing up the

rear with most of the carrier bags – was hopelessly lost. Then finally Ellie came to a halt beside a rather grand looking, studded oak door flanked by high stone walls.

Ellie put one of her carrier bags down and pulled on a small brass handle at the end of a length of multi-coloured plaited cord. Robin could hear a bell jingling beyond the door.

Moments later he heard the approaching clitter-clatter of feet on tiles, then the pulling of a metal bolt. A small hatch opened in the door at about head height and a friendly female face peered out at them.

“Miss Ellie!” the girl lilted, seeing them standing there and, quickly closing the hatch and bolting it, she heaved the heavy door open and stood to one side to beckon them inside.

She and Ellie exchanged a brief hug and then the girl guided them inside, round a sheltered quadrangle and got them settled in a spacious, airy and tastefully decorated reception room.

“Please excuse me one moment and I’ll go and let Missus Algar know that you’ve come to visit.”

As they sat there, a crowd of small children went by the open French windows of the reception room and dashed out into the courtyard, presumably to play. Then moments later, a middle aged lady in a neat tweed two-piece suit followed them outside and entered the reception room through one of the open doors.

Ellie rose to her feet as the lady entered, and he followed suit, waiting patiently as the two ladies shared a warm hug and exchanged greetings, then turned to him.

“Robin, meet Missus Algar. She runs a small school here for some of the younger children. Missus Algar, meet my good friend, Robin, who came to join us here a few weeks ago.”

“Jolly good to meet you, Robin,” the lady beamed, grasping his hand in a deceptively firm grip and pumping his hand energetically. “And call me Maud. Now please don’t stand on ceremony. Take a seat on the sofa and Marie will bring refreshments through in a few minutes.”

Ellie pointed to the collection of carrier bags in the doorway. “I hope you don’t mind, but I brought you a few things. I’m sorry it’s not much.”

“Oh, that is so kind of you, Ellie and Robin,” Maud Algar smiled. “Do you mind if I take a peek?”

“Not at all,”

The lady got up from her seat and trotted across to have a look in the bags. Then she turned back to Ellie. “Oh, really, that is so kind of you. Of course you shouldn't have, but thank you so much. That will help enormously. If it's alright with you, we'll take what we need and share the rest around between the children to take home to their parents. Oh, I really can't thank you enough.”

Well that would teach him for making assumptions and jumping to all the wrong conclusions on the basis of inadequate information.

“Yes, Maud,” Ellie laughed. “As I was going round the market, I could see my dear friend Robin giving me funny looks. Thinking that I was buying all these things for myself, he must have thought I'd lost my marbles.”

Oh thanks. That's right, rub it in.

Maud Algar shook her head and whispered to Ellie: “Oh you have a wicked sense of humour, Ellie, but you're embarrassing your poor friend.”

That's it gal, you tell her.

*She's right, though*, he distinctly heard a voice whisper in his own ear.

## 19. Betrayed

Much later that afternoon, after spending time with Maud Algar and sharing a welcome salad with her, Robin and Ellie set off once more. As the lady waved them off, they turned and began to retrace their way across the city in the general direction of the portal through which they'd entered this forbidden zone.

So wrapped up were they in each other's company and lively conversation that they failed to see the hunchbacked youth pointing them out to Darius. "There they are, you see," the youth grinned mischievously. "I told you that's where I'd seen the strangers."

Yes, it was the girl, Ellie, alright. And that's who she'd been with all this time: that stinking vagrant again. God knows what a good looking woman like her saw in the wretch. It made his skin crawl just thinking about it. By hook or by crook, he'd have her; and second to that, he'd find out exactly how she could come and go in the game as she wished. She must have had a fancy piece of kit, because there's no way that the system would let you teleport in or out of the compound, and she hadn't been past security, through the main gate. Now that secret alone was worth a helluva lot of money to the right people.

And then he realized how foolish he had been to report this to the Authorities as abuse, and he cursed his own lack of joined up thinking.

Darius was about to set off after the pair when the youth grasped hold of him by the arm. "You'd pay me for my troubles, that's what you said."

Now that, especially from one of these untouchables, he did not like one bit.

Darius pulled his arm free and took hold of the youth by the throat with his left hand, lifting him three or four inches clear of the ground, and drew his dagger with his right. "Oh, I'll pay you alright. But I didn't say *how* I would pay you, did I?"

"Ug, ug, ug." That's all the youth could say with the man's iron grip around his throat.

By now the youth could hardly breathe, and his eyes began to

bulge. Indeed they were threatening to pop out of their sockets.

Finally Darius relented. He let go of his grip and the youth collapsed in a hunched up heap, desperately trying to catch his breath. As Darius sheathed his dagger and set out to follow the pair, he had second thoughts and, rummaging in his pocket, he produced a silver coin and tossed it in the dirt near the youth, before moving on. It was all the ready cash he had left on him that day after bribing the guard to grant him a visitor's pass.

Still breathless, the youth scabbled in the dirt to retrieve the coin and pocket it before anyone else could steal it away from him.



## 20. The lock down

After a few moments of searching around, Ellie had found the way out of the enclosure and she and Robin had just emerged through the other side of the wall. Unbeknownst to her, Darius had spotted them close by the wall and he made a dash for the main gate to sign out, hoping that he wouldn't be too far behind them.

She intended to walk back into the industrial estate until they were well clear of the enclosure and then, given that it was already quite late in the day and the sun was beginning to go down, she and Robin would teleport back home from there. For obvious reasons, the system didn't allow teleporting to and from the enclosure itself, and to teleport from close by was just asking for trouble, because you never knew who might be monitoring your movements. Even then, there was an element of risk, but it was a risk that she'd simply have to take.

“You know, Ellie,” Robin spoke at length. “I can't help thinking of that guy we saw shortly after we entered the shantytown. It was like he was in a world of his own.”

She nodded. “With a very few exceptions, we all live in our own little worlds.”

“Everyone appears to be to some degree mad,” he added. “The other night, as I lay in bed, I made a long list of people picked entirely at random from my friends and family to celebrities and politicians, and I could see that almost without exception they had their quirks or skeletons in their closets. Don't get me wrong, I don't mean that these are bad people, or anything: it's just like something's got in the water supply and poisoned them.”

She laughed, though the topic of conversation was actually quite serious; a lot more serious, in fact, than dear Robin assumed. “Yes, we are in a real pickle. Welcome to the pan-galactic insane asylum.”

Then she added: “But there's really no shame in that, and if you do feel shame, then it's useful to bear in mind that we are all in the same boat, and to remember that at the end of the day, all

the chess pieces go back in the same box. Or, as Master Bupposo so succinctly and aptly once put it: we all sit in the same pot.

“There are many factors at work here, such as peer pressure and conditioning: issues with the software or the database, that is. Though fraught with difficulty, we can handle these. And then there is faulty wiring in the modern human brain: in the firmware and the hardware, if you like. Now that *does* present us with a real challenge in the decades and centuries ahead.

“There are some that say that we are up shit creek without a paddle, but I hold out a little more hope for humanity than this. Well, not hope exactly. Promise, more like. There is a growing Necessity and, thankfully, there *are* changes afoot in the realm of conscious evolution.

“Now whether that will come quickly enough and be sufficiently efficacious to save our species from extinction or mutually assured destruction, however, very much hangs in the balance. I suspect that it's going to be a bumpy road, and that cherished and not so cherished institutions, ways of life, even whole civilizations may be lost or toppled in the process. This may even be necessary in the long term and for the greater good, if there is to be real and sustainable and lasting change.”

After walking for a few minutes through the estate, she decided that they'd gone far enough. The place appeared to be deserted, but out of habit she furtively cast her eyes around to make sure that they weren't being followed. Just then, out of the corner of her eye, she happened to catch sight of a distant figure which abruptly dodged to one side to be lost in the lengthening shadows of the buildings.

“What's up?” Robin wanted to know, perhaps sensing her unease.

“Just keep walking,” she advised him urgently, grabbing hold of his arm and striding on up the road. Then: “Whatever you do, don't look now, but I think we're being followed.”

Of course, when you told someone not to look back, they very often felt a compelling desire to do just that.

“Robin!” she hissed, dragging him up the road.

“You think we're being followed. Are you sure? The mind can play some funny tricks with shadows, you know.”

She carried on up the road without slackening her pace. It

didn't really matter which way they headed, just so long as they put some distance between them and their pursuer. "Trust me, Robin, I *know* that we're being followed."

At that moment, she had an intuitive thought and, fetching out her smart phone, she typed in a user name and brought up the profile. Yes, her hunch had been spot on.

"I thought so. It's Darius," she hissed, as much thinking aloud as for Robin's benefit. "I was hoping that by now he would have got the message that I'm not interested."

Well, she said 'not interested', but that was a euphemism for feelings of utter contempt, disgust and loathing. Yes, and fear too, because a degenerate like Darius – who was a few cards short of a full deck – might stoop to any level to get his own way or exact revenge.

She was just setting up her smart phone ready to make their hop and reaching out for Robin's hand to take him with her when she saw the tell-tale shimmering ahead of her. She spun around and saw another ghostly figure emerging to her right, too.

Drawing in a deep breath, she tapped the button marked "Go" and was shocked that nothing happened.

Ahead of her and to one side, the figures had emerged now, and there was no mistaking the black uniforms of the Enforcers. She frantically tapped again and again on the Go button, but nothing happened. They must have locked her down.

"Catch!" she screamed, tossing the smart phone to Robin. For a moment he stood there, frozen to the spot and with an anguished look etched across his features and then he began to shimmer and was gone, leaving her alone as the Enforcers slowly advanced, their stun guns trained on her.

"Freeze!" bellowed one of the Enforcers.

"Okay," she conceded nervously, slowly raising her arms in the air. "It's a fair cop."

"On the ground! Face down!"

She dutifully complied.

"Now spread your legs! Hands behind your head!"

Well, there was one small mercy. Since Robin had been able to get away whilst she had not, then that meant the Enforcers were after her and not him. So he was safe – for now, at least.

And Robin had her smart phone. The Enforcers would give

their eye teeth for the incriminating data on that phone. She hoped and prayed that Robin would realize that and push the factory reset button or get rid of the phone; if nothing else, at least change the SIM card so that they couldn't trace it.

## 21. A text message

As Darius emerged through the main gate of the enclosure, he caught sight of the girl and the vagrant hurrying away into the industrial estate and he dashed after them, keeping to the shadows alongside the disused buildings. He'd wait a while, then make a quick dash across open ground to the next building, and then wait a few more moments, to make sure that he kept a safe distance between them and him.

Just then he could feel his phone rattling away in his jacket pocket. He'd put it on vibrate to avoid attracting unwelcome attention. The last thing he needed right now was for the opening chords of *Bat Out of Hell* to suddenly strike up and echo around the deserted estate.

Stopping for a brief moment, he checked his phone.

*You have one new message.*

Knowing his luck, it was probably just some SMS spam selling him prOn or pills to heighten his sexual experience. With his new seven inch enhancement, he didn't need any pills, thank you very much.

Hell no, it was from support.

*Hi Darius, thanks for the abuse report you filed. Will investigate and contact you when enquiries complete. To track progress visit support web site and enter code B345987X.*

“Yes!” Darius whooped, punching the air. That's spit in your eye, sister.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth, than the girl stopped dead in her tracks and looked back. He belatedly dived for cover in a nearby doorway and hoped for the best. However, he could see now that the pair had picked up the pace and were striding off down the road, so it was almost certain that she'd clocked him. Shit, that bitch must have eyes in the back of her head, or bionic hearing.

## 22. Second-guessed

Robin wasn't quite sure what was happening. He saw the figures emerging around them and, turning sharply around on the spot, he could see Ellie urgently tapping away at the screen of her smart phone. He could tell by her anguished expression that something bad was happening and something had gone seriously wrong.

Then she tossed the phone in his direction, he reached out and caught it mid-flight, and just a few moments later, he landed in a heap on the hard, cold paving slabs.

It took him a while to get his bearings, but he could see now that he was back outside the Corner Café from where they'd first set out that day. Judging by the force of this and his earlier landing, the global positioning system on the smart phone was not quite as accurate as the standard in-game teleport.

Just as he was picking himself up and dusting himself down, he caught sight of someone else beaming in, a few yards further down the road. It was Darius. The thug must have second-guessed his last move.

Not knowing quite where he was heading or what he was doing, Robin set off down the road at a sprint, anxious to put some distance between him and the thug while he thought of a way out.

Stopping for a brief second, he checked the screen of Ellie's smart phone to see if he could figure out how to work it, but there was no way that he could make sense of the menus, let alone swipe and tap his way through them whilst he was on the run. Only then did it occur to him that the sensible thing to have done would have been not to run but to simply take temporary refuge inside the café. Darius would not have dared to tackle him there.

The only thing going for Robin right now was that though Darius was a big and muscular guy, Robin could outrun him. However, whether he had the stamina to stay ahead was a debatable question. Only now did he realize that perhaps some of the hours he'd spent sat at his desk pouring over his computer might have been better spent out jogging or, for that matter,

simply walking in the park and along the seafront – anything to keep him in shape.

He was still perhaps a decent sprinter, but casting backward glances every now and again and judging by the way Darius was pacing himself, the thug was perhaps more suited to running a full marathon. He couldn't help but be reminded of the fabled race between the tortoise and the hare – in this case, perhaps an ill-fated race – and that was deeply worrying.

## 23. Locked up

As soon as Ellie had tossed the smart phone to Robin and seen him safely on his way, she dodged past one of the Enforcers and pelted up the road, hell for leather. The Enforcers made no move to go after her, but she'd only got a few yards when she felt a sharp prick in her left shoulder.

It must have been some kind of dart.

She ran on, but now she could feel herself going dizzy and she began to lose the ability to run. It was a hopeless situation, she knew that, yet still she ran. Every moment they spent chasing her, dear Robin would be that much further away, and that's all she could do for the lad, really, if the Enforcers were on his case, too: just give him a head start.

Her legs had turned to jelly and for a time it felt like she was wading waist deep in sticky molasses, until finally her legs completely buckled beneath her, the ground rushed up to meet her and she knew no more.

Some time later she suddenly regained consciousness and it took her several moments before she suddenly realized that she'd even been unconscious. How long she had been out cold, she had no idea. It could have been mere minutes or several hours. There had just been oblivion, with nobody awake to register any passage of time.

After a time, she was shocked to recall being ambushed by the Enforcers, then running away and being hit by some kind of tranquillizer dart. She could still feel a stinging sensation in her left shoulder. And then she thought of poor Robin, and she hoped and prayed that he had got safely away.

Finally, drawing a series of deep breaths to calm herself, Ellie slowly opened her eyes and looked around.

She found herself laid on a thin rubber mattress in a small cell, measuring perhaps eight feet long by no more than four feet wide.

It was quite dark in the cell, with only one tiny, barred window, above head height, let into one of the walls, and a small light bulb above her head, covered with a stout protective mesh.



The only reason that small blessing was there, most likely, was so that her gaolers could keep an eye on her. It was not there for her benefit.

The floor and walls were made of roughly hewn granite, and her instant reaction, other than to register the cold air, was that there was no way she'd be able to scrape a tunnel out of there, even given a pickaxe, let alone a sharpened metal spoon. Four feet past the end of her makeshift bed was a stout, studded wooden door with a small closed hatch at about head height and a tiny spy hole to one side of that.

In one corner of the cell was a plastic bucket with a broken handle, the purpose of which was disgustingly clear to her. Other than that, the cell was quite bare.

There wasn't even a single blanket on the mattress to offer a little warmth. The warders, whoever they were, perhaps thought that she might hang herself, given a blanket. Indeed, given the dire predicament she was in, she might have considered that final solution. Well, with all the adrenalin pumping through her system now, at least she had nervous energy and muscular shivers to take the edge off the cold.

Of course, what she should have done as soon as she found herself surrounded was hit the panic button, she could see that now. That way, she would have evaded capture. As for Robin, though he would have been badly shaken by the ordeal, the Authorities would probably have had to release him for lack of evidence. But in the heat of the moment, her affection and concern for Robin had swayed her judgement. And as a direct consequence of this, she had been taken and the safety of the whole network of Friends – or at least the Friends with whom she was acquainted, and their friends in turn – had been placed in jeopardy. Even if she did somehow miraculously manage to escape from the Authorities, she would still have to face probing questions and perhaps censure from the Director and from the Committee.

Don't get caught. That was a cardinal rule. Even the rookies knew that, since it was drilled into them right from the very start. Above all else, don't get caught. Being pragmatic, the Friends had, however, added a rider to that. If you do get caught, then find a way out even, they said, if this requires personal sacrifice. The

Friends didn't spell out what personal sacrifice meant, precisely. They didn't have to. Nor did they supply their field operatives with cyanide capsules in hollowed out teeth or anything spooky like that. But yes, if the warders were foolish enough to supply her with a blanket or a metal spoon that she could sharpen on the granite wall, then she knew what she must do.

Right now, the only thing that Ellie had going for her was that the Authorities hadn't got their hands on her smart phone. But that wouldn't hold them back for long. At best it would only buy her a little time and postpone the inevitable.

## 24. The perils of not-knowing

They left Ellie alone for several hours in the cell, without food or water, not that she felt like eating or drinking. Every now and again as she dozed off to sleep, someone would come along with a jingle of keys and make a special point of opening the hatch in the door, peering inside and slamming the hatch shut. No doubt this was all part of the game, to leave her to stew in her own juices and soften her up prior to interrogation.

Really, though, if that's the best they could do, she could handle that much. At least that's what she'd like to think. She knew, deep down, that this was just the beginning and that it could get a hell of a lot worse.

Then again, when she thought about it, they had already started working on her. They hadn't said a word to her as yet, let alone apply a thumbscrew, and here she was filling herself with self-doubt. Then there was the not-knowing, itself. Human minds being the fallible instruments that they are, she couldn't help but fill in the gaps with horrific possibilities, the application of a thumbscrew being a case in point. They hadn't said a word about torture, and yet here she was already bracing herself for something that might never happen, and scaring herself silly for no good reason. So yes, the psychological torture had already begun, if not in reality then in her own mind.

She had to laugh. The economy of action really was quite impressive, considering her captors had not said a word to her, nor raised a finger to harm her. And already she was beginning to ramble incoherently.

She wondered how Robin would have coped had he been caught. In one way, his naivety would have helped him. There was a time, too, when she would have laughed it off. There he would be, firmly believing that the worst penalty the Authorities could dole out would be to ban him from the game, and all that he'd have to do was hit Control X and then sign up again under a pseudonym. But then again, maybe it would have hit him with double the force when he found out that his captors were in fact acting in deadly earnest and that they could easily prevent him

from hitting Control X? Even pursue him off-game, in what he thought of as real life, and wage a silent war of attrition, secretly plotting against him to thwart all his plans, and leaving him believing that he was a hopeless shit magnet. Or they might terminate his account, to use the official vernacular, if they were granted approval from on high? Fortunately for Robin, they reserved such extreme measures for those few who had penetrated the secrets of the game and knew far too much to be allowed their liberty. Friends like her, Maud Algar and Master Bupposo.

Oh my God, if Robin only knew what these people were capable of, he would probably beat them to it and die of sheer fright. As Idries Shah once so rightly wrote, though in a different context: “Enlightenment must come little by little, otherwise it would overwhelm.”

## 25. Come out, come out

Although by now his legs were beginning to ache and turn to rubber, and he had a nagging stitch in his side, Robin kept running. He was heading for the common. He knew that there was no way that he'd be able to get into the garden café, but there were plenty of trees and bushes in the area, and he figured that he'd be able to remain hidden from view for long enough to be able to figure out how Ellie's smart phone worked.

Darius was still on his tail, but it looked like the thug also knew where he was heading, and Darius appeared to be quite content to follow him at a distance until he eventually ran out of steam. Or perhaps Darius has spotted him and Ellie near the café before and was thinking that he'd wait until Robin got close, then teleport there to cut him off? Robin didn't know this, and yet he had a strange feeling that this is what Darius was planning, and Robin was beginning to take heed of these intuitive hunches.

*Don't worry, sunshine,* whispered the voice. *We're with you every step of the way.*

There was a corner in the road ahead, just near the entrance to a park, and close by, there was an old public toilet. As he rounded the corner, Robin knew what he must do. He ducked inside the public toilet, oblivious to the stench of stale piss and fumbling in his pocket for some loose change as he went. Approaching a row of cubicles, he hastily inserted a coin in the slot, turned the handle, pushed the door, slipped into the cubicle and firmly locked the door behind him. He was hoping to hell that Darius would think that he'd entered the park and hidden himself in the bushes there.

Lowering the seat, he sat down on the throne and pulled out the smart phone. There was no time for squeamishness or propriety. No sooner had he brought up the home screen, however, than he heard the distinctive clitter-clatter of heels on the hard and grimy tiles outside.

He clicked on Contacts. There was no way to add contacts to separate folders, so all he could do was scroll through the long list. There was a search facility, of course, but to use that, you

really had to know what you were looking for, so this was not an option in this case.

“Hey vagrant!” a deep voice echoed around the bare tiled lavatory. “I know you're in here.”

Robin's heart lurched, but he drew a deep breath and continued to scroll through the list.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are!” the voice lilted. And Robin heard one cubicle door after another slam against the partition walls.

“Hey! What's your game?” called a gruff voice. “Piss off!”

“Piss off yourself, Granddad,” Darius retorted.

The footsteps were slow and measured, and Robin knew then that Darius had probably already seen the Engaged sign on the cubicle door, and that the man was toying with him.

“I wonder where the stinking vagrant could be?” the voice taunted him.

All the entries in the contacts were in the form of initials. One of the first that Robin came across was CC. He did think that was probably short for Corner Café and he nearly pressed it in his panic, but realized at the last moment that this would be suicide. Darius was sure to check out that location.

Robin distinctly heard the seat in the adjacent cubicle drop and moments later, he looked up in alarm to see Darius standing up on the seat and leering at him over the top of the wooden partition.

“Well, well. Look what I've found. A filthy, stinking vagrant who's grown too big for his boots and needs taking down a peg or two.”

JM. God knows who or where that was.

NS. That must be Newbie Square.

Darius had climbed down from the seat now and Robin could hear him rattling the door handle outside.

“What you doing in there, vagrant? Wanking yourself?”

The only one that looked promising was MR, which Robin figured might be Master Bupposo.

Darius was kicking at the door now, and Robin could see the brass fittings beginning to buckle.

Then it hit him. If Darius didn't know his user name, then the thug couldn't trace him. He could hit any of the entries that Darius

didn't know about.

At that moment, the lock on the door gave way and the door was flung open, the brass handle crunching through the wooden side partition.

As Darius stalked in, Robin hit the little button labelled “Go” beside the entry and in an instant he was gone.

Robin managed to land on his feet this time, having finally got the hang of the jumps. If you watched your feet, you could just get a glimpse of the ground beneath you, a fraction of a second before you landed.

His heart was thumping wildly now, and he spent two or three minutes counting his breaths before looking around for the house.

For the life of him, Robin couldn't remember the number of Master Bupposo's house, nor even the colour of the door. That's how awake and observant he was. The only thing he knew was that the house was close-by, to his left, so all he could do was try the doors one by one.

Of course, as soon as he tried the first door, Robin realized that there was a problem, because the door was locked. He tried half a dozen doors and every one of them was locked. Thinking that he might be able to attract Master Bupposo's attention, he quickly went from one door to the next, knocking loudly until his knuckles were bruised. Then he stood in the middle of the street for a few moments, scanning the upstairs rooms and looking for the tell-tale twitching of lace curtains. There was not the faintest flicker.

Robin was about to concede defeat and go through the list of contacts again, to select a different location.

*The pram*, an inner voice prompted him.

What about it?

*The pram in the hallway. Do I have to spell this out, Sherlock?*

Of course! he realized, and he dashed up to one of the houses, raised the letterbox and peered inside.

*Hurrah! Finally he twigs. What a winner! Give that man a teddy bear.*

Sod off.

When he came to the third house and peered through the

letterbox, he did indeed spot the rusty old pram half blocking the hallway, and again he rapped on the door with all his might, then stood out in the street while he checked the upstairs windows. There was not a flutter.

So now what? One of the upstairs windows was slightly open and he could just about reach the sill if he shinned up the drainpipe.

*Not unless you're feeling suicidal, the voice prompted him. We've tried brains and that got us so far ...*

Try some brawn, you mean?

*Well, go on then. What are you waiting for?*

Robin looked anxiously around.

*The street's deserted, Robin. So what if you make a clatter?*

Robin eyed up the door.

Sure, but I don't think that Master Bupposo is going to be very pleased if I kick his door in.

*Robin, your bosom pal Ellie is in deep doo-doo. What's a little splintered wood between friends? And if Ellie talks, it might not be safe for Master Bupposo to stay here much longer, anyway.*

Well, you have a point, Robin was forced to admit.

Taking a deep breath, he walked out into the street and faced the door, then he charged at it with his shoulder. There was a splintering of wood, the door flew wide open and he went sprawling inside, narrowly missing the pram.

*Okay, okay. It lacked a little finesse, but at least we're in, the voice remarked.*

Feeling a little shaken, Robin got to his feet. He was about to go upstairs but thought it prudent to push the front door-to, on the off-chance that someone happened to pass by.

*Come on, don't dilly-dally, the voice nagged at him. Time is of the essence.*

He took the stairs two at a time, and when he reached the top, he paused to catch his breath. Only now did he begin to feel the pain in his shoulder and realize that it was possibly badly bruised.

Standing outside the room where Master Bupposo had entertained them, he was about to knock, but catching sight of his own unthinking folly, he turned the handle and dashed straight in.

There was nobody there. The room was utterly bare and, judging by the thick layer of dust that he kicked up, there was no



sign that anybody had been there in years. Just like the garden café, when he and Ellie had entered the house, or at least this room, then they must have been passing through a portal into another location; a location that occupied the same space and the same basic form. And now, with Ellie not here, he perhaps didn't have the rights to access that hidden realm?

Robin sighed a deep sigh and disconsolately left the room and trudged back downstairs and into the street.

Okay, Einstein. What now?

The voice, too, seemed to sigh deeply inside him.

*Now you go back to the list of contacts and try somewhere else,* the voice suggested helpfully.

And what if the same thing happens there?

*Then like the proverbial spider: If at first you don't succeed – try, try again.*

*And what if that doesn't work, either?*

*Well, as one wit put it: If at first you don't succeed – cheat.*

Oh, very droll.

*I'm just trying to relieve the tension here, Robin.*

Yes, you are trying!

*Now, now. You're not going to get anywhere whilst you're all wound up like a clockwork crocodile going snap, snap, snap! at people's ankles.*

Okay, okay. I guess that's true enough.

Hey, what if I sent Master Buposo a text message?

*I may be wrong, but he doesn't strike me as the sort of man who'd use SMS. A cultural and generational thing, I think. Of course, don't quote me on this: I could be wrong.*

It's worth a try.

*Then again, a text message might be intercepted.*

Ah, better scrub that idea, then.

## 26. Interrogation

They came for Ellie much later. She'd long since lost track of time and could not have even said whether it was day or night or even the same date, but for the tiny, barred window high in the wall. Thank heavens for small mercies.

“Right lady, on your feet,” requested the burly guard, lashing out at her as she lay there on the floor clutching at the thin rubber mattress. Clearly, lady was just a label, not a concession to the fair sex.

Making an effort, she pushed herself up to a kneeling position and, grabbing her roughly by the arm, the guard unceremoniously dragged her to her feet, out through the cell door and off down a grey and green corridor.

They passed by several doors on the way down the long corridor, before turning a corner and entering an open room nearby. In the centre, there was a table and at either side of the table, there was a hardback metal chair. Needless to say, the table and chairs were firmly bolted to the stone floor.

The guard thrust her into the chair nearest the door and, taking out a set of handcuffs, he manacled her left ankle to the leg of the chair. Then he promptly turned on his heel and left, slamming and bolting the door behind him.

Ellie had expected that they'd have sent someone in to “interview” her not long after being taken to the room, but again it looked like they were playing with her.

Every few minutes, someone would come into the room, have a wander round and then leave again, not saying a word to her and not even acknowledging her presence, nor the questions that she put to them. Sometimes they'd be walking around sipping a plastic beaker of coffee; the next would be munching on a sandwich. And on it went.

Who are you? she'd ask. No comment.

Why am I here? No answer would be the reply.

Well, at least they hadn't put a sack over her head or resorted to waterboarding, though of course there was always the distinct possibility that such treatment might come later. One of the

visitors had had a pair of rusty pliers in his hand when he entered, and seeing this, she had feared the worst.

Again, what bothered her the most was simply not-knowing, and presumably the mere fact that she was asking questions told them that she had a need for answers, and they could then play on that need all the more and use it as a concession to hold over her in order to get her to divulge whatever information that they were after.

After perhaps an hour, perhaps two, others entered the room: an older man in a long white lab coat with ominous brown stains on the front that might once have been blood, and a younger, dumpy woman in a nurse's uniform. She came in pushing a metal trolley, which she left parked in one corner of the room. Ellie couldn't quite see what was on the trolley, but her initial reaction was that it was the sort of trolley surgeons might use in an operating theatre, perhaps full of instruments the surgeon might use to prise and cut and saw and pump? Seeing this, her pulse began to race uncontrollably.

The man reached into one of the pockets of his lab coat, produced a pack of cigarettes and lit up. He looked a bit like Dr. Crippen in the film of the same name, that she'd once seen on television. "Oh, I'm sorry. May I offer you a cigarette, Miss Grant? It is Eleanor Grant, isn't it?"

Without thinking, she replied. "No thanks, I don't smoke." And immediately, in responding to the man's question, she had given him something and straight away undermined her grim determination to divulge nothing more than her metaphorical name, rank and serial number.

"Then perhaps I might offer you a drink? Tea perhaps, or coffee if you prefer?"

There was nothing that Ellie would have liked better at that moment, than to quench her thirst with a good cup of tea. But if she said yes, then the man would probably press her for some further item of information in return for the concession.

"No thank you," she replied, with as little expression as she could muster.

And again, the man had succeeded in part, by provoking a response from her. She guessed that it wouldn't matter whether the response was positive or negative at this preliminary stage,

merely that two-way communication had been established.

“You know, we can do this the easy way or the hard way,” the man spoke up after he'd taken a few drags on the cigarette and stubbed it out on the floor. “Which is it to be?”

“No comment.”

The nurse pulled on a pair of white rubber gloves as Ellie watched, then fished around on the trolley. “Would you like the pliers now, Doctor?”

The doctor reached across the table and instinctively Ellie pulled back her hands.

The man paused for a moment, peering into Ellie's eyes and perhaps trying to gauge her reaction. “Not for now, Nurse. I don't want to have to resort to such measures quite yet. I'm hoping that given the right encouragement, Miss Grant here will see sense.”

“My name is Eleanor Grant,” she told the man.

“Thank you, Miss Grant, but that much has already been established. It is *Miss* Grant, isn't it?”

“Yes,” she nodded.

“And are you romantically attached?”

“No comment.”

“I understand that there was a young man with you when you were apprehended?”

“No comment,” she replied again.

“You know, it's only a matter of time before we catch up with him.”

Then, not quite knowing whether it was the right thing to do, Ellie added: “He is an innocent party and is not involved in any way. Do what you like to me, but leave him out of this.”

“Then you do admit to involvement in grossly nefarious acts contrary to the terms and conditions of the game?” the man asked rhetorically.

“To wit,” he began, reading from a card that he'd retrieved from his breast pocket:

*1. Thou shalt play the Game by the rules as laid out in the official terms and conditions. The owners and official controllers of the Game reserve the right to change these rules at any time, without prior notice and for any reason they see fit.*

*2. Thou shalt not drop out of the Game.*

*3. Thou shalt not hide nor obfuscate your online presence.*

*4. Thou shalt not hide nor falsely report your current coordinates.*

“And more importantly, in this case:”

*5. Thou shalt not attempt in any way to game or outwit the system nor the official controls placed upon the Game and upon its players' conduct.*

“No comment.”

*6. Thou shalt not hack into, nor patch into, the Game Servers in any way to access, modify, redirect, hijack, steal from, damage or in any other way interfere with the hardware, the software, the database, the gaming experience, nor any other aspect of the Game.*

“Sounds like you've got all your bases covered there, Doc. Is it okay to fart, or is the rule against that, too?” she enquired, with a sneer.

The man ignored her response. “Do you admit to involvement in grossly nefarious acts contrary to the terms and conditions of the game?” he asked once more.

“No comment.”

“Eleanor. May I call you Eleanor?”

“Suit yourself.”

“Well you know, Eleanor, you're going to have to do a lot better than that, if you really value the health of your male companion. If you were to cooperate with our enquiries, then I can see no reason why we should involve this young man, let alone detain him.”

Ellie sighed and shut her eyes for a moment, realizing that the man had got something else from her that he could use as leverage against her. Every time she opened her mouth, indeed even before she opened her mouth, she put her foot in it.

Ellie drew herself up straight in her seat. “No comment.”

“Would you like the pliers now, Doctor?” asked the nurse once more, holding up a pair.

The doctor looked at Ellie for few moments and then turned back to the nurse with a deep sigh. “Yes, I think so, nurse. But not those clumsy things. Could I have the snipe-nose pliers? It's so much easier to thrust them under the nail and obtain a better purchase.”

Fishing around on the trolley the nurse found another pair,

with quite narrow points. “Are these what you had in mind?”

“Yes,” the doctor nodded. “Those are the ones.”

The nurse came over and waited whilst the doctor put on a pair of rubber gloves, then handed him the pliers.

“If you'd call in the orderlies now, they can help restrain the young lady.”

The nurse bowed her head slightly. “Very good, doctor.”

Shortly afterwards, two burly orderlies wearing white tunics and black trousers entered the room. At the doctor's direction, one of them took Ellie's right arm and neck in a vice-like grip so that she was unable to move her upper body, whilst the other pinned her outstretched left arm to the table.

As the doctor thrust the sharp end of the pliers under Ellie's thumbnail, she felt the most excruciating, stabbing pain. It travelled right up her arm and set her teeth on edge, and she involuntarily screamed out. That, she could just about handle, since the pain was mercifully short and sharp. But as the doctor began to waggle the pliers around and gain leverage to tear out her nail, at the point when she could take the pain any longer, she must have fainted from the shock, for she knew no more.

“Okay,” announced the doctor at length, when he'd finished his gruesome task. “Take the woman back to her cell and we'll leave her to stew for a few more hours. Then we'll see if she's in a mood to cooperate.”

## 27. P!

Robin sat down on the cold, stone doorstep of the house, took out the smart phone from his pocket, unlocked it and brought up the list of contacts once more.

He couldn't make sense of the vast majority of the initials. They were unfathomable. Ellie's system was not exactly user-friendly, but presumably this was the only way that she could hide the identity of the 'special' locations or the name of her Friends?

There was one entry that did stand out, however, and as he scrolled up and down the long list, his eyes were again and again drawn to it, the single capital letter P, followed by a pling: *P!*

The pling seemed to indicate a sense of importance or urgency, but what did the P mean? There must be thousands of words that began with the letter P. Even if he were to bring up a dictionary and skim read the entries, this daunting task might take several hours to complete. Even then, the chances of recognizing the right word in such a huge list would be remote. And yet what else could he do, for crying out loud?

*Time is pressing*, the voice informed him.

Hey buddie: tell me something that I don't know! he snapped. With his heart thumping heavily in his chest, that much was painfully obvious. And the more he thought about it, the more agitated he became.

*Then I strongly suggest that you practise your breathing, Robin. You'll achieve nothing useful while you're all worked up.*

I'm scared of what might happen to Ellie if I can't contact any of her friends to raise the alarm.

*Try to cast that from your mind and concentrate on the immediate challenge, Robin. Start with the letter P and add a vowel, starting with "a" and working your way through "aeiou" and a few other second letters like "h" and "l".*

Okay, okay. Pact, padlock, page, painful, pal ...

*That's the ticket.*

Oh, damn it, I've lost the thread of my thoughts now.

He shook his head from side to side and cursed. Oh, this is hopeless!

*Concentrate Robin, or take a few minutes out to calm yourself. Go for a walk through the streets or find a park bench to sit on and relax. You'll get nowhere while you're in a blind panic.*

Robin's ears pricked up. What did you say?

*I said: go for a walk or find a park bench to sit on and wind down.*

No, not that bit.

*I said that you'll get nowhere while you're all worked up.*

Those weren't your precise words.

*Wound up, worked up, in a blind panic: these words pretty much mean the same thing.*

That's it, don't you see? P for Panic!

*Could be.*

That would explain the exclamation mark, wouldn't it?

*It's your call.*

Oh, thanks a lot.

He was just about to stab his finger on the button, when a thought occurred to him.

But what if it's something else, like P for Police!

*Worry is a cloud that rains destruction, Robin. What have you got to lose?*

Well, my liberty for one thing.

*You think that you're free right now? The voice laughed out loud. What liberty? Ask yourself: what have I really got to lose?*

I'm not entirely convinced by your rhetoric, but maybe you have a point?

*Sometimes the right thing to do is apparently not the sensible thing to do, and we have to take a blind leap of faith into the unknown. Hang the consequences. Are you a man or a mouse, Robin Hargreaves?*

Oh well, here goes nothing.

Without further thought, and his heart in his hands, Robin hit the red button marked "Go".



## 28. Room 101

They eventually came for Ellie several hours later. She'd been dreading that moment since she first regained consciousness, and yet paradoxically, it came as a minor relief from the interminable boredom.

Since she still hadn't had anything to eat or drink, her stomach was rumbling ominously and beginning to hurt, and her energy levels had plummeted.

Again, she was taken down the long corridor, and as she entered the interrogation room, this time she noticed a brass plaque on the door. *Room 101*. It seemed that someone must have read George Orwell's classic, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and had a wicked sense of humour.

And what lay within that room in the Ministry of Love? As O'Brien had informed Winston Smith, *"You asked me once, what was in Room 101. I told you that you knew the answer already. Everyone knows it. The thing that is in Room 101 is the worst thing in the world."*

Room 101 was a torture chamber, where subjects were made to face their worst nightmares, their fears and their phobias.

And again, as the guard roughly pushed her down into the chair and manacled her left foot to the metal leg, Ellie sighed deeply. On its own, "Room 101" was nothing more than a sign on a door, just two simple words. It was she who had allowed herself to conjure up all manner of fears about it, doing half of her captors' work for them without them having to lift a finger. And this was no doubt just as they hoped. Perhaps her intelligence, awareness and sophistication was not a boon to her under such circumstances, as she might have liked to imagine, but actually more of a bane? She could see the wisdom in the saying now, that ignorance is bliss. It was an astute observation.

A few minutes later, the doctor entered the room, with the nurse following in his wake, wheeling in that dreaded metal trolley. Even the squeal of the unoiled wheels jarred on Ellie's nerves and, now reminded of what might lay in store, the thumb on her left hand began to throb and trouble her all the more.

“So, how are we feeling now, Eleanor?” the doctor enquired, taking his seat.

She mumbled something obnoxious under her breath.

“What's that you say? Speak up.”

“How do you think?” she spat back at the man. “Like shit warmed up, if you must know.”

“So, are you ready to tell us about the wall on the common?”

“No comment.”

The man was undaunted. “Or how you managed to pass through three inches of solid, military grade steel in order to gain illicit access to the forbidden zone?”

“It must be magic,” she offered, with more than a hint of sarcasm.

“No, not magic, Eleanor. We've been aware of the use of portals for some time now, and we know that it involves advanced technology. Is it hardware-based or have you hacked into the software?”

“No comment.”

“Come, come now, my dear. You're not playing the game,” the doctor pointed out.

Ellie frowned. “Doctor, you say 'you're not playing the game', as if you have penetrated the mystery, and yet it's patently plain to me that you simply don't get it. You haven't got a clue.”

The doctor raised his eyebrows.

“I'm sorry, what you say is intriguing, but I don't quite follow your drift.”

He turned away for a moment. “Nurse, perhaps you'd get one of the orderlies to make us a coffee? And plenty of sugar for the young lady, too.”

“As you wish, doctor,” she bowed before spinning on her heel and leaving the room.

“Now where were we, Eleanor?”

“You said that I'm not playing the game, Doctor. And I responded that you haven't got a clue.”

“Ah, yes. Do go on.”

“Of course I'm playing the game,” she insisted.

The doctor shook his head. “I beg to differ.”

She laughed. “You can beg all you like or you can dance around this table stark bollock naked with a sign around your

neck that reads 'Kick me!' for all I care: it doesn't change the facts. Not one iota.”

“Could you explain that, Eleanor?”

“Well you see, all the wrong people have risen to power and taken over, and they demand that everyone play the game by their rules.

“So what you mean is that I'm not playing the game by the rules that the Powers That Be have arbitrarily imposed on us. I'm not conforming to what you deem to be acceptable social norms, and I'm not complying with your dictates.”

“But ... but ... but what you're talking about is heresy. Worse still, it's treason. It's a capital offence,” the doctor stammered, taking out a handkerchief and mopping his sweating brow. “Why, if everyone thought that and behaved accordingly, the country would descend into anarchy and debauchery!”

One of the orderlies had returned with the nurse now and the doctor remained silent for a time whilst he sipped his drink and puffed anxiously on a cigarette.

Ellie knew that she'd rattled the doctor's cage now, and she was keen to capitalize on this. “Don't you ever think of escape, doctor?” she asked him, after gulping down the rest of her coffee before they could take it off her.

The man looked askance. “And where to, might I ask?”

“Why, outside the game, of course. You know, real life.”

Again the doctor mopped away the sweat that was forming in his receding hairline and trickling down his chubby cheeks. “Do you really believe that occult nonsense? Or are you mad, woman? There's nowhere else to escape to.”

“Except in a wooden box, that is,” the man added as an afterthought. “That's if you can afford a wooden box.”

“Hey, lighten up, buster,” Ellie retorted. “It's just a game.”

Of course she knew full well that it was far more than that, but she wanted to rattle the man's cage again. She had him on the run.

“Well, hark at her!” the nurse laughed, slapping her fat thigh.

“A game is it? Just a game?” You could see the pressure building up, and the doctor seemed fit to explode, without further warning, at any moment.

The man was not to be outdone. “Well you tell that to the

widow down the road where I live. Just lost her dear husband. One day he goes down with galloping gut rot and within a week, he's dead of multiple organ failure. And now she's been hit by crippling medical bills. And you tell me that it's all a big game and that I should lighten up?"

The nurse was waving a long hypodermic needle in the air, trying to get the man's attention. "I think perhaps we should proceed, Doctor," she suggested. It was a statement more than a question.

Ellie cringed, hoping to God that it didn't show. As a child, she'd had suspected tuberculosis and been subjected to countless examinations and tests, not least having a long optical tube unceremoniously pushed down her nose. And if there was one thing she really couldn't stand, it was the sight of a hypodermic needle.

The doctor rose to his feet, his face growing a darker shade of crimson and his hands visibly trembling. He'd developed a disturbing and powerful spasm in his neck, too, that almost threatened to rip his head from his shoulders.

"No, not now nurse!" he snapped. "Take the woman away. Just get her out of this room, do you hear?"

Ellie stared directly at him and he averted his eyes, unable to meet her gaze. "Get this abominable woman out of my sight!"

Deep, deep down, the man knew that she was right, but it was a truth that he simply could not bear to entertain. This must have been all his worst nightmares rolled into one. Welcome, indeed, to Room 101.

## 29. Sucked in and blown out in bubbles

There was a brief pause as the sharp tap on the screen registered and, presumably, the app on the smart phone negotiated with the game servers.

Robin still hadn't got used to teleporting: it always made him feel a little queasy, especially after a heavy meal, but he wasn't at all ready for today's hop. It felt as if someone had stuffed a hosepipe up a certain bodily orifice in the nether regions, attached it to a high powered vacuum cleaner, and turned the machine on. Then, just as he thought matters could get no worse, his contents were funnelled back into his skin at the far end. Well, thank heaven for small mercies, at least on this occasion he landed flat on his feet, albeit with a spring in his knees, and didn't have to perform a parachute roll or pick himself up from the dirt.

When he'd recovered his composure, Robin looked around and saw that he was on a narrow, cobbled side street, with small terraced shops lining either side and the occasional flower-filled trough or hanging basket to add a dash of colour. At one end, judging by the number of pedestrians walking to and from, was a high street, and at the other end, the road went under the crenelated arch of what looked like a medieval town bar.

Looking at the front of the nearest shop, he saw that he was standing outside a small shop, *Bar Street Books*, which also confirmed his thoughts about the arch at the end of the street.

Could this be his intended destination, then? Well, there was only one way to find out, and that was to go inside and see what he might find.

It was actually a bit like entering Doctor Who's Tardis inside, for though the shop front was quite narrow, the shop was very deep and there were also steep stairs leading to yet more rooms upstairs. The aisles were narrow and the displays packed to the gunnels, as it were, with hardly a square foot of the shop floor not utilized.

“Yes sir, my I assist you?” asked a friendly gent, leaving the counter and heading his way. He was a slim looking chap,

perhaps two or three inches under six feet tall, and sporting a neat slate grey suit and blue woollen sweater, with a bushy brown beard, receding hair combed over a bald spot on top, and black, plastic glasses.

Where to begin? he wondered, and then it came to him.

“Are you familiar with Eleanor Grant's work?” he enquired.

The man did not bat an eyelid. “I'm afraid that name doesn't ring a bell, though I can consult the database,” he replied, leading the way back to the counter, removing his glasses and typing away at the keyboard of his desktop PC.

Robin wondered if perhaps the Friends used code words and challenges and funny handshakes.

“No, there's nothing there, sir, unless it's newly published. And Miss Grant's works. Are they fact or fiction?”

Robin waited whilst one of the other customers passed out of earshot.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” he told the man in hushed tones. “Ellie isn't a writer, she's a dear friend of mine. She's gone missing, you see, and may be in need of help.”

The man shrugged his shoulders. “I really am awfully sorry, but the name doesn't ring a bell. Anyhow, I do hope that you find your friend.”

Again Robin had a thought and he reached in his pockets. As he did so, the man visibly flinched, as if he thought Robin was going to pull a weapon on him. He pulled out the smart phone, clicked on the Photo album icon on the home screen and scrolled through the photos.

“Here, perhaps this may jog your memory?” he suggested, showing the man a photo of Ellie.

Taking off his glasses again, the man peered at the screen and shook his head, and it didn't escape Robin's notice that the man's hand was trembling and that he quickly snatched it back when he'd looked at the photo.

“Trust me, I'm a friend,” he repeated and again he hunted through the photo album until he came to a photo that Ellie had recently taken of them, using the timer delay of the two of them arm-in-arm. “There see? That's me and there's my friend, Ellie.”

The man put his glasses back on and appeared lost in thought for a moment or two. “And this friend of yours – Ellie, you say. Is

she in trouble?”

Robin nodded. “But not in trouble with me.” He looked furtively around. “She’s in trouble with the authorities. I mean, trouble with a capital T.”

At this point, a customer appeared, clutching a book, and the man excused himself while he went to serve her, then he turned his attention to Robin.

The man saw a woman heading his way and he waved his hand in the air. “I say, Mollie, would you mind the store for a few minutes, I have some urgent business to attend to.”

“Right you are, Justin.”

Receiving a thumbs up, the man turned back to Robin. “If you’ll follow me, I think perhaps we should have a private chat”. So Robin followed him through the shop, weaving his way through the many displays of books, through a doorway and into a small, dimly-lit office. The man waited until he was inside, then firmly closed the door behind them.

“Here, take a seat,” the man offered. “I’m Justin Fields.”

“Robin Hargreaves, and I sure am glad to meet you, Justin.”

“So, how much do you know, Robin?”

“Just a little. Ellie took me under her wing not long after I entered the game and she told me about the Friends,” Robin informed the man, “and I know about the portals. But that’s all I know. Ellie didn’t provide me with any details.”

“And what’s happened to Ellie? You’d better tell me the whole story.”

So Robin told Justin about the thug Darius stalking her and taking exception to him, right up to the point that they were ambushed by the Enforcers.

“They just came out of nowhere. I think Ellie was trying to teleport us out of there, but she couldn’t.”

Justin nodded. “Yes, that’s happened before. They must have locked her down. So then what?”

“Well, she tossed her smart phone in my direction and next thing I know, I’d been teleported out of there, leaving her to face the music. Then Darius turned up again and chased me half way across the city. Finally I escaped him, using Ellie’s phone. I knew that I had to contact the Friends and warn them, so I teleported to Master Bupposo’s home, but when I looked round there, I found

the house abandoned.”

“That's most likely because you didn't have access rights, Robin.”

Robin nodded. “Yes, that's what I thought, Justin. Whenever we went anywhere, like through the green door into the garden café, she always went into the system to temporarily grant me access. I've no idea what she did to change my rights, though, and it's perhaps prudent not to ask. What I don't know, I can't tell.”

“Sure, sure. I understand,” Justin agreed.

“So what now?” Robin wanted to know.

Justin raised his eyebrows and waved his arms in the air. “As yet, your guess is as good as mine, Robin. But I'm extremely grateful for this information, albeit unwelcome news. Leave it with us, we'll take care of it. And, under the circumstances, I think it advisable that we find you somewhere safe to stay until we know more about the danger Ellie and you may be in.”

Robin frowned. “Surely not? Ellie and I have been through a lot and I really want to help out. I need to help out. Ellie is my best friend. Well, she's a lot more than that, really.”

The man thought for a few moments. “Very well.” Then he added: “However, without meaning to sound officious, you really must follow orders and adhere strictly to the letter. Do you understand? This is for your own good as much as it is for ours. The last thing any of us need is for you to end up in a pickle as well.

“Now, if you'll excuse me for ten minutes, I must warn young Mollie that something important has come up; phone around to get one of the other staff to come in and help mind the store; and also contact a couple of Friends. There's a kettle over there by the sink and biscuits in the tin. You're welcome to help yourself.”



## 30. What are we missing?

When Justin returned, he led Robin right through to the back of the shop, through a low doorway past a dangling curtain and into a back room.

“This is our private collection,” the man reliably informed Robin.

“Another time, perhaps?” he replied, unable to totally disguise his impatience.

Pausing for a moment, Justin ran his hand along one of the bookshelves, pulled out a large green tome, reached his hand in between the books and pulled a hidden lever. Then, grasping one corner of the heavy bookcase, he swung the whole section out into the room, and motioned Robin inside.

As Robin entered, and Justin clicked on the lights, Robin could see that the small, air-conditioned room was stocked, along the full length of one of the walls, not with dusty old tomes, but row upon row of rack servers.

“Welcome to our nerve centre,” the man smiled with a flourish.

Shortly afterwards, two other people, a man and a woman, entered and Justin introduced them as simply Jane and Brian. It was perhaps best that Robin did not know their full names, given the circumstances. Like Justin, they were really nothing special to look at. Conservatively and respectably dressed and middle aged, they were the sort who would blend in perfectly at a village fête. These were the Friends that Justin had mentioned, and they all spent some time sitting at a bare wooden table in the centre of the room while Justin brought them up to speed with recent events. Had Robin been recounting a long story that Justin had told him, he'd have surely fluffed his lines, and yet Justin's detailed rendition was smooth and flawless.

“Do you know where Eleanor is being held?” asked Jane, the alarm evident in her quivering voice.

“Somewhere in what we euphemistically term the Ministry of Love,” Justin replied.

“Well, that's pretty obvious, but of course it doesn't tell us

much,” Brian contended.

“Let's see.” Justin scooted his swivel chair away from the table and over to a nearby terminal. He brought up Ellie's profile easily enough, but let out a sigh. “Yes, it's as I feared. *The subject's present coordinates are temporarily unavailable. We apologize for the inconvenience. Please try again later.*”

“What about her inventory?” Jane spoke up.

Justin nodded vigorously. “Now that is smart thinking, Jane.”

“Why's that?” Robin wanted to know.

“Ah, you see, everything in the game had its own unique identification number or UID and also a sales code,” Jane informed him. “Between the two, items may be traced all the way back via the retailer to the manufacturer. So in theory, unless they've stripped Ellie naked, then we should be able to locate her by checking an item in her inventory.”

Again Justin sighed. “Somehow, I guess they've already thought of that. I just picked one or two items at random, and it's the same old message: *The item's present coordinates are temporarily unavailable. We apologize for the inconvenience. Please try again later.*”

Robin was just idly toying with his ring when he had an idea, or at least his little friend did.

*You have it, Robin.*

I have what? he wanted to know, running his finger this way and that over his lips, as you do when you're trying to think.

*It's right under your nose!*

The ring?

*Yes, the ring! Finally he understands.*

Robin slipped off the ring and held it up for all to see. “Ellie and I bought an interlocking friendship ring and we kept half each. They're sold in pairs. Does Ellie have one in her inventory?”

Justin checked. “No,” he replied, shaking his head. “But it's probably safer that way.”

Jane's eyes lit up. “But Robin here does, is that right?”

“We're not going to get anywhere without an ID for the ring,” Justin pointed out.

“Trust me, Justin,” Jane persisted.

“Okay, you're the boss. I'll just check.” He was lost for a

moment, tapping in Robin's name and selecting items from menus. "Sure, there it is. In this very room."

"Right, now copy and paste the sales code into the search engine. And before you ask, 'Why's that?', it's because the two halves of the ring will carry the same sales code."

"Right, with you so far." Justin tapped away at the machine. "Okay, we now have two such items, one of which Robin has with him and the other of which is hopefully still in Eleanor's possession."

"Good," nodded Jane. "Now find the ID of the other ring and copy and paste that into the search engine."

"Ah yes, of course," Justin laughed, clapping his hand to his forehead. "I'm sorry, it's been an exhausting day in the shop."

Moments later, Justin let out a loud "whoop!" of joy. "Jane, you are a marvel, and you're quite right: the other half of the ring is currently in room 76 at the Ministry of Love, though of course the search engine tells us nothing about the layout of the building complex, nor whether the ring is still in Jane's possession. I guess that we shall just have to cross our fingers and hope for the best."

"Well, there you have it," Jane grinned. "Thank you, Robin."

"Yes, well done," Brian concurred. "Though let's hope and pray that the authorities don't have the same brainwave and trace our friend Robin to this shop."

Robin again slipped the ring off his finger. "Perhaps it would be wise to take the ring for now and hide it outside somewhere?"

Brian took the ring. "Yes, I was actually just about to suggest that, but you beat me to it. Don't worry, I'll keep it safe."

Excusing himself for ten minutes, he left the room, being careful to slide the bookcase back into place behind him.

"So what now?" Robin enquired.

Justin shrugged. "Let's wait for Brian to return, then we'll hold a pow-wow over a cup of coffee, and hopefully a feasible strategy will emerge. I'm sorry, but that's the best I can offer right now," he apologized.



"Justin, I take it that you can't just teleport into room 76 and pull Ellie out, or you would have mentioned it earlier," Robin suggested at length when the quorum had reassembled.

"Yes, I believe that's the case, Robin," the man nodded

solemnly. “But I just tinker with the system and give the servers a spring clean every now and again. Friend Brian here is the technical wizard and is the man to answer such questions.”

“No way,” replied Brian confirmed. “Teleporting into or out of the Ministry of Love is restricted to white collar workers there. As for the security services, they have a global override that works for all but sensitive and classified locations. And, needless to say, they don't liberally hand out temporary passes for visitors. Anywhere visitors go in the MoL, they're accompanied by armed security or management, and most of the facilities there are strictly off-limits to visitors.”

Brian thought for a minute. “I guess there are three possibilities. One is to use a technological means of gaining access; two is to sneak in; and three is to blast our way in. But trust me, the third possibility is not a feasible option.”

“Let's work our way through the other two possibilities, then,” Justin suggested. “What about the technological approach?”

Robin was just about to open his mouth when Brian stole the words off his tongue.

“Well, if teleporting won't work, then the only other hi-tech option would be to hack the system and install a temporary portal. This would take a good half day to set up, but we could be in there, grab Eleanor, be out of there and delete all traces of the portal in a matter of seconds.”

“Again, though,” Robin spoke up. “If you really thought that would be easy or work, then you'd have suggested it earlier,” he noted.

“Exactly,” Brian sighed. “It's one thing constructing and accessing portals in random locations in the grid, since we can move them round frequently. And additionally, we run software that randomly generates and later deletes a great many dummy portals, to keep the authorities on their toes. To paraphrase the old saying, they can monitor some of the locations all of the time, or all of the locations some of the time, but they can't monitor all of the locations all of the time. But you can bet your bottom dollar that the authorities will be monitoring the entire complex inside the Ministry of Love.”

“Are you sure?” Robin queried. “What about non-sensitive

areas, like a broom cupboard or a ventilation shaft?”

Brian nodded. “Sure, but without a layout, there's no way that we can tell, if we picked a location, whether we'd end up in a broom cupboard or the guard room. As I said, we could be in and out with Ellie in a matter of seconds, but since it takes several hours to set up a portal, if they discover it, we might well find them waiting in ambush for us. That's a risk that we can't afford to take, in my opinion, though of course we each have one vote and Justin here has an additional casting vote.”

“Is there any way of getting hold of blueprints for the buildings?” Jane wanted to know. “Maybe they keep copies elsewhere, like at the local fire station? I don't know, of course: I'm just thinking aloud here.”

“Well Jane, that's something we could investigate.”

“Okay, Brian. Then what about the possibility of sneaking in?”

Brian sighed. “Not so easy. Okay, I'm sure that given time and ingenuity, we could come up with a plan that would work. But that's just it, you see. We'd have to case the joint for weeks, watching for comings and goings, and maybe arrange for someone to work on the inside. And we simply don't have that amount of time. If the scare stories are anything to go by, we have one, two or three days, or a week at the most, before Eleanor begins to crack under interrogation.”

“And there's no way you can pull the plug on her account, so that she's safely logged-out? Then maybe she could return with a new moniker?” asked Robin.

Brian shook his head. “No, they have the account locked down and Ellie isn't going anywhere quick.”

“You can't hack her account, then?”

“Nope. We can still bring up her profile, but access to change the settings has been locked down.”

“This doesn't look good,” Justin was forced to concede. “I really can't see any way of us teleporting, blasting or sneaking Eleanor out of there.”

“I'll second that,” Brian agreed.

“Hey, hey guys!” Jane protested. “Let's not talk our way out of finding a solution at such an early stage. Let's go back to your point, Justin, which expresses the crux of the matter. You said,

quote: 'I really can't see any way of us teleporting, blasting or sneaking Eleanor out of there.'

“Right.”

“Now is there anything we might be missing here? Are we making any unnecessary or flawed assumptions?”

There was silence in the room for two or three whole minutes, and you could almost hear the cogs whirring and the pistons pumping inside their heads. Maybe the mechanoid model was correct after all?

Robin thought he had an idea, but then he dismissed it, not wishing to be thought a fool.

*Go on*, the voice insisted.

“Well ...” Robin began.

*This is no time to pussyfoot around.*

All eyes were on him now and he could feel himself blushing.

Then he had it. “Excuse me butting in, but we are making one assumption.”

“Go on, Robin,” Jane urged him.

“Well, whichever option we've been considering, we're assuming that *we* get in there by hook or by crook and that *we* do the work in order to get Ellie out.”

Brian hadn't quite grasped what he meant. “Come again?”

“Yes, that's it,” Jane nodded eagerly. “I'm with you. Here is a classic example of how limited thinking can box one in.”

“Could you explain that?” Brian asked her.

The lady looked to Robin.

“Over to you, Jane,” he offered.

“Okay, well there may be alternatives,” she suggested. “That is, ways in which we can get the people at the Ministry of Love to do our work for us. You see, we are limited by what little we can do. Those inside the complex, however, they are the ones who are free to act.”

“Such as?”

Jane waved her arms in the air. “I don't know, but there must be half a dozen possibilities.”

“In general terms, then, Jane.”

“Well, in general terms, we don't go into the complex to pull Eleanor out, we have *them* bring Ellie to *us*.”

“Ah!” Brian uttered. “Now I'm with you.”

Then, moments later, the lady's eyes lit up and she thumped her fist down on the table decisively. “Gentlemen, I have a proposal to make ...”

## 31. Alarm bells ring

Ellie had been asleep for less than an hour when the alarms began to sound throughout the building and she awoke with a fright. Not only did she leap up off the mattress, she nearly jumped clean out of her skin.

It took her a few moments before the sickening realization once again dawned on her that she was still confined in the cell at the Ministry of Love.

God, if only she could do that – leave her donkey and all its worries behind and never look back?

Moments later, she heard a series of clunking sounds as the doors of all the rooms along the corridor automatically unlocked. For a brief moment, she actually wondered if she might somehow make a run for it, whilst everyone else was perhaps in a state of confusion, but then a synthesized voice over an intercom began to reel off a list of instructions:

*Alarm! Alarm! This is not a drill. A fire has broken out on the premises. Leave your room, closing any doors behind you, and follow the flashing green signs to the nearest exit. Proceed in an orderly fashion. Do not run. Once outside, await further directions.*

*Alarm! Alarm! This is not a drill ...*

Ellie left the cell and she saw for the first time that there were several other prisoners on the same corridor. One of them, a girl of about her own age, looked up and down the corridor. Pointing to a flashing sign, she yelled out to the others: “This way!” and Ellie closed the cell door behind her and followed in their wake.

At the far end of the corridor was a stair well, and they quickly descended three flights of stairs to find themselves near an exit on the ground floor. There were several guards there, and they had their electronic batons drawn, and as she found herself being shepherded away from the building and into a large, fenced enclosure, her hopes of escape were thoroughly dashed. That was a real pity, because she could see now that it was night time and, out of the glare of the spotlights, with little moon in the sky, she could so easily have slipped away in the shadows.



Once their names had been checked off and they were all safely inside the enclosure, the guards left, firmly padlocking the wire door behind them.

The enclosure butted up against high steel railings on one side and Ellie surveyed it. She could possibly have scaled the wire fence, at a pinch, but there was no way that she'd get past the razor wire at the top. She could see ceramic fittings, too, to which armoured cables had been attached, and she knew then that the razor wire must also be electrified. Whether that would just give you a nasty jolt or fry you on the spot, she had no way of knowing, and she didn't care to find out.

Just then, as she was wandering around the enclosure, she caught sight of a large fluorescent cross in the centre of the open space. The first thing she noticed was that none of the other prisoners had shown any indication of having seen the brightly glowing green cross.

Intrigued, she casually wandered toward it and as she came closer she noticed a faint shimmering in the area. In that instant, she knew what it was and what she must do.

In that instant, too, an intermittent klaxon abruptly started up and the original fire alarm was immediately silenced. Ellie knew then that she'd been rumbled.

As she neared the luminous green cross, a powerful searchlight in one of the nearby towers sprang to life with a loud electrical crack and as the intense beam was swung around, she suddenly found herself in the spotlight.

“Stand still! Do not move or we will be forced to fire!” a voice called out loudly through a loudspeaker attached to the guard tower, and without warning, a shot rang out, hitting the concrete and kicking up sparks before she'd even heard the gunshot. Then a second shot rang out, whizzing past just inches from Ellie's head.

But the shots came too late.

The instant she stepped on the green cross, she was gone, and just a few moments later, she came down with a bump to find herself on her backside in the middle of the road. It took her a few moments to get her bearings, and then she realized where she was – outside the book shop on Bar Street. And who was there to meet and greet her but her beloved friend, Robin. Reaching down,

Robin helped her to her feet and they stood there hugging one-another. There were no words to describe how good she felt, indeed right now she didn't have to say a word: that hug and the stream of tears, said it all.

Jane, Brian and Justin were there, too, and they came forward now to embrace her.

“Come on,” Justin advised at length. “Let's get you inside where it's safe and warm.”

She turned again and took back her mobile phone from Robin's outstretched hand, but in that instant he simply vanished into thin air. And when she glanced at the screen of the phone, she just caught sight of the notification before it faded from the screen: *Your friend Robin has just logged out.*

What she didn't know was that there had been a power cut on Robin's street and his PC had instantly shut down. It couldn't have happened at a more inopportune moment, the one time she really, really, really, wanted to be with Robin, thank him for his help, and share a celebratory drink with him.

## 32. Guttled

The power was off for most of the night and, come morning, Robin's mother was doing her nut, worrying herself sick about whether all the food in the fridge freezer would have to be thrown out.

Of course the first thing that Robin wanted to do when he woke up the next day was to get back on-line and meet up with Ellie, but his mother had an urgent errand for him to perform, so he had to anxiously and impatiently bide his time. He realized then that real patience is not the same as waiting impatiently for something for a long time. Patience is having patience with patience, as Ellie herself had told him on two or three occasions now.

He had just taken a parcel into town to the post office for his mother and by the time he arrived back he found that his father had returned home from work early. They were both standing there in the living room, discussing something.

“Hi dad,” Robin smiled, poking his head round the door momentarily.

“You posted the parcel?” his mother queried.

“Sure.” He fumbled in his pocket as he entered the living room and held out the change in his hand.

Mother waved her hand dismissively. “No, you keep the change.”

“You sure?”

“Sure I'm sure. You've earned it.”

He didn't put up much of an argument and quickly re-pocketed the silver.

“And you remembered to get a receipt?”

Robin was just about to turn on his heel and stopped dead in his tracks. “Ah, no. I'm sorry, Mum, I quite forgot.”

His father let out a deep sigh. “Oh, for heaven's sake, Robin. Your mother told you specifically to ask for a receipt, so that we can claim the cost as a justifiable business expense. These may be little things, but they all add up over the course of a financial year, you know, and it's not as if this family were rolling in

money.”

*Careful, Robin. This is definitely not the right moment for ill-conceived adolescent responses like “Tell me about it”,* he distinctly heard the voice whisper a warning in his ear.

He flushed bright red and dropped his head, fearful of meeting his father's steely gaze. “Sorry, Dad.”

Father shook his head from side to side. “You really are going to have to pull your socks up, young man.”

“Sorry.” Robin turned away quickly and headed for the door.

“Aren't you going to bring up the subject of you-know-what, Roger?” Robin distinctly heard his mother whisper to his father as he left the living room, and he hesitated a moment before clambering up the stairs.

“Not yet, Shirley,” came the reply. “He'll find out for himself soon enough and come to me, cap in hand.”

Again Robin felt his cheeks redden and his ears begin to burn.

*That sounds like trouble with a capital T, Robin.*

Whatever that was about, it sounded rather ominous, but Robin had more important things to do right now. He had to log back into *Game of Aeons*, find Ellie and exchange the latest news.

Okay, okay, he hissed back.

*Well, don't say that I didn't warn you.*

Will you just sod off and leave me alone? I have enough worries without you adding your tuppence worth, thank you very much.

When he got to his bedroom, Robin got down on his hands and knees and clicked the switch on the wall socket, then he turned on his PC and waited impatiently as the machine booted up. Acknowledging his own impatience, he made a special point of spending a few minutes counting his breaths and calming his mind before logging in.

Robin didn't want to enter the game still in a bit of a tizz. When he was wound up, that's the time he tended to fumble, feel socially awkward and say and do all the wrong things. He was beginning now to see the wisdom in Ellie helping with his learning how to learn and in prescribing sitting meditation for him.

Robin completed his ten minute session and waited until he'd

reached the count of ten, then he opened his eyes again, took hold of the mouse and went to click on the desktop icon to launch *Game of Aeons*. He was slightly bemused to find that the icon wasn't there in the bottom left-hand corner of the screen, then relaxed, remembering that occasionally PCs encountered a glitch and desktop icons could get repositioned on the screen.

He quickly checked the desktop but couldn't locate the icon, so he checked again, working his way from top left to bottom right. No, the icon had definitely gone AWOL.

Well, there would still be an entry in the Start menu. Or so he thought. He checked for both *Game of Aeons* and also for the publisher's name. Alarmingly, he found nothing.

Robin drew a deep breath, opened Windows Explorer and navigated to Program Files, carefully checking the sub-folders – to no avail.

Oh my God, he said to himself, and he could feel the blood drain from his face and his heart begin to pound heavily in his chest. Something or somebody had erased all traces of *Game of Aeons* from the PC.

Again Robin drew a series of slow, deep breaths, counting each inhalation and exhalation, in a vain bid to calm himself. His hand trembling with fear as a fresh rush of adrenalin flooded his system, Robin felt in his jacket pocket and brought out the crumpled packet of tobacco from his pocket. Pulling out a cigarette paper from the pack, he took a large pinch of tobacco, teased it out along the length of the paper and, after several fumbling attempts, he finally managed to roll the tobacco in the paper. The roll-up was far from perfect, but it would have to do. Licking the paper, he reached across the desk, tore a piece off a sheet of writing paper, rolled it up and thrust it into one end of the roll-up, to act as a makeshift filter and keep the end of the roll-up from becoming soggy.

Then he got up from his seat, went across to the bedroom window, opened it and, again fumbling in his pockets for a box of matches, he lit up. Standing with his head half out of the open window, he took several drags on the cigarette, blowing great plumes of blue-grey smoke outside and hoping to hell that his parents wouldn't smell the smoke if it lingered in the room or on his clothes.

Feeling quite queasy now and his legs feeling heavy and leaden with the noxious nicotine rush, he spat on the end of the roll-up to extinguish it, leant out of the window and flicked the roll-up down onto the street below. Unfortunately it landed short, in the driveway not far from the front door. Shit, that was something else he'd have to sort out before his parents noticed.

Well, all was not yet lost. It would be a bit of a faff, but he'd simply have to reinstall the software using the CD and hope that he'd be able to still be able to retrieve his details and settings and log back in as Robin111.

Staggering back to the desk, Robin opened one drawer after another, frantically searching for the installation disk. Not finding it there, he slammed the last drawer shut and sat there, in an absolute panic, with his face buried in his hands and tears of grief welling up in his eyes.

Robin must have sat there for half an hour or more, going through a gamut of emotions until he could rave and weep no more and, by now feeling horribly empty and numb, he finally roused himself and slowly trudged his way back downstairs. He knew now what it was that father had whispered to his mother: "He'll find out for himself soon enough and come to me, cap in hand."

And again there came that voice in his head, as if he needed to be reminded of the fact: *Well, don't say that I didn't warn you.*

Okay, okay. I thought you were my friend? There's really no need to gloat and rub it in!

*I'm not gloating, Robin, I'm just stating a simple fact of life. Now, you may not want to know this, but it is something that you really need to know. I do have your best interests at heart.*

Oh my God, he screamed out inside. What the hell am I going to do now?

*C'est la vie, mais ce n'est pas la fin du monde.*

And what's that supposed to mean?

*It's French and it means "That's life, but it's not the end of the world."*

Jeez, it's easy for you to talk. It's the end of the world as far as I'm concerned. I mean, what's Ellie going to think when I fail to turn up? She'll be beside herself with worry, and then most likely with grief. And what the hell am I going to do without

Ellie?

*You'll get over it. Time is a great healer, you know.*

Now don't give me any of that shit, he retorted.

*And besides, there are plenty more fish in the ocean.*

How can you say these things? I mean, how dare you?

*It's hard on you, sure, but it's nothing more than an adolescent crush, and you'll get over it and find somebody else. A real girlfriend, I mean, not a virtual friend.*

Just shut the f--- up, alright. That's not you talking: that's my parents. Go away and leave me alone for a while.

*As you wish, Robin. I'll be back when you've calmed yourself down.*

Hesitating a moment at the foot of the stairs, Robin trudged into the living room, and as he entered, his father got up from his armchair to stand in front of the open coal fire and his mother came in from the kitchen to stand close by. Why they had the coal fire on today, even given that it was a chilly day, heaven only knew. Maybe they were still half asleep, like Ellie had said people were?

“Yes, Robin. Do you have something to say?” his father asked cryptically.

Robin glowered. “I'm not sure. What do you want me to say?”

“Well,” replied his father, puffing out his chest. “You could begin by apologizing. For the last few weeks you've spent most of your time in your bedroom playing stupid computer games and treating your mother and I like hotel staff, whose sole purpose in life was to give you money and wait on you.”

“But ...”

“But nothing, Robin. This simply has to stop.”

“Well ...”

“Indeed, I have taken matters into my own hands and made it stop,” his father added ominously.

“You mean ...”

“Yes, I mean *Game of Ages*.”

“*Game of Aeons*,” Robin corrected him.

“Please don't interrupt me, Robin. *Game of Ages*, *Game of Aeons*, *Sim City*. Whatever damn fool game you've been playing.”

“So you uninstalled it.”

“Yes, I did.”

“And you've taken the installation CD.”

“I have.” His father reached up to the mantel shelf, took the disk and waved it in the air before him.

“So you're grounding me for a while?” Robin queried, hoping against hope that it wouldn't be for too long.

“No, I think that we've already gone past the point of no return, Robin. If I were to ground you for a week or a month or for the rest of the summer, sooner or later you'd be back at it again and things would only go from bad to worse. The only thing that I can say in your favour is thank God that it's not online pornography that you're hooked on. But that's beside the point. So, no, I'm not grounding you. There is, however, a final solution.”

Father took the CD out of its plastic case and tossed it onto the coal fire, then he reached to his right, picked up the ornamental brass poker and raked around in the embers until the CD began to melt, then abruptly catch fire in a flurry of colourful sparks.

What an absolute twat!

Robin had already left the room, storming up the stairs and slamming his bedroom door shut. Feeling absolutely gutted, he flung himself on his bed and lay there with his head buried in his hands, fresh tears of grief streaming down his face.

Back downstairs, Shirley turned to her husband. “Should I go after him, Roger?”

“No, no,” her husband decided. “Leave the lad to brood for now. He'll have to come down sometime, if only to feed at the trough. And when he does, I'll tell him our decision about limiting the time he spends up in his bedroom and request that he look for work over the summer holidays. I'm not having him loafing around the house any longer. I simply won't put up with it.”

“Well, it's your fault for giving Robin your old PC, Roger. You know what kids are like with newfangled toys. They're designed to be addictive, and I'm sure that there must be a lot of peer pressure to be 'in with the in crowd' and to conform. Personally speaking, though, I really don't see the appeal.”



### 33. Maintaining a stony silence

Later that day, as Robin sat at the table forcing his food down, not having spoken a word beyond a begrudging “please” and “thank you” to his parents, his father spoke up.

“I had a word with Mister Larkin at the newsagent's down the road and it turns out they have a paper round going and they're willing to give you a week's trial. If they like you, then there's a permanent round available. You start bright and early at 6:45 on a morning and again at 4:45 in the afternoon.

“Mister Larkin said that he'd show you the round on the first day, starting tomorrow. Your mother will need to get you up at 6:00 tomorrow morning, then, and you'll have to be showered, dressed, had your breakfast and out of here by 6:30, so you'll need to get your skates on.”

Robin sighed. “Sounds like you've got it all worked out,” he mumbled under his breath.

“What's that you say?” his father asked when he'd emptied his mouth.

“I said thank you, I can't wait to start,” Robin huffed.

“Now there's no need for that, young man,” his father retorted angrily. “You're not too big for a slap across the backside, you know.”

Oh yeah? You and whose army?

*Take it easy, Robin, the voice advised him. Look on the bright side: you could do with the extra pocket money, and there's no telling where this might lead.*

“Thanks, Dad,” he repeated.

“That's more like it, lad,” his father smiled. “I was hoping that you'd see sense at last.”



Two weeks later – the longest, most mind-numbingly vacuous and awful two weeks of his life – though he was no longer intent on maintaining a stony wall of silence, Robin had slowly but surely slipped into a state of deep depression that no amount of meditation or positive thinking could lift. Indeed, he did perhaps wonder if meditation might actually be

contraindicated under the circumstances? So now he was silent not to make his parents pay for treating him this way, but simply because he hadn't got anything significant or uplifting to say to them, nor even the urge to speak.

As usual, his mother had roused him early that morning, though he turned over and went back to sleep, not wanting to face the cruel world that day, so she had to come back a second time, and this time she stayed until she was sure that he was awake and out of bed.

Robin's father was up by the time he'd showered and dressed and gone down for breakfast and when Robin merely grunted a greeting to him, his father threw his newspaper down, rose to his feet and stormed out of the door without the kisses and sweet nothings that he customary showered on his wife.

*You've done it now, warned the voice in Robin's head. Mark my words: much more of this malarkey and your father will turf you out of the nest and onto the street. And where will that leave you, eh?*

I'm not doing this on purpose, you know, he protested. Can't you see that I'm down in the dumps?

*There's a wise old Japanese proverb, you know: "Fall down seven times, get up eight." If I were you – and I am you – then I would give that some serious thought, young man, before it's too late.*

Mother came back in from the living room and looked around. "Has your father gone already?" she wanted to know.

"Yes," he replied. "I said good morning to him and he threw his newspaper down and stormed out."

"Hmm," she sighed. "You grunted good morning more like. You know I don't think that he's going to take much more of this behaviour from you; and I don't know if I can take much more. It's unpleasant and creates a terrible atmosphere. And losing your job at the newsagent's did not help one iota. You know, that was almost the last straw."

He didn't dare tell them that he'd resigned, and not been sacked.

It was Robin's turn to sigh. "I'm sorry, Mum, it's not that I'm deliberately trying to make your lives miserable, it's just that I've been really depressed these last couple of weeks. I simply can't

find the energy or the urge to engage in conversation, and I feel as if I have nothing significant to say that would interest either of you.”

Robin got up to leave, but his mother shook her head. “Sit down a while, Robin. I think that we should have a little chat.”

He looked up sharply and she smiled. “No, I don't mean an inquisition, just a friendly chat with your old mum.”

Robin sank back down in his seat, relieved to hear that, and yet also anxious about where this might be heading.

“Is this to do with the game?” his mother enquired. “I guess it must have been fun, and I know how attached you were to playing it.”

Robin thought for a moment and shook his head. “No, it's not the game so much as the other people playing it. I miss their company.”

He pushed his tongue into his cheek while he searched for the right words. “Well, to tell the truth, there was one friend in particular, a lovely girl called Ellie. I don't suppose that you'll understand, but we were seeing a lot of one-another and I became quite attached to her. And she taught me a lot, too.”

His mother raised her eyebrows.

“I'm actually quite pleased about that, Robin; and yet I can't help thinking that if you want real friends – or a real girlfriend for that matter – that you won't find them by pouring over a computer but here in the real world.”

“Times have changed, Mum,” he offered a little lamely. He didn't want to openly admit that she might be right.

“Well, yes, granted they have. But you know, Robin, for all the talk of modern progress, things don't always change for the better.”

He shrugged. “I don't know what to say, Mum, except that I know what feels right for me. And I was hoping that I might actually meet up with Ellie in real life. She's an honest, decent and loving person, you know; not some creep.”

“Well, I hope that you're right, Robin, but you never can tell with people who are online.”

“Really?” he countered. “And are you speaking from personal experience, Mum?”

She thought for a moment. “Well, that's what I've been told.”

“By whom?” he wanted to know.

“Well, by your father, for one.”

“And who else?”

“Alright, just your father, if the truth be told.”

“And is he talking from personal experience?”

“No, I suppose not. The internet is not his cup of tea, either, really.”

“Well there you are, then.”

His mother mulled that over for a moment or two. “Yes, I suppose we have to admit that your father and I are largely ignorant of these things. Though having said that, we do read the newspapers and there have been some cautionary tales about the internet. There are a lot of queer folk in the world, you know. Paedophiles pretending to be fourteen year old boys, confidence tricksters, and whatnot. And I know that they say that beauty is only skin deep, but what if this so-called friend of yours turned out to be as ugly as sin? She might be a married woman, for all you know.”

Yes, not having as yet seen a real life photo of Ellie, there was that lingering doubt. Her avatar could have been “surgically enhanced”, as it were. There was no denying that. And yet what was even more likely and frightening was the possibility that she would not like him if she saw and met him in real life.

“There are also some absolutely wonderful, intelligent and resourceful people online, Mum. Heck you can talk to them and walk around with them every day and become friends, so why should that be any less well thought of than some real life friend you maybe only see three or four times a month? Or some relative that you only see once every three or four years, for that matter?”

*Blood is thicker than water, maybe?* suggested the voice within.

So they say. But is that really the case? It seems like a sweeping generalization from a bygone age when families tended to remain in the towns they were born and marriage was still a revered institution.

Mum shrugged. “It just seems different, that's all. It doesn't seem as real to my mind. There's surely not the same commitment? I mean, if you were absent for a couple of weeks, do you really think that they'd miss you, or would they simply

move on? Business as usual, and all that?"

"I'd like to think that Ellie missed me," he protested. "She doesn't give me the impression of being that shallow and uncaring."

"Well, I expect we'll see what we see when we see it, Robin," she concluded. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe I'm just too long in the tooth and incorrigibly old-fashioned? The long and the short of it is, I just don't want you getting hurt, that's all."

He bowed his head in appreciation, but he was determined not to give in.

"And what if I met up with Ellie and brought her round for Sunday tea and she turned out to be a decent kind of girl, the sort of girl that you really could take home to meet your parents and share Sunday tea with?"

His mother smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "I'm really not sure what to say to that. This is all so new for us and, as I said, we are old-fashioned sort of people. I hope that you're right, Robin. I really do. You know that your father and I only want the best for you."

"Sure," he nodded. "If it's any consolation, I am quite street wise and if I made a mistake, then I hope that I would be man enough to admit it to you and learn from the experience."

Robin's mother got to her feet and fetched her handbag. Taking her purse, she pulled out a five pound note and thrust it into his hand.

"What's that for?" he asked, peering into his mother's eyes to gauge her expression.

"Go out and treat yourself to something nice," she told him.

Well, that was a pleasant surprise. "Oh, right. Thank you."

"They do say that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, Robin, and we can't go on like this."

"Sure. Thanks."

"And," she added: "if you happen to find yourself another copy of that game you've been playing – well, just don't spend all your time up in your room playing it. Let's say that you ration yourself to two hours a day and maybe three on a weekend."

"Wow! Right."

His mother laid her arm gently on his shoulder. "And if your father finds out, which he no doubt will at some point, then I'll

take the blame.”

He reached out and gave his mother a hug and planted a kiss on her cheek. “Thank you so much. I promise that you won't regret it.”

For a moment something flickered across her face, as if to say “You'd better not make me regret it”, but she merely smiled and playfully shooed him out of the room toward the hallway and out of the door. Now that's what mums did best.

## 34. A major setback

*Mister McAfee's Poshe Emporium* was empty yet again when Robin entered, and he did wonder how much longer a place like that, with all its overheads, could afford to continue trading.

“Well hello there again, young sir!” piped up Mister McAfee as Robin walked toward the counter. “You're the young man who bought *Game of Aeons*, if I'm not mistaken.”

If Mister McAfee could remember details like that, then it was due to one of two things: either his real occupation was as a memory man, or business really was as dire as Robin had thought.

“That's right,” he nodded.

The man came from behind the counter and extended his hand. “Jeremiah McAfee at your service.”

“Robin Hargreaves,” he responded, shaking the man's hand.

“And are you enjoying the game, young Robin?”

Robin gritted his teeth and pulled a face. “Well, that's it, you see. I'm afraid that I enjoyed the game so much that my father took exception to me spending all my time on the computer.”

“Oh dear, dear,” Mister McAfee commiserated. “So he grounded you, is that it?”

Again Robin grimaced. “Worse than that, actually,” he replied. “He wiped the program from my computer and threw the CD on the fire.”

“Oh dear, dear and double dear,” Mister McAfee sighed. “Now that *is* a pity. You know, *Game of Aeons* is hard to come by these days.”

“Ah ...” replied Robin, feeling his heart lurch momentarily. “You mean you don't have any more copies.”

The old man shook his head. “I'm afraid not. You bought the last copy. Well, I say last copy. I meant the *only* one.”

“Hard to come by, you say. How hard, Mister McAfee?”

“Almost impossible,” the man shrugged.

“It really is important.”

“I'm sure it is, young Robin. But you see, I have no specialist contacts. All I can suggest is that you try on-line. A specialist

second-hand games store, I hasten to add, not an illegal download site. We don't want you getting into trouble.”

“Heck yes,” Robin laughed. “You know I don't know why I didn't think of that in the first place. What am I like?”

Mister McAfee stood there stroking his chin for a moment. “I hope you don't think I'm being too personal, young man, but you said that 'it is really important'. Tell me, why's that?”

Oh well, it could do no harm, he thought, and he told the man about meeting Ellie on-line and how their relationship had blossomed and about the bust up with his father, right up to his mother relenting.

“Fascinating!” Mister McAfee beamed. “Yes, I can see how your father burning the CD would really scupper your plans. If you've been down in the dumps about it, think of the effect this must have had on you poor friend Ellie.”

Robin nodded vigorously. “Exactly.”

“Oh, I do hope that you can get hold of another copy of the game.”

“Thank you, Mister McAfee,” he replied, then turned to leave.

“Oh, one minute young man. Could you come back into the shop on Monday?”

Robin shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

“Excellent. It's just that I have something else that might interest you.”

Robin pulled a face. “I'm a little short of cash ...” he pointed out.

“Oh, no, no,” smiled Mister McAfee. “Now what I have in mind isn't quite the same as *Game of Aeons*, but I think you'll enjoy it. And, I hasten to add, you can have it on the house.”

“On the house?”

“Free, *gratis*, with my compliments.”

“Another game? The last thing I want to do is rub my parents up the wrong way again.”

“No, it's not another computer game, you'll be glad to know. Trust me, young man. Will you trust me?”

“Sure.”

“And if it's not to your satisfaction, then I won't be offended if you have second thoughts and bring it back. Is it a deal?”



Robin shrugged his shoulders and accepted Mister McAfee's outstretched hand. "Sure, it's a deal."

"Would around eleven o'clock suit you?"

"Sure."

"Then I shall look forward to seeing you on Monday morning at eleven. Good day to you, young Robin."

## 35. Empty-handed

When Robin returned from the shop empty-handed and still with a long face, this did not escape his mother's attention.

“No luck?” she enquired, leaving the kitchen and coming into the living room.

“Fraid not. Mister McAfee sold me the only copy of the game. But he did say that I should try on-line. Is it okay if I go up and check? One of the games stores is bound to have a second-hand copy at a reasonable price.”

“I don't see why not, Robin. But be sure that it is a reasonable price, no matter how much you want the game. And make sure that you shop around at reputable sites.”

“Sure. Thanks, Mum.”

He left the room, dashed upstairs and booted up the machine, and it did not escape his own attention that he was once again feeling quite excited after weeks of unremitting depression.

Robin's first port of call was Google. He didn't expect a whole heap of results for the search term “Game of Aeons”, since it was an old game, and he wouldn't have even been surprised if it yielded only the one result. That was a remote possibility. But for Google to return the message *No results found for “Game of Aeons”* was bizarre in the extreme. With so many people online playing the game, there simply had to be a healthy market for the software. And with such a healthy community this must surely have been a topic on many thousands of people's lips at some time or other over the last ten years? It just didn't make sense whatsoever.

That was his initial reaction: incredulity. That gave way to frustration as he tried various alternative searches and these, too, yielded no relevant results. So, too, the frustration grew into anger and after a few minutes, he had to exit Windows, turn off his computer and leave his bedroom as he was sorely tempted to pick up his computer monitor and hurl it against the nearest wall. And finally, after returning to the room and forcing himself to just sit and meditate, that awful emptiness and depression returned to haunt him – or plague him – with a vengeance.

## 36. No rational explanation

Monday couldn't come around fast enough for Robin. He wasn't so much interested in hearing what trinket Mister McAfee thought might interest him, as recounting his tale in the hope that the man might have a rational explanation. And yet Robin was pretty much decided by now that there simply could be no earthly reason, unless one were to delve into the occult or metaphysics.

Well, at least one good thing had come out of this. As this conundrum wouldn't leave Robin in peace, even on a night when he was asleep, and took up a good deal of his attention and his psychic energy, his depression had once again lifted and he found himself actually quite fired up by this apparently impossible challenge. How could Robin express the way he felt? Strangely, he really did feel game for anything or ready to take on the world and his dog. At least, he could maintain this level of energy for a time, but he realized that if things went on like this for much longer, then if he didn't succumb to mental derangement, then he would begin to run out of steam and perhaps collapse in an exhausted heap.

Almost as soon as Robin entered the shop, Mister McAfee came over to him and took hold of him gently but firmly by the arm. "My word, young Robin, whatever is the matter? You do appear to be in a bit of a state."

Robin mumbled something.

"I think that you'd better come and sit down. That's it, sit on that chair behind the counter and I'll make you a drink, then I think we should have a little natter and you can tell me all about it. Which would you prefer: tea or coffee?"

"Whatever you're having," he replied, his head swimming.

"I'm easy. What about a good strong coffee? You look a coffee man to me."

He nodded. "Sure, thanks."

So Mister McAfee disappeared into a back room, emerging a couple of minutes later with two steaming mugs of coffee. "There you are, young Robin. Now, when you've got your wits together, perhaps you could brief me on whatever it is that's troubling you?"

I may be old and past my prime, but I'm a good listener. And, as they rightly say: a problem shared is a problem halved."

So Robin did his best to explain the bizarre results he'd found when he'd tried to find *Game of Aeons* on Google.

"No results whatsoever?" the old man echoed. "Why yes, I agree that this is bizarre in the extreme."

Robin was certainly glad to hear that. "Remembering that you were reading a book of the same name, I tried Amazon UK and US, too, and they didn't yield a single result. Again, even if the book went out of print and was remaindered, you'd expect at least one third party trader to have the book in stock; even more likely if the book is as rare as it appears to be. I checked libraries, too, and there appears to be no record of such a book ever having been written, and yet I've seen a copy of the book with my own eyes. Now how do you explain that?"

The old man could merely shrug and offer no plausible explanation.

"Okay," he continued. "So that's the bizarre part. But the bit that I really can't handle is that unless I can get hold of another copy of the game – and apparently I can't – then there's no way that I can get back in touch with Ellie. And that is the heartbreaking part. If I could just get in contact with Ellie again, then nothing else really matters a jot, least of all conundrums. I'd turn over a new leaf and I'd tidy my room, I'd give up gaming, I'd sweep the streets with joy, I would do *anything* to have Ellie back. Do you see?"

"Yes, young Robin," Mister McAfee nodded sympathetically. "I do see and I understand you perfectly."

Robin peered intently at the old man. "You don't think I'm going crazy, do you?"

Mister McAfee gently patted him on the shoulder. No, young Robin, I can see that you're worked up about all this, but no, I don't think you're going crazy. Not at all. And there's something else you need to know."

Robin pricked up his ears. "What's that?"

Mister McAfee leant closer and whispered in Robin's ear. "You've fallen madly in love with Eleanor."

Now that was food for thought.

Then: "Did I say that her name was Eleanor? I've said so

much these last few days, I can't recall.”

Mister McAfee shrugged. “I thought you did, but perhaps I'm mistaken. Anyhow, I promised I had something that might interest you.”

Robin sighed. Free trinkets were the last thing on his mind right now.

“I'm afraid it's not much, but I don't think you will be disappointed.”

I'm afraid it's not much ... That said it all, really.

*Well folks, on Game of Aeons, nobody goes home empty-handed. So here you are, Robin, your very own guilt-ridden Game of Aeons commemorative plaque and an inscribed, refillable fountain pen, courtesy of tonight's sponsor.*

A few others had entered the shop by now and Mister McAfee took a minute or two out to see if he could help them, but it turned out that they were just browsing, so the old man left them to it and returned to sit beside Robin, until they made their minds up. There was no hard sell with Mister McAfee, and people probably preferred it that way.

“Excuse me,” one lady spoke up at length and Robin looked up sharply, recognizing that voice in an instant. It was Ellie. There was absolutely no doubt about it.

But when he saw the lady approaching the counter, his heart lurched.

Oh my God, he cried out inside. So all that stuff about “what you see is what you get” was just bullshit. And all he could hear ringing in his ears now were his mother's prophetic words: “*I know that they say that beauty is only skin deep, but what if she turned out to be as ugly as sin?*”

He sat there on the seat behind the counter, totally at a loss for words and physically frozen to the spot.

## 37. A case of mistaken identity

Mister McAfee rose to his feet as the rotund woman approached the counter.

“Yes, madam, can I help you?”

“I hope so, sir. I was looking at the painting of a storm-tossed ship in the window and I was wondering if I could have a closer look?”

Robin was even more bemused at this point, for the lady's affected accent was a far cry from the dulcet tones he'd heard a moment earlier that he'd presumed were addressed at him. Perhaps he was going insane and Mister McAfee was simply being diplomatic?

“Certainly, madam. If you follow me, I'll fetch the painting for you. You may take it outside and examine it in natural light, if you prefer.”

“Woo hoo. Excuse me,” he distinctly heard the voice call again and he jumped to his feet and spun on his heel. Three feet to his right, standing in the open doorway into the back room of the shop stood a petite lady with long, glossy shoulder-length black hair. She was the spitting image of Ellie. If not, then Ellie was the spitting image of her. And her voice was almost the same as Ellie's.

“This is a long shot,” the lady continued, and a broad grin had crept across her face by now, “but I wonder if you had a young man in here a few weeks ago. I believe that the young man's name is Robin, and understand that he bought a copy of *Game of Aeons*.”

“I-I-I ...” for a few moments, Robin was quite lost for words.

“Let's get you out of here,” Ellie suggested and she came forward, took hold of his arm and guided him into the back room, then up a flight of stairs into a small flat above the shop. She pointed him in the direction of a settee facing the fireplace, sat him down, then took her place beside him.

“I'm sorry,” he croaked, but I've had several shocks recently. Moments ago, I distinctly heard you call out 'Excuse me', but when I looked up, I got the fright of my life, thinking that the ...

um ... well endowed lady approaching the counter was you. I mean, I didn't know what to say. I was glued to the seat with fright.”

“Oh my God!” Ellie laughed, “And no wonder. But ye of little faith: when I said that with me, what you see is what you get, I really did mean that. I'm really not the kind of person who would lie or trick you about things like that. Well, lie or trick you about anything, for that matter.”

“And then when I heard you speak again and saw you for the first time, I got the third fright of my life.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” she soothed him, gently stroking his arm. Then: “So if I was the third fright of your life, and the ... um... well endowed lady was the second, what was the first? Or have you simply lost count?”

“It's a long story ...” he apologized.

“Sweetie, we have all the time in the world, there's no rush.”

“My father decided that he'd had enough of me spending all my time on the computer and treating him and my mother like hotel staff, waiting on me.”

“Yes, so I gather.”

“So you gather?”

“Yes, my grandfather told me the sorry story.”

“Come again?”

“Mister Jeremiah McAfee is my grandfather.”

Robin was gobsmacked. “Better make that four frights,” he gasped. “And it sounds like you've also got a tale to tell.”

She nodded enthusiastically. “I certainly do, but you go first. Everything that you told my grandfather the other day, he relayed to me.”

Robin thought for a moment. “Well, there's not much more to tell, then, except that the first great fright was discovering that in spite of searching Google, Amazon and a few libraries, I could find no record whatsoever of either *Games of Aeons* or a book of the same name. I'm sure that I don't need to tell you that this inexplicable result presents something of conundrum. That, and the apparent impossibility of ever being able to get in touch with you again, has been driving me to distraction and near-insanity over the weekend.

“But,” he added, “as I said to Mister McAfee – as I said to

your grandfather – the only important thing is to find you again. Rather, the only important thing is to have found you again. Nothing else really matters anymore.”

Ellie took hold of his shoulders and pulled him close to her, to nestle his head in the soft woollen sweater than covered her ample bosom, and it was then that the heavens opened again and the tears began to flow freely from his eyes.

“There, there, sweetie. You're safe and sound now and we're back together. As you say, nothing else really matters.”

Eventually, having soaked the front of Ellie's sweater, Robin pulled himself together and Ellie went to make them and her grandfather a fresh cup of tea.

When she returned, Robin of course had many questions to ask her, but first he listened patiently as she recounted her own tale, from the moment they parted on the last day that Robin logged into *Game of Aeons*.

“For the first few days, though I missed you terribly, Robin, I simply thought that something must have come up at home and that this was just a temporary 'glitch' in our relationship, if you like. But as the days passed and you still didn't show up, I became worried and I must confess that all my years of training were blown out of the window.

“I mean, all manner of possibilities sprang to mind. I thought perhaps I had offended you in some way, though this seemed a pretty remote likelihood. I thought perhaps you'd found someone else in real life and, given that I was just a virtual friend, that you'd chosen your new-found friend. And of course, I then began to wonder why you hadn't had the bottle to let me know that you were seeing someone else.

“Then all manner of darker possibilities occurred to me. I thought that maybe Darius or the Powers That Be had caught up with you and they were maybe holding you for interrogation; or they'd incarcerated you; even, to use a euphemism, that your account had been terminated. I mean, you've experienced first-hand how it works now: if you get a good thumping in-game, you wake up with bruises – even broken bones – at a psychic level in the real world. The severity of your injuries is dependent on how deeply you're immersed in the game and how quickly you can wake up out of the game and hit Control H or Control X.”



“So how did you find me?” he wanted to know.

“I had one of the Friends hack into their game servers. He found your record and would have pulled out your address, but unfortunately he found that all the personal details other than the user name in the database were encrypted. Thankfully, however, in the marketing questions you'd answered when you signed up, you'd typed in *Mister McAfee's Poshe Emporium* as the place you bought the game, and this had been stored in clear text.

“So, to cut a long story short, I came to see my grandfather and explained the predicament. Then all we could do was cross our fingers and hope against hope that you'd return to the shop at some time or that one of us would spot you in town.

“You used to complain about a four hour shift sweeping the streets in-game, but I tell you I spent the best part of a week on the streets. I didn't just sweep the streets, I scoured them. If I hadn't found you, I planned on putting an advert in the classified ads of the local newspaper. I'd have put up missing person posters, too, but I didn't have a photo, and I'd have checked local record offices, but again I couldn't remember your surname.”

Ellie waved her arms in the air and tears began to well up in her eyes now, so he pulled Ellie close to him and comforted her.

“God,” she sobbed at length. “At one point I was at my wit's end and I did wonder if maybe you were feeling the same way about me.”

He nodded and leant down to lightly kiss Ellie on the forehead. “Thank you, Ellie. And yes, I was feeling just the same way about you.”

Then a thought occurred to him. “Isn't it all-too convenient that the one real friend I have in *Game of Aeons* turns out to be the granddaughter of the guy who sold me the game? A game for which no record exists online?”

Ellie laughed. “Really, if I've told you this once, then I've told you half a dozen times, and hinted a good many more. But then, as I've also suggested, it simply hasn't properly clicked, has it? However, this is only to be expected, Robin, so please don't fret.”

Ellie's tone was actually quite gentle, and yet he still felt something of a jolt as she spoke these words.

“The game you know as *Game of Aeons* is a portal into a limited subset of another game that goes by another name. I told

you a fib, actually. *Game of Aeons* was developed by a group of our Friends and it was never released commercially, and the book was privately printed. That's the perfectly rational explanation for why they don't show up on Google.”

*Doh.* He felt a dull thud in his head on hearing this.

“I told the truth when I said that I was involved from the beginning as a beta tester. The game was privately distributed to a number of Friends who have an interest in working in this area.

“It has also been used by the Friends for certain training and teaching purposes. And that is where you came in.”

“How's that?”

“My grandfather – who is himself one of the Friends – could see that you might benefit from exposure to *Game of Aeons*.”

Robin frowned. “So, it was a set up, then?”

Ellie took hold of his hand. “Without putting too fine a point on it, Robin, when you first walked into the shop, he sensed that you were rather wayward and in a bit of a mess. That you were in need of a short, sharp shock, if you like.”

“He could tell that by just spending a few minutes with me?”

“Oh yes,” she nodded in earnest. “He's more adept at sensing these things than I am, but that was also the impression I got when I first met you in *Game of Aeons*.”

“I take it that you didn't just happen to turn up at the right time and find me?” he asked rhetorically.

“It wasn't deliberately orchestrated by us, Robin, if that's what you're asking, though it is my job to keep a general eye out for newbies and to monitor the progress of certain characters who have bright prospects. Those who might benefit from the Work or might benefit at a later date by working for the Work. When I say you are 'like gold dust' or have 'bright prospects', what I mean by that is that you are a rarity and though presently raw and scattered, you are nonetheless potentially very valuable once refined and either minted or crafted: that is, once put to good use in the community.”

“So it was just good luck that you found me, then?”

“I don't think that there is such a thing as chance or coincidence. You and I were sending out signals, if you like, and we were drawn to one-another by what the Friends call Necessity, or by Design, or by Destiny, or by Divine Grace. We deliberately

capitalize all these words to signify that they have meanings to us that go way beyond or even contrary to the common definitions you'll find in dictionaries and encyclopedias.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Gosh, that's quite an eye opener. It sounds kind of mystical.”

Ellie laughed and squeezed his hand. “It *is* mystical, Robin. That is precisely what this Work is.”

“So, Ellie, do you work in the real world, too?”

“Well, first of all, it depends what you mean by 'real world', Robin.”

He cast his arms around and tapped the wooden coffee table that stood in front of the settee and the floor under his feet. “I mean the everyday world of glass and wood and concrete and steel. And what's left of the natural environment, of course.”

“And you really think that this is the real world, Robin? Certainly in the concrete and everyday terms that you've described it, it is what you commonly refer to as the real world, with a little 'r' and a little 'w', yes; and any number of modern scientists and technologists would agree with you there, though in fields like psychology, quantum physics, religion, spirituality and mysticism, there are many who would beg to differ – some for the right reasons and some for all the wrong reasons.”

“Go on,” Robin prompted.

“Some, like C.S. Lewis would say that this realm is but a shadow of the Real. The Russian mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieff would say that man's state is robot-like or mechanical or that he is asleep and needs to wake up and remember his Higher Self. Others like Doris Lessing and the Sufi thinker and teacher Idries Shah whose pupil she was, might say that this is an abode of decay and degeneration, governed by Shammat, like Shikasta; that man is in the grip of the Commanding Self and the many technical impediments that I once listed for you, and that the Real World lays beyond this realm at a higher spiritual level. The Buddhists would say that this is *samsara*, an abode and endless cycle of death and suffering and rebirth which we need to transcend – and also return to in order to practise mindfulness and compassion. There are many such variations on a similar theme ...”

“So where does *Game of Aeons* fit into all this?” he wanted

to know.

“The game – be it *Game of Aeons* or The Big Game which really has been playing out over aeons – is a shadow or a poor substitute for living in the Real World, Robin.”

She, too, waved her arms around and rapped her knuckles on the wooden table in front of them and the floor beneath their feet. “Don't be fooled by the apparent reality of these surroundings, Robin. This is still all a part of the game.”

He was puzzled, then a minor revelation struck him and he groaned: “Oh, for heaven's sake, isn't there a pill I could just take?”

Ellie laughed. “Red pill or blue pill? If only it were that simple. You've been watching the wrong movies.”

“That begs the question, Ellie,” he replied, quick as a flash: “what are the *right* movies?”

Ellie didn't answer that. “So what level did you achieve in *Game of Aeons*, Robin?” she, in turn, wanted to know.

He sighed. “I didn't manage to get beyond Level 1. I thought maybe when I was 'promoted' from unemployed vagrant to apprentice street sweeper, that I'd be upgraded, but apparently it doesn't work like that.”

“Well, Robin, let's put it this way – Welcome to Level 2. Or, as it is sometimes affectionately referred to by the Friends: God's Little Joke.”

“You mean that we haven't really escaped the game?”

“I mean that you haven't as yet escaped, Robin. And also, the solution is not as simple as shutting down or destroying the game. We need to keep the game going to help people escape from the game we call real life. And what you've learnt to do in the game, you must now apply in the real world, too. Though you could escape, you must return to help other sentient beings.”

“So I have my work cut out.”

“We all have our work cut out for us. Practise, practise and more practise. Giving, giving and yet more giving.

“And I might add, if you're in need of some gentle encouragement, I really do think that you are cut out for this work.”

“Game on, you mean?”

“Oh yes, Robin,” Ellie nodded. “Bring it on!”

~ ~ **Congratulations** ~ ~

Congratulations, you have now successfully completed Level 1.

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## ***Game of Aeons: A short novel***

By H.M. Forester

Young Robin Hargreaves is looking for something to occupy his time and spice up his life. Apparently by chance, whilst perusing the wares in a second-hand shop, he is introduced to *Game of Aeons*, a computer simulation.

In the game, he meets up with a young lady, Ellie, who takes him under her wing. Despite her youth, Ellie has risen to the ranks of a veteran in the game and as well as a loving heart, she has a wise head on her shoulders.

Robin soon discovers that like life itself, *Games of Aeons* is not all beer and skittles. As he becomes more and more involved and immersed in the game, it becomes increasingly real and at times frightening. But by the time he realizes this, it is too late to back out and there is too much at stake – not only in-game but also in what we commonly and mistakenly think of as the Real World.

***Game of Aeons*** is a short, 60,000-word novel in the genre of soft science fiction. Like the in-story game of the same name, the book is more about people rather than technology, so you don't need a degree in quantum physics to understand and enjoy it. Nor is it a shoot 'em up, so you don't need an interest in computer gaming.