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Opening extract from

Strange Hiding Place

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Chapter 1

Whispers in the air. Scrambled messages on an unknown frequency. Invisible commands to silent watchers . . .

“Scanners tracking the southern quadrant have a pick-up. Do you read?” they said.

“Reading,” came the reply.

“Confirm distance.”

“Two kliks and closing.”

“Units in place?”

“Yes.”

“All systems operational?”

“All systems operational.”

“Estimate time to final countdown.”

“Four minutes. The accident is waiting to happen.”

* * *

It had been a long day and Dez was getting fed up. He was stuck in the back of the car, watching countryside that his mother kept describing as “wonderful” but which he was thoroughly sick of.

His father was fed up as well. Fed up with Dez for getting himself lost in the little town they’d stopped at for lunch. Their timetable was now, according to his dad, shot to pieces – though why they had to have a timetable at all Dez couldn’t understand. They were on holiday, driving around somewhere in France called the Dordogne (which sounded to Dez more like a medical condition than a place), and timetables were for school – somewhere he wouldn’t be for at least another six weeks.

“Dammit, Mary – it’ll be dark in half an hour!” Dez sank further down in the back seat so he couldn’t be seen in the rear-view mirror.

“That doesn’t mean you have to drive like Damon Hill, Ted.” His mother had never cottoned on to the fact that Dad liked having his driving criticized even less than he liked being late.

As his parents squabbled in the front, Dez picked up his Game Boy and, with the sound turned down (“Switch that off, please – I can’t concentrate with all that mindless beeping. We *are* driving on the wrong side of the road, you know!”), he let his mind wander. When they got back to England it would be to a new house and the slightly worrying prospect of a new school.

New school, new teachers, new boys – friends or enemies, who could tell? – and only his dog, Rufus, to help him through the inevitable bad times. Dez was a natural optimist, always thinking the best, but he knew that the first few weeks of September were going to be tough. He was determined to enjoy this holiday, timetable or no timetable, even if it was supposed to help him with his French.

He looked up from the tiny glowing screen in his lap. It really was getting dark now. The car’s headlights, with those funny bits of black tape stuck on them, were lighting up the road ahead, but it twisted and turned so much you couldn’t see a lot. Maybe it was the dark, but he thought his mum could be right – they did seem to be going quite fast.

On the side of the road nearest the car the jagged silhouettes of fir trees made an almost impenetrable wall as they zipped by; on the opposite side low, scraggy bushes led off to yet more trees. It had been like that for the past half hour. At this rate, surely they’d be at their hotel soon.

He had just gone back to blasting alien blips to pixels when he heard his mother gasp. He sat up straight, undid his seat-belt and moved over to her side of the car.

“Ted!” she shouted, pointing at the approaching bend in the road. “Ted – slow down!”

Dez could just make out the dark shape his mother had spotted first because she was sitting where the driver should be. It looked like a brick wall, and the thought flashed through his mind that it must be a broken-down lorry.

“The brakes aren’t working!”

Dez looked at his father, mouth open, face lit up by the soft green light of the dashboard. His arms were rigid in front of him, as if he was trying to force himself through his seat and into the back of the car.

“We’re going faster!”

Right then time seemed to slow, stretch, e-x-p-a-n-d.

Dez watched, fascinated, as the huge black shape in the road grew even bigger. He watched his father fight with the steering wheel and gear stick, almost as if they were attacking him. He watched his mother twist slowly round to look at him, her left hand reaching between the seats, the diamonds in her engagement ring glinting. The last thing he remembered doing was flicking up the lock on his door.

Chapter 2

Dez woke up.

Had he been dreaming? He opened his eyes and made out a strange orange light somewhere in front of him. He was lying on his side, and everything he owned seemed to ache as he moved his left hand down to help push himself up. If he was in bed it was a bed covered in dust and small stones . . . Then it all came tumbling back. Their car had crashed! The orange light was fire – his parents could still be trapped!

Dez tried to stand, his feet scrabbling in the dirt. Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder, pushing him gently down and pulling him back at the same time. He froze. And then he heard a man's voice.

"Stay still," it whispered. "You are in great danger – move away from the road."

There was something odd about the way the man spoke, but his voice had an edge that made Dez do what he said. He glanced over his shoulder to look at the speaker as he squirmed further back under the spiky bushes. For a moment all he could see was a dark shape, but then the light from the road intensified and he could make out the man's face and the fact that he was wearing what appeared to be black mechanic's overalls.

With the burst of light Dez remembered the car. It was burning! He couldn't just lie there if his parents were inside, injured and unable to get out. Breaking free from the man's grip, Dez lurched forward, only to be thrown back, punched by the force of a huge explosion.

For a moment the night sky was lit up by a vivid gout of flame that reached up five, ten metres and then slowly sank down. Dez's ears felt as if someone had boxed them and his head seemed to be looser than it should be on his shoulders. Gasping for breath he peered through the tangle of bushes towards the burning car and was stunned to see what appeared to be men in

uniform gathering round it for a second or two. One then gave an order, gesturing with a gun, and they ran off.

The night was strangely silent after the dragon's roar of the explosion, and then in the silence Dez could hear a high-pitched whine in his ears, like you do after a big bang. He felt something wet on his face and realized that he was crying.

"There's nothing we can do," said the man's voice. Dez had forgotten all about him and whirled round in a panic. Crouched right next to him, the stranger's face had an odd, wax-like quality, shadows waving across it as he spoke.

"We have to get away from here," he went on. "Follow me – and be as quiet as you can."

"But my parents . . ." said Dez, looking back at the road.

"All I can tell you is that it was very quick," said the man, indicating that Dez should follow him through the bushes and away from the road.

"Who were those men? What happened?"

"I can't go into details now." The man held a thorny branch back to let Dez through a small gap, and, too confused to do anything else, he followed.

When they reached the trees and were able to stand up, Dez was about to speak when he heard a soft sucking noise in the distance. The man stopped and looked at a small box in his hand. He smiled slightly.

"They've gone," he muttered and began walking away from the road again, deeper into the forest.

"Who?" asked Dez, running to keep up with him and stumbling in the dark. "Who's gone? Where are you taking me? Shouldn't we call the police . . . are *you* the police?"

“I will explain everything – as far as I can – when we get to where we’re going,” came the reply. “For the moment you just have to trust me.”

Trust. Small word, big responsibility. But for Dez there was no choice. Even though he’d been warned, ever since he could remember, not to go off with strangers, what choice did he have? Either stay where he was, stranded by the side of a French road in the gathering dark, or go with this man. Dez mentally flipped a coin, stood looking at the man looking at him, and then nodded.

“OK,” he said, wondering as he followed if he’d done the right thing.

Their journey was a short one. There wasn’t exactly a path through the trees, and there was no light to see where they were going, but the man led the way without once bumping into anything and Dez followed his black-against-black shape like a puppy.

As he walked, his mind was in a turmoil. His parents were dead. Well, not his *real* parents – he was an adopted child – but they were the only parents he had. For all he knew his real parents could be dead as well, and it occurred to him that for this sort of thing to happen to a person twice in eleven years was totally unfair.

He’d been in foster homes until he was five and counted himself lucky to have been adopted at all. People only seemed to want babies, little squirts they could pretend were their own, and when Ted and Mary Danby had come into his life it was like ten Christmases arriving at once. And now they were gone. In a way Dez was used to it; people had been going from his life all of his life, though usually it was in a far less dramatic way.

He was alone again, and he was going to have to get used to the idea.

A few minutes after leaving the roadside the man stopped in a clearing and Dez almost bumped into him.

“What’s happened?” he asked, peering round the man. There was nothing to see.

“We’re here.”

“Where?” said Dez, walking past the man and into the clearing.

“Careful.”

“Why? There’s nothing he— *Oof!*” It felt as if he’d walked straight into a tree, but when he stumbled back and looked there was nothing there.

“I told you to be careful,” said the man. He pointed his fist in Dez’s direction and the thing in his hand clicked. Dez heard the sort of sound a TV screen makes when you turn it on and the air in front of him flickered. One moment there was nothing and the next he was staring at a sleek, ultra-modern van.

“How . . . ?” Dez put his hand out and touched the vehicle with the tips of his fingers. It was real, it was solid, it was there.

“Intra-molecule expansion,” the man said, smiling as he walked forward, clicking the thing in his hand again and making a door appear in the side of the van. It hissed as it opened.

“What?”

“That’s how we do it,” the man said, pulling the door open and waving at Dez to follow him inside. “It’s called ’cloaking’.”

Dez stood stock still and looked at the man, half of him lit by the yellow interior light of the van, his shadow cast on the leafy ground. Feelings crowded in on him like spectators at an accident, all wanting to be in front – amazement, fear and loss, all covered in the cold blanket of shock.

What was he doing here in this chilly French wood, alone with a stranger? Shouldn't he have waited by the car for the police to come? Why did he believe a word this man said? He could be anyone. What on earth, thought Dez, had made him think he'd be safer going with him? From inside the van he heard what sounded like a soft chirruping. *Budgies?*

All this time the man had watched him, saying nothing, staying still. Then, ignoring the weird birdcalls, he moved towards him and put his hand on Dez's shoulder and patted it, just like his dad used to do. The simple gesture made Dez feel a lot calmer, more at ease, and he knew, just somehow *knew*, that everything would be all right if he got in the van. He walked slowly to the door, hesitated, and then got in, the man following him. There was another sighing hiss of air as the door swung shut.

More whispers. More questions.

"Success?" they asked.

"As far as we can tell," they answered.

"What?"

"There was an explosion."

"Why?"

"The machine they were in was far cruder than we imagined, little more than a travelling bomb. But, as far as we can tell, we succeeded."

"I hope so. Stay for another circuit or so, just to check. We will be in touch."

Chapter 3

While the outside of the van had undoubtedly looked very modern, very streamlined, the inside was something else entirely. It didn't look to Dez as if there was any way these four wheels could have rolled off a production line *anywhere* on Earth. But if they hadn't, where had they come from? A Hollywood special effects studio? His eyes almost out on stalks, he sank into a chair and refused to follow that particular chain of thought, it was too confusing.

The seat he was sitting on moulded itself to his body the moment he sat down. It was the oddest sensation and he felt as if he was suspended in mid-air, being gently massaged – which was just what he needed after being flung out of a speeding car and across a road. He didn't seem to have broken anything, but he did ache quite a lot.

Then there was the smell (sort of mothbally, but nicer) and the fact that he was surrounded by the most mind-boggling display of equipment he'd ever seen.

The van was divided into two compartments, the bit he and the man were sitting in and, through a small gap, the actual driving bit. Dez stared, mouth open, at large, flat screens. Some danced with weird hieroglyphics, others projected three-dimensional pictures – aerial views of wooded countryside, what looked like the solar system and other things he couldn't make out – and yet others showed objects that moved and gave the distinct impression that they were, in some odd way, *thinking*.

And all the time, in the background, he could hear strange bird-like squawking, cheeping noises. Was someone talking?

The more he looked, the more convinced he became that there was nothing twentieth-century about the van, nothing at all. But (and this was what he was still finding hardest to think about) if it wasn't twentieth-century technology, what was it? In books people pinched

themselves when they thought they might be dreaming, but Dez had already woken up once to find that everything around him was real. Pinching himself would only be a painful waste of time.

He turned to look at the man. Somehow he looked more real here than he had out by the road. His skin had lost its waxy appearance, and it occurred to Dez, looking down at his dust-covered, scuffed clothes, that *he* probably looked quite odd himself.

"Maybe I should try and explain a few things, Jack," said the man. Dez looked at him and frowned. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes . . . but, you know . . . how did you know my name was Jack?" Nobody called Dez "Jack" any more, not since primary school, not even his parents. His surname was Danby, and someone, he couldn't remember who, had nicknamed him "Desperate". He'd been Desperate Danby for a month or two, and simply Dez from then on. It was strange to be called Jack after so long, but then everything was strange at the moment.

"I know rather more than just your name, Jack." The man reached over to a console that looked like a kitchen work surface covered in blisters, tapped it and said something Dez couldn't understand. The screen cleared and then threw up yet more of the dancing hieroglyphics; they twisted and squirmed like coloured worms, wriggling across the thin grey sliver of . . . what? Plastic? Metal? He couldn't tell.

"Well, you don't know that no one calls me Jack." Dez sat forward, and the back of the chair moved with him. "And anyway, what's *your* name?"

"How rude of me," replied the man, looking slightly surprised. "My name is Yakob. So, if you aren't called Jack, what *are* you called?"

“Dez,” said Dez, watching as the man called Yakob tapped the console again. The worms tangoed. “Everyone calls me Dez.”

“I shall as well.”

“You were going to explain things to me.” Dez rubbed some dirt off his face as he spoke. “What happened out there?” He took a deep breath, swallowed the lump that had suddenly appeared in his throat and pointed back to the road, “Why are my, um . . . why are my *parents* dead? And what were *you* doing there?”

“I was sent to rescue you, Jack – sorry, Dez.” Yakob leaned back in his chair. “I came a long way to make sure you would be safe, and, to be honest, I arrived too late.”

“But I *am* safe, aren’t I?”

“More by luck than anything to do with me,” said Yakob.

“What do you mean?”

“Somehow or other you were thrown out of your car.” Yakob fiddled with the small matchbox-sized thing in his hand. “The Väd-Raatch meant you to die in that crash, and it was pure chance that you didn’t. None of this,” his hand swept round the weird clutter of humming, seemingly alive stuff that surrounded them both, “could have stopped it from happening.”

“Why would they want to kill *me*? What have *I* ever done to them? And anyway, who are they? What did you call them? The Vädwotsits?” Dez could feel things welling up inside him once more – things he couldn’t control, like tears and stuff. He wanted to cry, but he couldn’t quite remember how. Actually, what he *really* wanted to do was kick something very hard.

He was alive, but his parents weren’t. He was alone in the world. No brothers, no sisters, no grandparents – just some sister of his father’s, somewhere in Australia, who no one had heard from for years. And he was in the middle of the French countryside, a long way from home.

Then he remembered they were moving house soon, and didn't really have a home at the moment. *Total* bummer.

Yakob looked at Dez in the kind of way people do when they don't quite know what to say, and took a deep breath. "You'll have to listen to what my Wing Leader, Tor Kobal, has to tell you for the full story," he said at last, reaching behind him and picking up a small silver oblong. "But before I play you this, I have to tell you something you may find very hard to believe."

"Harder to believe than some people I've never heard of trying to kill me?" interrupted Dez.

"Quite possibly."

"Tell me, then."

But before Yakob could say anything something in the van screeched out loudly and all the lights dimmed.

"What's happening?" gasped Dez.

"Scoutship overflight . . . low and slow," Yakob said, then turned and spoke again, but this time in what Dez assumed was his own language. Seconds later every screen in the van blanked and there was complete silence. No one spoke, no one moved. In the yellow half-light Dez sat rigid in his chair, wondering what the heck was going on. He didn't dare say or do anything and as the seconds ticked by all he could do was try to stop his teeth from chattering. He wasn't cold, so he knew he must be frightened. The unknown is very good at doing that.

Then one of the holo-screens lit up next to Yakob, information of some sort streaming across it at a rate of knots.

“Right overhead . . .” Yakob muttered to himself, and Dez couldn’t help looking up; somewhere above the roof a hunter stalked. “Why aren’t they going? They can’t have picked anything up – there! Moving away . . .”

“Can we, um . . . can we talk?” whispered Dez.

“We can.”

“What’s a scoutship overflight?”

“The Väd-Raatch are checking the area,” explained Yakob. “Being typically thorough.”

“Can they see us? Will they be able to find us?”

“They’re not looking for us, and they don’t know we’re here,” said Yakob, studying the screen. “And if you don’t know what you’re looking for, you very rarely find it.”

“So why all the precautions?” asked Dez.

“Because if they *did* happen to pick us up we’d be in real trouble.”

“I thought I was in real trouble already,” sighed Dez.

“This would be real trouble and a half,” said Yakob, sitting back. “Good, they’re out of range . . . for the moment.”

“For the moment?”

Yakob turned and said something over his shoulder to whoever or whatever it was in the van he spoke to, and the lights brightened. “They may come back,” he said, “or they may not. What were we doing before all that?”

“You were going to tell me something you said I’d find hard to believe,” said Dez.

“Right, so I was. All right. I’ve already told you my name is Yakob, Yakob Pell. What I didn’t say was that I am a Tylurian from Priam IV, a planet somewhere behind what I’m told you

call the Cygnus Rift – that's in the Orion Arm of the Milky Way, 300,000 light years from here – give or take a light year." Yakob pointed to himself. "I am – how would you put it? – an alien."

"You don't *look* like one," Dez said, peering at Yakob, staring in a way he'd been told he never should. "You look just like one of us."

"Appearances can be deceptive."

"Huh?" frowned Dez.

"Don't judge people by what they look like – they aren't always what they seem," explained Yakob, reaching over and placing the silver thing on the console. There was a hiss, like the sound of a bottle of fizzy water opening, as it changed colour and somehow became part of the surface. "I'm going to play the holo now, so listen carefully."

He waited for a second or two and then a dark circle next to Dez crackled and lit up. A cylinder of light, about a metre high, shot up out of it and started to change shape. Then, quite suddenly, Dez was gaping at the figure of a woman dressed in some kind of uniform. She looked like a very expensive plastic kit he'd seen in a comic shop once, and then she moved, waving her arm.

"That's a holo of my Wing Leader, Tor Kobal," said Yakob.

"Hello, Jack," said the small figure.

"She doesn't know you're called Dez," whispered Yakob, leaning forward.

"You are now safely in the hands of one of our best agents," Tor Kobal continued. "And it is time for me to tell you why . . ."

The next half-hour was the most extraordinary of Dez's life.

Priam IV's star system, Tor Kobal told him, was dominated by two cultures, the Tylurians and the Väd-Raatch. These two had been sworn enemies for longer than anyone cared to remember, and the Tylurians, according to Tor Kobal a peace-loving race, had managed to keep the Väd-Raatch at bay and their home planet safe until very recently. The arrival on the scene of a bloodthirsty new leader had changed the Väd's tactics. They were now at war.

This man's one aim in life was the destruction of the Tylurians and the devastation of Priam IV. To guard against this ever happening a secret weapon had been developed, but never actually made. The weapon – a complex, oxygen-hungry bacteria – could wipe out the Väd-Raatch in a matter of weeks once released on their planet. The plans, said Tor, were hidden in a safe place – in fact, split up into three parts and put somewhere the Väds would never find them. They were only to be used in the most extreme emergency, for the threat of the weapon's existence was enough to ensure peace.

So far, so good, except that the Tylurians had discovered there was a Väd spy in their midst. They didn't know who it was, or how much he, or she, had found out, until the person was intercepted trying to download information from the Tylurian High Command's central intelligence unit – a sort of computer like a cross between an ultra-bright plant and very clever rock.

The spy – obviously someone very high up in the Tylurian government able to gain access to the intelligence unit – was disturbed before he could get the information he was after. Realizing that he'd been rumbled he'd shut down his own terminal before the security forces could find out where he was operating from, and therefore who he, or she, was.

He had escaped detection, but not before breaking into the sector that contained part of the information about where the plans were hidden; then, when it seemed as if he was about to be

caught, he'd infected the Tylurian computer with a deadly bio-metric virus – a disease that had damaged, beyond repair, almost all the other files about the secret plans. The data they contained had been lost for ever.

The tiny holographic figure of Tor Kobal paused for breath. Dez looked at Yakob.

"What's all this got to do with me?" he asked.

"Wait, there's more," Yakob said.

"You are probably wondering what all this has to do with you, Jack." Tor started talking again and Dez found himself nodding at the hologram, even though it couldn't see him. "And the reason is that we hid the information about our secret weapon – including the antidote – on your planet. To be exact, some eleven years ago we placed it in the genetic coding of three inhabitants of Earth. You are one of them." The figure pointed in his general direction and then froze. Dez noticed that Yakob was touching part of the console, almost as if he was tapping out a phone number on a keypad that wasn't there.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Shall I start the holo again?" Dez nodded. He wasn't all right! He was, to put it mildly, stunned. Eleven years ago? He'd only had his eleventh birthday three months before. He'd been messed around with by aliens when he was only three months old? No wonder he couldn't remember it happening! But how come no one else knew? Did this have anything to do with him being an orphan? A million questions raised their hands and demanded to be asked, but you couldn't talk to a hologram, only listen. He watched Yakob touch the surface of the console again.

"Hidden in the double helix, the twin spirals of your DNA, is one-third of the information required to make the secret weapon we need to stop the Väd-Raatch," Tor continued. "You may

not believe this is possible, you may not believe that we could have done this – but you are sitting in a vehicle that has travelled well over a quarter of a million light years to find you, so please believe that *every* word I say is the truth.

"We thought we had chosen a hiding place the Väds would never find, but we hadn't reckoned on the traitor. We were lucky the spy was uncovered before he found out everything, although what he got was bad enough. He had managed to get your name and where you were – that was all. When we searched through the mess our central intelligence unit's memory was in, we found that all we now had was the same information the spy got, plus the names of the other two people and the cities in which they lived. They would be difficult to find, but not impossible.

"The race was then on to get to you before the Väds. They wanted you dead, and if you died we would not be able to build our weapon. You three are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle – the picture is incomplete, and the information useless, without all of you being alive.

"I must end now. I am glad Yakob has succeeded, and I look forward to meeting you in person in the very near future."

The hologram saluted, and then faded to nothing. Dez stared at the empty black circle, finding it hard to blink, let alone think. Tylurians? Väd-Raatch death squads? People from a planet three hundred thousand light years away? He had to be hallucinating, but he knew he wasn't. This was real, this was happening. And what was more, it was happening to him, Dez Danby, 14 Avenscroft Road (until he moved), London, England, Northern Hemisphere, Earth, the Solar System.

He breathed out and realized that he'd been holding his breath for ages. He looked at Yakob. Yakob raised his eyebrows, as if to say "Well?" and Dez rubbed his face with his hands before speaking.

“So, I’m a filing cabinet.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your lot thought I’d make a neat place to store stuff . . .” Dez frowned. “How’d they come to choose *me*?”

“I’ve no idea, Dez. I was still in the Academy eleven years ago.” Yakob pressed the silver holo-chip and there was another T-ssst! as it disengaged from the bobbled surface of the console. He picked it up and put it away. “All I know is, now I’ve found you, I have to tell Tor Kobal so she can send one of *Tyson’s Grip’s* cruisers here to pick you up.”

“Tyson’s grip? What’s that?”

“The T-class Star-Jumper we came here in – it’s hidden out behind the planet you call Pluto at the moment.” Yakob swivelled his chair and turned to face the console. “Excuse me for a minute, would you?”

Dez watched as Yakob’s hands moved like dancing spiders across the surfaces in front of him. As he watched he could hardly believe what he saw – things moved, other things disappeared and the whole area in front of Yakob seemed to reform into a new configuration. Then Yakob started speaking; it still sounded like total gibberish, but then it was a foreign language. About as foreign as you could get, thought Dez, making a mental note to ask how the talking bit worked.

“Done!” said Yakob, sitting back.

“What is?”

“I’ve just sent a hyper-fast coded message to *Tyson’s Grip* informing them that I have you in safe keeping.”

“What happens now?”

“I will tell you . . .”

Chapter 4

Sitting holding a cup of something hot (coffee? tea? Tylurian mushroom soup? who knew?) that Yakob had given him, Dez listened to “the plan”.

They were going to drive from the Dordogne to a pre-arranged site in the Alps, where a cruiser from *Tyson’s Grip* would come and pick Dez up. Yakob would then go and find the other two people who had the code inside them.

“Why do we have to drive?” asked Dez, putting his empty cup down. Whatever he’d been drinking had actually tasted quite nice. “If you’re such an advanced lot, why can’t this van, or whatever it is, just teleport us there?” He snapped his fingers.

“It *can* fly,” said Yakob, “but the cloaking device isn’t working properly. As far as the diagnostics can tell one of its logic buffers has lost the plot. It *thinks* it’s working, but it isn’t.”

“It was working all right when I walked into the thing!” interrupted Dez.

“That’s because it only works properly when we aren’t moving. I don’t want to alert anyone to the fact that we’re here by flying – your people or the Väds.”

“Why would the Väds still be here? They think I’m dead.”

Yakob fiddled with one of the controls and something, somewhere in the van, started to hum quietly. “Remember the spy?” he asked. Dez nodded. “He’s still there in Central Command; he wasn’t caught. If he finds out you are still alive we’ll be in the firing line again.”

“So,” said Dez, getting up and walking over to look at the driving compartment, “you can’t talk to your ship, except in hyper-fast code; we can’t fly, and the Väds might still be out there looking for me.” He turned. “Have you got a gun, just in case?”

“I carry a needle laser; the van has side-mounted, melt-tipped rockets, front and rear Cold Pulse cannon and three-ply molecular shielding, just in case.”

“And a broken cloaking device.”

“Yes, and a broken cloaking device that will be fixed as soon as the cruiser arrives. Look,” Yakob got up and walked past Dez and sat in the driving seat, “you’re safer here than anywhere else on this planet.”

“I’d be even safer if you hadn’t mucked around with me and made me into a target for a bunch of space gangsters who ended up killing my parents!” Dez did what he’d been wanting to do since getting into the van. He kicked something. Whatever it was simply absorbed the shock by letting his foot sink into it slightly, making him feel a bit foolish.

“I can only apologize for what has happened to you,” said Yakob, ignoring Dez’s outburst. “I’m sure that when Tor finds out how badly things have gone wrong she’ll be horrified. It was never meant to be like this – never.”

“Well, it is like this, and this is supposed to be my holiday! Some rotten holiday.” Dez plonked himself down in the seat next to Yakob. “I know it’s not your fault, Yakob, but, you know, what’s going to happen to me? I mean after this is all over?”

“I don’t know. That is in the future. For now all I can say is that we must get to our destination within the next two days. When you meet Tor, you must ask her.”

“Well, let’s go,” sighed Dez. “I’ve never seen an Alp, so I suppose that’s something to look forward to.”

“You are a brave kid, Dez,” said Yakob, flicking switches on the dashboard as he spoke. The lights in the van went out and the headlights switched on, illuminating the trees in front of them. He reached over with his right hand, taking Dez’s hand and shaking it. “I am very pleased to have met you, and only sorry that it is in such bad circumstances.”

“Me, too,” replied Dez, smiling despite how he felt. There was something about this man that made him unable to stay angry with him for long. Then a thought struck him. “Has this thing got number plates and everything, in case we get stopped by the cops?”

Yakob muttered something in his own language and started turning the very unalien-looking steering wheel. “Yes it has,” he grinned, looking at the windscreen, which now showed the view out of the back window as the van reversed, “but thanks for the reminder!”

Once Yakob had driven the van out of the clearing and on to a rough track, he spoke again. Instantly the windscreen cleared and Dez found himself looking at the real view in front of him.

“How . . . ?”

Yakob shrugged. “Muta-cyte webs sandwiched between two layers of plex,” he said. “The new model will have a Tri-D upgrade.” None the wiser, Dez nodded anyway as Yakob spoke in his own language again and a map appeared, low down on the windscreen. A red dot blinked in the bottom left-hand corner and a green one to the right. He pointed at the green one. “That’s where we have to go.”

“How far is it?”

“550-600 kilometres – about a day’s drive.”

“But we don’t have to be there for two days,” said Dez. “What’re we going to do for the rest of the time?”

“If we get there early, we rest. It’s always good to have some spare time.”

Dez nodded, thinking that Yakob sounded just like his father – far better to be early and have to wait for hours than be even five minutes late for anything. He watched as the van moved

quickly along the deeply rutted forest track, its suspension making it feel as if they were driving over the smoothest of motorways.

"You will drive carefully," he said, as the memories of – how long ago? An hour, two hours? He couldn't be sure – came back.

"Very carefully," replied Yakob. "You are—"

"I know, '*safer here than anywhere else on this planet*' . . . but just watch out for big trucks."

From the forest track they turned on to a small side road, and from that on to a two-lane road with the occasional farmhouse, shuttered against the night, just visible against the skyline. An hour later they were still travelling along the same type of road, not fast, not slow. Poodling.

"Why don't you get on to a motorway? You know – an autoroute. Wouldn't that be quicker?" asked Dez.

"Could be, probably, but I prefer to stick to the less well-travelled routes."

"Just in case?"

"Yes," smiled Yakob, "just in case."

Dez fell silent, looking out of his side window. The van was a left-hand drive, like a proper continental car, and for some reason this made him feel safer. Looking back inside the van he noticed there was no rear-view mirror; he was just about to comment on this when he saw it had a small rear-view screen instead. And in it Dez could see a police car – at least he *hoped* it was a police car. "Yakob," he said nervously, "we're being followed."

"I know, I've just done a scan. It's an ordinary car; I can't pick up anything unusual."

"Could it be the Väds?" asked Dez.

“It could, but they’d have to be unarmed.”

“Why?”

“Because pleraniar vauschite gives off high resonance feedback when sonascanned,” replied Yakob, his eyes flitting to and from the rear-view screen.

“Oh . . .” said Dez.

“PV, the plasmetal that laser weapons are made of, has a particular sound signature when scanned.” Yakob accelerated the van, and the car behind also speeded up. “And that car has no shielding. I’d know if they were carrying.”

“I see,” nodded Dez, who did, sort of. “What will we do if they stop us?”

“Act dumb.”

“One of my many talents,” said Dez.

“Happily,” said Yakob, pointing to one of the dashboard screens, “I don’t think we’re going to have to put it to the test – they’ve just received a radio message calling them away.”

From just behind them a loud siren began to wail and Dez jumped as he saw the police car’s blue light begin to flash. Seconds later the white saloon car sped past the van and away into the night. As the red tail lights disappeared Dez realized his hands were tightly balled and slowly he unclenched them.

“Try and relax,” said Yakob. “We’ve a long way to go and you’re going to be a nervous wreck if you do that every time there’s a car behind us. Why don’t you tell me about yourself?”

Dez looked at Yakob. “What do you want to know?”

“Oh, you know, everything – what it’s like being you, here on Earth.” Yakob checked the mini rear-view screen in front of him and overtook the battered 2CV bumbling along ahead of

them. “Loud, noisy, dirty, inefficient – why do they make things like that, let alone buy them? Sorry, talking to myself. You were going to say?”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” frowned Dez. “I’m just a kid. I don’t do anything except fool around and go to school . . . fool around *at* school as well.” He sat back and let the seat hug him like a big, fat auntie at a christening. “Well, I’m eleven – but you know that. I like football, computer games, pop music and watching TV. I’ve got a dog called Rufus, two best friends – Tim and Cy – and I’m moving schools in September. Which is all right, ’cos I didn’t really like the one I was at, but not all right ’cos I’m even less sure about the new one. And I’m moving house, which is definitely *not* all right, ’cos Tim and Cy won’t be there.” He paused. “Well, I *was* moving house and schools, but now . . . you, know, who knows?”

“But what’s it like living here?”

“I don’t live here,” Dez explained. “I live in Britain. This is France, and I’ve no idea what it’s like to live here. They eat lots of garlic and go *‘Fe t’aime les bicyclettes de Belsize*,’ and stuff like that.”

“OK, what’s it like living in Britain?”

“S’all right; doesn’t rain half as much as people say it does. We’ve got a crap football team and my dad says – my dad *said* – that we’ve got a bunch of crooks running the country,” Dez turned in his seat. “Now you tell me what it’s like on Priam IV – you can see what it’s like here.”

Yakob laughed, slapping the steering wheel as he did so. “Well said, Dez! Good point!” He sat back in his seat and, flicking a switch, took his hands off the steering wheel and turned to look at his passenger.

“What are you *doing*? The road – look at the road!”

“It’s all right, this steering wheel’s really just for show, so we don’t look conspicuous. I’ve put the machine on auto,” grinned Yakob. “It’s a better driver than me anyway, and now I can concentrate on talking to you.”

“Machines go wrong, like cloaking devices, remember?”

“Trust me,” said Yakob.

“I was always told never to trust strangers.”

“And what could be stranger than a man who says he comes from behind the Cygnus Rift?”

Dez nodded.

“OK, *I’ll* drive,” sighed Yakob, turning back to the wheel. “Where were we? Oh, yes, Priam IV. Well, it’s bigger than your planet, has four moons and is in a system with twin suns – sunset takes for ever and we have slightly shorter nights than days.

“Many thousands of your years ago we shared the planet with the Väds – there was enough room for everyone. There were wars (there are always wars) but we co-existed, lived together quite well, really. But after one particularly vicious war (one that the Väds lost badly) they packed their bags, so to speak, and left Priam. It took them some years to do, but they went and colonized another planet in our system – Anavrin – and made it their own.

“Strange to tell, they *still* had wars – terrible, cataclysmic battles amongst themselves that have turned parts of Anavrin into nuclear dustbowls. I suppose they must just like fighting.”

“Don’t you have any wars on Priam, then?” asked Dez. “We have them all the time here. I suppose we must like them as well. Are *we* like the Väds?”

“We don’t have big wars,” replied Yakob, looking over at Dez. “And, no, you people here are nothing like the Väds.”

“But what’s Priam like? Is it a nice place?”

“It’s not perfect,” said Yakob. “Nothing ever is; but some parts of it are beautiful, truly beautiful – even some of the cities, and it’s hard to make a city attractive. Too many people all wanting to do different things.

“Priam is a very advanced place, in comparison to Earth, as you’ve probably guessed.” Yakob indicated the van they were travelling in, and Dez nodded, even though to call the thing he was sitting in “advanced” seemed to him to be like calling a Ferrari “quite fast”. Super-futuristic might come closer. “But we haven’t forgotten where we came from. We still have countryside, we still have waterfalls and wild animals – they just look rather different from the ones you have here.”

“The ones we still have left,” mused Dez. “We don’t seem to be very good at remembering where *we* came from.”

“Do you want to hear more?” Yakob inquired.

“You bet! What about school? Do you have schools up there?”

“Do we have *schools*!”

And as the darkened countryside sped past, the van eating up the distance between them and the Alps, Dez sat and listened, spellbound, to this strange man from beyond the stars spin tales of life on an alien planet.