

The End of Winter

Glen Walker

ACT 1 - FLIGHT

Chapter 1

Jack stared at the two packs in front of him. One blue, one green. Faded leather straps, well oiled, a small patch on the green lid, old fashioned buckles. No detail escaped him. For that moment all the world was those packs, the rain laden grass beneath and lichen rocks beside. Jack tried to fill his world and concentrate. Exclude everything else. Straps. Buckles. Patch.

Other thoughts began to nudge in though, creeping along like vermin, sneaking into the back of his mind. The late afternoon cold started to work into his hands and feet. His shirt was clammy. Breath misting as he concentrated, forcing his heart to slow, his breathing into a rhythm. Straps. Buckles. Beside him Seb yawned silently and stared at him expectantly with saucer eyes then flicked her gaze away sniffing the breeze. Alert. She dropped her head slightly when he tensed and shuffled four paws back.

A noise above him finally broke through and instinctively Jack flattened and hefted his rifle to a more defensive position. Seb tensed and would have growled if she could but instead silently glowered into the pine trees. It was only a bird. A young buzzard growing weary of watching the strange interlopers and stretching to take flight. Not enough meat on a buzzard. Jack relaxed. Lifting out from the confines of the boughs with an easy grace the bird flew into the chill air. It cried out as it flew, a mournful lament, keening across the valley.

Minutes passed. An hour. Seb shuffled to a more comfortable position, but Jack stayed prone, numb. The pine trees swayed in a light breeze above them and a dark stain was smearing across the sky. It was the smell that finally aroused Jack from his stupor. An acrid smell of burned plastic, a foreign smell which was forcing its way through the forest, crashing up against the boughs and consuming the earthy natural scent of pine and damp ground. Wary again and clutching his rifle Jack looked around as if hunting for the source but there was nobody to be seen in the encroaching gloom beneath the trees. He had been waiting too long. Stayed still too long. Cursing silently and motioning to Seb to follow he picked up the two packs and shouldered his weapon. There would be time enough later on to sort out the contents into an easy to carry bundle, for now he would just have to make do.

Careful not to leave an obvious trail Jack worked his way up the side of the mountain. Seb knew to follow in his footsteps, alert but obedient. They soon found themselves in a small clearing between the trees. Jack knew it well, and knew that the trail would get steeper, the trees sparser a short way up further on, but for now this space provided a good resting point where he could keep watch and was close enough to forest for cover. The vantage point provided a glimpse of the valley they were climbing out of with its heavily wooded sides and a thin river, little more than a large stream, running in between rocky banks. The river pooled in several locations and it was to one of these pools that Jack's gaze was drawn, where a thin ribbon of black smoke was rising into the early evening. He wondered how many other people were watching the smoke, smelling the smoke, as it rose. Buffeted and torn by the breeze it spread out over the valley in a clear signal; Come here. it beckoned, Come and have a look...

The evening light would not last much longer and Jack needed to find somewhere safe. He did not relish the thought of climbing over the mountain in the dark. Further on after the trees the land gave way to rocks as it peaked in a false summit, then it would dive down again and the trees would return, filling a small hanging valley. Jack planned to head for this now, he knew that the small hanging valley led to another larger one around the side of the mountain, only accessible through a narrow passage between the rocks and trees. Enclosed. Safe. He would stay there for the night and sort through the packs.

Tearing his gaze from the smoke, Jack motioned for Seb to follow and they silently resumed their climb through the wood.

Chapter 2

Jack slept fitfully huddled under a small outcropping next to Seb. He was worried about sleeping too deeply in case someone or something managed to sneak up on them, but in the end the only eventful occurrence was a squall of icy rain which lashed down in the early hours. The rocks provided some cover but the dampness pervaded everything and dawn was gladly met. Jack rose as soon as the first hints of sunlight outlined the Eastern mountain range and set about preparing for the day. Seb stayed stubbornly curled in the corner, trying to preserve as much warmth as she could.

Keen eyed in the early gloom he made best use of the time by laying out the contents of the packs on a couple of large flat rocks. As soon as it was light enough he would make a fire and cook some breakfast, as long as he could find enough dry wood so there would be no smoke. The gear needed his attention now. He tried to be emotionless while going over the equipment, but it was impossible to block everything out, and he found himself lost in long moments simply staring at different things. Remembering. This was his favourite knife he would think and picture his uncle holding it and using it with quick practised strokes. He always wore this hat in the summer..., Jack clutched at it, trying to squeeze some life back out from the cloth, an essence, a smell, a memory. Anything but numbness.

The sorting was halted and he slipped back into macabre reverie, going over the events of yesterday, trying to find his place, his meaning. His memories were discordant and crashing up against each other in a muddle. Most of the day was spent running, he remembered that clearly, climbing up to the chill rocky hiding place where he now squatted. Tracing all the way back through the day he thought of his uncle. That was the start...

His uncle had left their habitat early to check on some snares they had set the previous day up on the Eastern side of the valley. He was supposed to be coming back at noon. Jack was tasked to bring in the last of the autumn cabbages and check if they were safe to eat before preparing them to be pickled. The cabbage patch was relatively large and half of them had still not been harvested when he left the building. Jack remembered it distinctly, the chill air, a hint of frost and a thin mist that was sighing back and forth between the trees and over their small cultivation. He did not want to linger and only paused to collect a large knife and barrow before heading to the field. The quick work was filling the barrow with cabbages, which he did and then went to the side building where they kept the isotope scanner. His uncle had said that when they first arrived in the valley, although Jack was too young to remember, much of the crop had to be discarded each year. Deep ploughing had turned the contaminated soil underneath and out of reach, although occasionally they still did turn up vegetables that were unfit. Jack was busy scanning each cabbage when Seb came crashing through the door.

She was unable to make a sound, some birth defect or mutation Jack's uncle had said, although otherwise she was a perfectly normal dog. Jack had never seen her so excited. Uttering only pants and snuffles she rushed up to him and grabbed his trouser leg. At first Jack thought she might want to play. He shooed her away and picked up another cabbage. Determined to finish the work. Seb was insistent though and grabbed his trousers again, this time dragging his foot back a pace. What is it? Jack had smiled softly at her. She would not let go this time and Jack finally started to become concerned. He put his hand on her head to calm her and then said; OK Seb, show me.

He had trained her well enough so that this command usually made her run off and wait by something interesting she had found, a rabbit hole or freshly snared animal. This time though she dived into the back of the shed, hiding behind some of the machinery. Jack followed into the gloom and found her cowering in the corner. He was just about to go to her when he heard the shot. A single shot, muffled, like their hunting rifles. It was close. Almost immediately it was followed by a splash and scraping of gravel. Something had fallen by the river pool just in front of the shed. Moving silently Jack crept over to the wall and picked off an old wood axe. It was a little rusted with disuse but would work as a club if nothing else.

When he was very young, a pack of wolves had made their home in the valley. His uncle had tolerated them at first, but good meat was scarce, and they eventually started prowling around the habitat. Jack could remember hiding indoors while his uncle lured them in and shot them and now as he crept toward the door he was expecting it to burst fully open and a wolf or some other beast to be standing there. Nothing came. He crept on until he could see around the edge, hefting the axe ready to strike. There was no wolf. Instead, lying part in the pool on the river bank was a man.

Jack knew immediately it was not his uncle. He had never seen another man before and this one fascinated him although instinct was keeping his heart racing. Completely unlike his uncle who always wore simple drab clothing, this man was dressed entirely in some kind of hard material that was fading into and out of the colour of the rocky bank and water. Almost like it was trying to blend in. Jack approached cautiously. The man's top had a large crack across the left shoulder and blood was seeping out. He was still moving though. Jack took a step closer, away from the barn. Alert now the man jerked his head up and Jack was greeted by a blank mask with a visor that seamlessly blended into the headpiece and had a slight mirror tint to it. He could not see the man's eyes or face and did not see the man raise his right arm—did not see the weapon.

Even remembering, far away on the mountain, Jack winced. He forced his mind to go over it again. *Was it my fault?* He wondered again.

The man on the riverbank fired at Jack. It was some kind of pistol and the loud crack it made echoed off the valley walls, startling birds to flight. The shot was badly aimed though and rattled off the shed roof behind him. Shocked, Jack suddenly noticed the weapon but he was already out in the open and there was no cover. He only had an axe. The man was lining up for a second shot when his hand exploded into a red mist, the weapon flying back into the water. At that point he slumped onto the stones and passed out but Jack was not about to take a chance again and ran for cover behind the barn.

Minutes passed and nothing had changed. Jack finally summed up the courage to come out from behind his hiding place. The man was still. He had not moved. So who shot him? Jack was suddenly afraid for his uncle. Where was he? If his uncle had shot the man then surely he would have come to find Jack by now.

He would have to go and look for his uncle, but first he went back to the habitat and picked out his rucksack. His uncle always made him keep it ready packed and by the door. Next to it was a cupboard with their hunting rifles in, he picked out his favourite, a slender barrelled weapon made entirely out of some kind of dark grey alloy. It was light and fitted him perfectly. Ammunition for it was already packed in the bag but he strapped a belt on with a knife and some extra. Then he set the booby traps just like his uncle had made him practice and keyed in the door code to lock the rear of the habitat. Once the building was secure he went back to the shed with the cabbages in and brought Seb out. She was shaking with fright but was obedient and followed him out toward the river.

Just before he left Jack went over to the man who was still unconscious. His fingers were mostly missing on his right hand and blood was trickling out thickly. The wound on his shoulder had stopped bleeding. It looked like the suit he was wearing had formed some kind of skin over it and pulled it tight. Briefly Jack wondered if he should shoot him through the head, like they sometimes did with wounded but living animals when they were out hunting, but then he thought he had better check with his uncle first.

The shots were from nearby, and since his uncle had originally intended on going up the Eastern side of the valley that was where Jack started. He forded the river in the shallows just above the pool and made his way up the slopes. His uncle must be close.

For what seemed like an age Jack hunted on the Eastern bank of the river, though in reality it was only minutes before he came across his uncle. It looked like he had propped the rifle up on a rock in order to take aim at the man in the valley and save Jack's life but now he was slumped beside it and the rifle pointed at the sky. Carefully so as not to disturb the trigger Jack eased the weapon out of his uncle's hands and set it down beside him. Calling his name did not arouse him but he was still alive and breathing raggedly. Jack dropped his own pack next to his uncle's and motioned for Seb to lie down.

His uncle was hurt badly and bleeding from cuts to his stomach and shoulder. Jack went to open his shirt but it was slick with blood and his hands were shaking. While he was fumbling his uncle opened his eyes and looked at Jack with a glazed expression.

"Jack?" He gasped wheezily.

"Uncle? I need to get this shirt off. Have to stop the bleeding." Jack babbled back.

"No...time Jack...he was...scout," his uncle struggled on almost every word. "More coming...run...go West...run..." he faded away again, losing consciousness.

The memory of his Uncle's haunted and twisted words lingered in Jack's mind but the moments afterwards were still sketchy. Shortly after losing consciousness he stopped breathing and died while Jack was still trying in vain to bandage his stomach. That was when the numbness started. He sat next to the body with the blood still glistening on the rocks and just stared at it. All of the animation. All of the life. Drained. Gone.

Shortly after that there was an explosion. It crashed across the valley with such force that the shock-wave threw Jack backwards to the ground and momentarily stunned him. Reality came seeping back in only when he became aware of Seb licking his face. He pushed her away and sat up dizzy. She just glowered at him and looked like she might take flight. Jack tried to orientate himself, tried to block out the ringing in his ears. The forest above him sighed. Trees swaying in a light breeze. He had fallen onto a bed of pine needles and could feel the damp earth beneath seeping into his trousers. Crimson rocks. Just beyond his feet was the edge of the forest, scrubby grassland in lumps and tufts leading down to a small river. The habitat. He stared at it now, his uncle momentarily forgotten, blasted out of his mind. The habitat. It was gone. Or rather, it had changed. Now there was a smouldering pile of rubble. The entrance to the rear section that went deep into the rock face was completely blocked off and hidden. The rest was scattered across their field, across the river bank, in the river even in the trees. Small fires had started in a couple of the outbuildings. The man was gone.

For the third time that morning Jack stared. Frozen. The wary fear that had first overcome him when he saw Seb cowering in the corner of the shed had returned. His uncle's words striking a chill up his spine run...go West...run...

At that point Jack did run. He picked up his own pack and rifle and was about to flee up the valley alongside the river but stopped a moment and thought; What would his uncle do? Turning around again he looked at the body of his uncle but was unable to feel anything. He silently picked up his uncle's rucksack and then reached for the rifle but changed his mind. His uncle went everywhere with that rifle, never left it out of his sight, it seemed right somehow that he should have it now. Jack carefully placed the rifle on the right side the body and squatted next to it. Goodbye Uncle, he said after a moment. There did not seem to be anything else to say so Jack picked up the packs and ran.

Chapter 3

Jack had finished sorting the equipment into two piles just as the sun peaked over the horizon. A pale disc barely visible behind the chill mist. Most of the gear was duplicated in each pile, though he had moved all the food rations, ammunition and his uncle's knife into the pile he was going to take with him. The rest he would pack into the other rucksack and hide it in the rocks. He did not know if he would ever come back this way.

The mist seemed to be thickening and Jack decided it would be safe for a small fire, not that he would need much to heat up some water. From his own pile he picked out four small metal perforated sheets which he slotted together to form a combustion chamber. It was an old camping stove, almost as old as the rucksacks and some of the other equipment but his uncle believed in simplicity. Don't be afraid of technology, Jack remembered his words and smiled, but only use what you need. The smile seemed incongruous suddenly and he frowned at the thought trying to block it out.

A short distance away was a stand of spruce trees that had long since died. More than likely it was one of the pockets of old contamination, long since decayed but somehow the vegetation was slow to come back. Jack knew that this sort of thing would increase the further he went away from the valley, he had seen it from the top of the mountain. Acres of death. Shrugging off the gloomy thoughts he picked a few twigs from the ground under the nearest tree and returned to where Seb was finally stretching and yawning. He tickled her behind the ears. She was no longer a young dog and yesterday had been an ordeal.

The sticks alight in the stove Jack placed a small billy can on top of it and splashed a little water into it from his bottle. Though he now had two water bottles he was conscious that whichever route he took he would have to make sure that there was safe drinking water soon. Once the water was warmed up a little he stirred in one of the ration breakfasts. They were disgusting and while he had better food in the pack he knew that the ration could keep him going all day without the need to stop for more. Hopefully he would be able to set a better camp tomorrow night and maybe snare some food. Seb fared marginally better and got a few scraps of jerky as well as Jack's leftovers.

The sun had risen to a point where the disc had vanished behind cloud, the grey air thickening. A stillness had settled over the mountainside and the small hanging valley they were hiding in had filled with a mist that seemed to hang and cling. Jack stepped out from the overhanging rock, the water immediately beading on his jacket in a thousand tiny droplets. This was good, Jack thought, at least no-one will be able to see us. The stove now cool, he dismantled it and returned it to the pack, scattering the small amount of ash so there was no trace of the fire. He let Seb lick the pot clean and then wiped it over with his shirt, no sense wasting water by washing it. Just before packing the bag he pulled out a fresh pair of socks and swapped them over. Putting his old ones in a bag, he would dry them tonight if he could. His boots were nearly new, a fresh pair from the the

stockroom at the back of the habitat, they were still waterproof but overnight damp had seeped into everything. The rest of his clothes would just have to stay damp. He wondered if he would ever have access to supplies like that again.

The camp broken Jack fitted his rifle onto the side of his blue rucksack and shouldered it. He put the other in a crevice in the rock and hid it by placing a few stones at the mouth, it would be invisible to all but the most meticulous observer. He set off through the fog. The first part of the journey he knew well, but whenever he was hunting with his uncle they always went North or East, so by the end of the day he would be encroaching on unknown territory. The mountains beyond to the West always had a foreboding air, of decay, the winds carrying strange and unnatural odours. Jack assumed that his uncle told him to go West because the scout had come from the East. He decided to travel as quickly as possible for the first half of the day and hopefully put as much distance as he could between himself and whomever was coming. In the afternoon he would have a look at a map to decide which direction he should take, but for now he had to get over, or around, the mountain.

He retraced his steps through the clammy air, Seb sticking close to his heels and and they picked their way back out of the hanging valley. All the animals seemed to be subdued by the weather, no birds were singing, nothing stirring. The rocks around him seeped with water, probably the run-off from the previous night, and while there was no sign of animal life the mountain had taken on an eerie life of its own. His steps were punctuated with trickles and drips as the liquid oozed down to the softer ground beneath the tree line. Many of the trees up at this level had long since died and they loomed now out of the mist. Twisted, broken, decaying. The odd living tree reached out to the water laden sky with glistening boughs as the droplets moved in the scant breeze. Jack walked on through it, quietly, like when they were stalking. He felt that sound would carry further through the mist or would be more noticeable in the absence of other animals. Through a narrow cutting and they were out on the main mountainside once more. The wind picked up once they were on the exposed flanks. It blew great rifts into the mist and then filled them with more fog, a god-child playing with silver sand and tormenting with glimpses of the valley or route ahead before blocking it out again. Jack shivered for the first time since waking. Normally he was resistant to the cold but this weather was seeping into his heart and making him feel gloomy. He resolved to walk more quickly and get out of it as soon as possible.

The way ahead now presented a choice, they could climb up over the top of the mountain or work their way around the side. Neither route was a particularly difficult climb and he had done both many times. Today he decided that climbing over the top would be quicker and get him out of sight on the other side in case the fog cleared. He adjusted the rucksack slightly, it was heavier than he would have liked, but the extra food and ammunition would come in handy, and then they set off. The route was an old trail, clearly once used frequently but now only used by Jack, Seb and rarely his uncle who did not like to venture onto the Western mountains. Jack asked him about the paths once and he simply replied; People used to come here, walking...for fun. and shrugged before his eyes glazed and he took on the expression which said "Don't ask me any more questions".

Chapter 4

The path zig-zagged up the side of the mountain and they gained altitude quickly. The broken trees slowly gave way to grass and stone and soon everything was grey. The rocks underfoot acquired a slippery sheen from the water condensing out of the air and Jack picked his way carefully. He did not stop until almost half way up the path where there was a large rounded boulder next to the track. Here they rested for a moment and he gazed to the valley below, or at least, to where the valley

should be. Instead there was just more grey, more mist. Suddenly he felt isolated. Removed. He should go back down. It couldn't be real. This was a dream.

He squatted down next to the rock, unable to move momentarily, and rested his shoulder against the cold clammy surface. The wind was unchanged, only now the view would open up to reveal more mist, a temporary change in shade, in texture, of the world around him. Next to the rock in a sheltered crack between boulders a small mountain plant was swaying as the wind whipped back and forth. Green. It seemed strangely out of place in the grey world. Jack reached out and touched the plant. Soft, leafy, it had collected moisture from the air in little beads on the leaves. He looked around but there were no others. It was alone.

Suddenly Jack started laughing but he did not know why. He leaned on the rock as laughter racked his body but he did not feel any mirth and the laughs turned to tears as suddenly as they had appeared. At least I've got you, Seb he muttered and stroked her wet head, then scraped the tears off his face with his cuff and stood up.

The rest of the climb was slower because the track had all but petered out and they had to pick their way over large rocks and boulders. He knew that this would be the sort of progress they would make for the rest of the day. There was no path down the other side. At long last, though, they reached the summit. The wind had increased but still the mist clung to the air all around. On a good day from this point it was possible to see down to the East into the valley where the habitat used to be. The river and forest would be laid out before you, though the habitat itself was hidden very well. Jack wondered if the fire he had seen yesterday had spread. A lot of the wood was old and dead and made up of resinous pine trees that could burn even when wet. He looked back the way they had come and sniffed the air but there was no sign of fire or even the acrid smoke. There was no sign of anything.

To the West from here it should be possible to see a wide open valley with steep sides and a river snaking through the middle. The valley clearly used to be heavily wooded but was mostly dead now, with only a few hardy species springing up in between the ruins. The river was black and unwelcoming, much larger than the one in their valley. Jack worried about how he would cross it. He had once spent some time on a summers day sitting on the top with a scope and scoured the valley for any sign of life. The scope was a good one, capable of showing the valley in detail, but he did not pick out any sign of movement or habitation by man or beast. He stopped and tried to remember the scene now. The scope was packed in his rucksack but it would be useless to try and use it in the mist. Although his memory of that day was a bit sketchy he convinced himself that the river ran from the North, so he decided that if there was likely to be a good crossing point it would be in that direction.

Descending from the mountain in thick fog was a slow process. He had never gone down this side before so it was all new and he was worried that at any moment the ground would open up before him with an impassable precipice. As soon as they were in the lee of the hill the wind died down which made the temperature suddenly feel a few degrees higher. The air also changed as they progressed further into the valley. Instead of being fresh and cold, it started to feel close, almost claustrophobic. The fog took on a more oppressive character. At what he thought might be the half-way point Jack sat down for a few minutes and had some of the jerky out of his pack. He was not really hungry but needed something to help cheer his mood. Soon, hopefully, they would see some sign that they were nearing the valley floor. Some grass or vegetation, right now Jack would settle for a forest of dead trees, even though it would make their progress slower. Anything to change from the grey of rocks and fog. He checked his compass again, at least he knew they were going in the right direction.

Before continuing Jack thought about checking the map, even though he doubted that it would be much use with the weather such as it was. He pulled out a small device from the top of the rucksack which his uncle referred to as the Solarpedia because it ran off sunlight and had an encyclopedia inside. Jack knew that there were maps in it as well, since he had used it a lot, reading about the past. There seemed to be so much life, so many different lives, in the past but when pressed on the subject Jack's uncle was evasive and tried to discourage him from using the Solarpedia. This only made Jack more curious and he had taken to carrying it around everywhere he went, although there was too much information contained in it to absorb quickly. When asked about anything specific Jack's uncle would simply say, I don't know, it was before my time and then usually added, Put it away. You won't find any happiness in that thing. It was clear that he regretted that Jack had found the device. Now though, Jack thought, now it might well save me.

Despite the lack of sunlight the Solarpedia had enough charge for several days and it would even charge up under cloudy conditions, although the mist was probably too much. Jack quickly found the maps he remembered but most were lacking in detail and the few detailed ones were hard to read, full of strange symbols. He sighed and put the device away. Better to keep moving, even if it was in the wrong direction, at least it was something to do.

He shouldered his pack again and set off with Seb following silently behind. Shortly afterwards he came across the first good sign. It was a small spruce tree which had been stunted and twisted by the wind but remarkably was still alive. Transfixed Jack walked up to it and examined the top. It was not just disease or contamination that had stunted the tree. Something had been eating the new shoots each year. Deer. Jack felt a glimmer of genuine happiness for the first time since he fled the habitat. This meant that the valley was not dead as he had thought. If he could find a small deer they would be set for food, and if there were deer it meant that there would be rabbits and hare. With lifted spirits he set off down the slope again, sticking steadfastly to a North-westerly direction.

Chapter 5

Progress was slow, the single tree was the start of a forest, although many of the other trees were dead and fallen across the path. Jack had no doubt that there was an easier route to take if only he could get up high and see but the mist still prevented that. It was a little thinner now he was amongst the trees but there was no wind and little chance of it blowing off anytime soon. Jack had settled into a kind of resignation about it. At least it would be hiding him from anyone up on the mountain, he thought grimly, as long as he could make it across the river by the end of the day.

Temporarily shutting out the thought of how he would get across the water, he plodded on through the dead forest. The ground underfoot was marshy in places, forcing him to take wide detours, and sometimes he would come across a group of trees that had fallen together and were impossible to climb over. The god-child was playing pick-up-sticks. Aside from the first tree he had found there were no other signs of animal life, although he kept his eyes peeled. At least the water laden ground underfoot had some greenery, moss and grasses in between high piles of branches and boughs. Jack did not relish the thought of having to spend a night on the ground here. There would be nowhere dry to set out his camp. At least his boots were holding up, he thought with a smile, even though almost everything else had succumbed to the water, creeping, freezing onto his skin. His hands had long since gone numb from where they clutched at broken branches and trunks as he skirted or climbed. His coat and trousers, once drab green, had now taken on a mud splattered hue. Staggering on, a drunken obsession propelling him forward now. He was not going to spend the night in this dead wood. Seb followed without complaint. Jack's breathing was becoming ragged from the cold, his own breath adding to the mist, lungs burning from the effort. Another fallen tree.

Climb up. Push dead branches aside. Jump down. Walk on. At every tree the branches clawed at him with spiked fingers, grabbing, clinging and then whipping back upright after he passed. At first he was conscious about not breaking any, not leaving an obvious trail, but now he just forced his way through. Half the time he would turn to find Seb struggling and then have to return, pick her up and take her to the next clear stretch. Progress was slow.

He had no idea of the time, had no way to track the sun, but estimated that it was late afternoon when they finally reached the first change in the fallen forest. A small stream was bouncing through a rocky ravine. Steep sided with numerous trees tipped in, as if they were lying down and drinking from the water. It was as good a place as any to rest. Jack pulled out their water bottles and decided to see if the water was safe. He told Seb to stay at the top of the ravine so she would not be tempted to drink any of the water, just in case it was unsafe. Unpacking his portable scanner he took it and an empty water bladder down to the water's edge. The scanner would detect any contamination, but he would still have to boil or purify the water to kill off any disease before using it. He scooped up a little vial and poured it through the hole in the device, a moment later a small green light came on. It was safe. Jack pocketed the scanner, double-checking he had switched it off, careful to conserve its solar battery because he did not know when they would next get good light. He filled the bladder until it had swelled and the plastic was tight then screwed the top on and returned to Seb. He was careful to put the bladder into the bottom of his rucksack away from the safe drinking water, if he had a chance to make a fire he would boil it in the evening.

The stream was meandering in a South-westerly direction and now they were faced with the choice of crossing it and continuing to the North or following it. If they followed it at least they were guaranteed to get to the river by a fairly direct route, but it might be too far downstream and too wide or deep to cross. Jack hesitated, not sure what to do. It was possible that the river was not as wide or as deep as he was fearing. They would follow the stream.

The going was not any easier, but boosted by the fact they had a landmark to follow, the progress seemed to be quicker. The stream widened a little. The ravine grew deeper though, and Jack was now worried that they would arrive at the river to find the bank was a cliff. He stopped a moment and considered, but it was already too high and steep to safely climb down and their only option was to continue or turn back. He did not relish the thought of fighting his way through the wood in the wrong direction. They pressed on and his fears proved to be unfounded, with the land dropping off steeply in front of them. Within a few hundred metres they were almost at the same level as the stream. It seemed that the area they had been walking through was some kind of plateau, and not the valley floor as he had first thought. The ground here was drier. More of the trees were alive, although most of the old, large ones were dead. It seemed that only the young were surviving or perhaps re-growing.

The air showed no signs of warmth and the mist persisted. Jack stopped again at the bank of the stream. He let Seb drink some now that he knew there was no contamination, her stomach would be able to cope with anything biological he reckoned. He also took time to rinse off his hands and splash some onto his face. It was icy cold and had a faint earthy scent to it but was welcome and refreshing. They could only see about a hundred metres but it looked like it might be easier from now on, less trees to clamber over, firmer ground. Bolstered by this thought, Jack trudged on beside the stream again.

It turned out that they were closer to the river than he had thought. Any sound of the water flowing must have been masked by the stream. Within a few minutes of walking they were standing on the bank. It was wider than the river next to their habitat but thankfully did not appear to be much deeper. Jack could probably wade across right there but he decided that he would try a bit further

up the bank and see if there was a shallower area. Splashing across the stream they made their way up the bank. The river bank was easy walking compared to the forest they had just come through. Large rocks with gravel between them that crunched and rattled underfoot. Suddenly paranoid about the noise they were making Jack ushered Seb to the edge of the bank where there was more mud and grass. They could walk on this silently. They had not been walking for long when suddenly a shape was looming out of the mist. Jack froze. The shape did not move. A rock? Trees? He could not make out what it was so crept forward. Seb sensing his mood flattened her ears and glanced about nervously, creeping along behind him. It was a house. Or rather it was the ruins of a house, with trees fallen and piled around it, growing through it. It was ancient. Nervously Jack crept up to the wall and touched the rock. Rough hewn stone piled up to make walls, three still standing. The roof was long gone and the trees had once taken hold, flourished in and around the building before the contamination had killed them off. Now they lay across the walls, piled up against them, dead roots and fallen rock. There was nothing like this in his valley and Jack was fascinated. He wondered why he had not seen it when he had scoured the valley with the scope and went around to the side that face the mountain. It was well hidden, trees against the rock, natural stone. A good hiding place. The remaining stone walls seemed to be secure enough so he ventured inside. Seb remained out of the boundary, wary of the strange structure. The floor was now pine needles and moss. A hearth remained with something bent and twisted inside it, possibly once a stove, but now rusting away in the damp air. Jack touched the simple stone walls. Somebody had cut these. Brought them. Stacked them. Someone lived here. The thought was almost too much and he stayed still for a long moment. Someone lived here.

Jack had no idea that the cottage had been abandoned for hundreds of years, but it was a connection to someone else and like the scout that his uncle had shot, this connection carried an air of foreboding, an unspoken threat. It was a reminder that he was not alone in the world, that despite nobody coming from behind to find him, he might well be walking into places where people lived. Reluctantly he decided to stay, at least for the night, not least because he was exhausted and this was the best hiding place he had found so far. With a bit of persuasion Seb was brought inside and for the first time in ages the cottage was roofed, although this time it was with a lightweight camouflage tarpaulin, and only over one corner. Jack set his camp in what was once someone's combined kitchen and living area. He laid down to rest where once people walked, played, talked, argued. He could not picture them.

Chapter 6

Jack slept fitfully on the cold ground inside the cottage. Though the stone floor was buried under layers of pine needles and earth it still seemed to sap the warmth out of him. His dreams were interrupted by the strange sounds that surrounded the house. Creaks from the wood, rustling of some unseen creature, an owl cry. All the time there was the unsettled gurgling and rushing of the river. In half sleep it almost sounded like the river near the habitat. He could almost convince himself that he was home.

The noises of life in the woodland around him should be encouraging, he kept telling himself, but still could not shake the sense of unease that pervaded the ruins. Seb was not immune and slept little, curled into a tight ball, her eyes were wide and ears twitched at the slightest sound.

For the second day in a row Jack roused before light and set the camp in order. He did not know yet if there would be fog, but the air felt clammy and moist. Hopefully it would just be the dew-fall over the forest. This time he did not stop to make breakfast or cook any warm food and instead snacked on some jerky before shouldering his pack and setting out quietly up the bank in the gloom.

His eyes were good and there was just enough light from the pre-dawn sun to make slow headway. It did not matter, at least they were leaving the place behind. As much distance as possible between them and the ruined habitat. As much distance as possible between them and the ruined house. Jack wondered if someone had once fled from these ruins as well, leaving behind only stone and a lingering sense of foreboding. He wondered if he was just being stupid, but everything seemed to be larger now. All of his small fears, once quickly allayed with a few words from his uncle now seemed to fester and grow. They morphed into a tangible dread that had kept his heart racing through the night.

The morning wore on slowly to a new grey dawn. More mist, but thinner, and the wind had picked up bringing the promise of clearing the air. It rattled through the boughs of the fallen trees in mockery of the gentle sighs Jack was used to from his own valley. The river was getting more rocky and was meandering in great loops, sometimes exposing large semi-circles of scrub-grass. Jack skirted around these, keeping as close as he could to what remained of a tree line. The forest felt strange suddenly but Jack could not work out why. It all seemed to be too ordered. Too neat. The fallen pine trees were all a similar size and age, and the new growth sprouting amongst them too seemed to have all sprung up together. Jack stopped near one of the semi-circle loops described by the river and thought for a moment. The sun was still rising but there was enough light to see as far as the mist would allow. It was straight. Perfectly straight. Jack stared at the tree line as it passed across the grass. *Plantation*, Jack thought, he had read about them but never thought he would see one. It was not natural and suddenly even the trees felt threatening.

In a moment of irrational panic he stumbled away from them across the grass. Heart racing. The river was over his knees at this point but he rushed into the water. The icy cold hit him immediately and was enough to shock him out of his panic. Standing knee deep and shivering he looked across to the other bank. The river was quite wide here with a gravel bank on his side and a rocky bank on the other, the outside of the curve. No sense in getting wet twice, he thought grimly to himself and went back to the bank to get Seb. She was wide eyed and confused. Ready to take flight. First he calmed her down and then lifted her onto one of his shoulders. She was not a small dog and he wondered how long he could hold her there. Better get this over quickly. Jack strode out into the water. Luckily Seb was obedient to the last and did not struggle. He had more problems from the current tugging at his legs. Rocks slippery under foot. Small steps. He could swim well enough but did not relish the thought of

being dragged under the cold water. The further he went out the stronger the current. His teeth were chattering now from the water that was up to his thighs and rising. Not much further. He regretted not making some kind of stick to help him. Up to his waist. If the current got any stronger he would go under. The water gurgled with turbulence around his body. He turned sideways on to lessen the force and took another step. One more step. Two. His feet were giving way. With a sudden thrust forward he managed to bridge the gap and cling to the first rock on the far bank with his left hand. His right was firmly clamped around Seb. If they were going to go they were going to go together. His feet had given way completely now and the water was building up against his stomach as he held onto the rock to keep upright. They were still sideways on and he could now feel it pulling at his pack too, soaking into the canvas. With all of his strength he pulled them higher up the rock, thankful that it w

as not slippery. Once higher he managed to get his boot into a small space between that rock and the next and then climb higher. Now only his feet were in the water and he half stood, half knelt on the top of the rock. Precariously swaying as he worked out what to do next. The proper bank was only a couple of rocks away so he drew himself into a full standing position adjusting to the extra weight he was carrying. His back and shoulder were aching but he had no time to think about that. With a wobbling gait he sprang from one rock to the next and then up onto the bank. Seb immediately sensing they were safe jumped off him and started running around in little excited circles. Happy to be free and dry. Jack was shivering violently. He would have to change. Luckily

the water had only got a little way into the pack and the spare set of clothing he carried was protected anyway in a sealed bag. Stripping right off he stood for a moment shaking in the cold and sponged off the worst of the water with a camp towel from his pack. Once dressed he immediately felt better and was even greeted by a flash of bright sky through the mist.

It was still cloudy but Jack knew little else. The sun rarely shone in a clear sky. This was the best weather he could hope for and he smiled. It might even give his clothing a chance to dry so he quickly checked it with his portable scanner to make sure it was clean, wrung it out as best he could before strapping it to the outside of the pack. Most of it was made out of special fibres that dried quickly, all of it was military green. They used to have boxes of the clothes in the back of the habitat and Jack had often asked why they had so much but his uncle rarely answered or if he did it was a simple but cryptic reply such as: Not everyone is as lucky as you and me. A lot of the clothing was too big for Jack, but he made do, rolled the sleeves up or sometimes trimmed them off. His boots would have to stay wet for now and it was a miserable moment when he strapped them back onto his dry socks and the cold water seeped in to his skin.

Standing he looked down on the river. This bank was higher and the extra visibility from the lifting mist gave him a clear view up and down the water. He cursed. Only a hundred metres away up stream the banks were both grassy, the river wide and shallow, rippling over rocks. The cheer that had grown from the brightening sky turned sour and Jack scowled. He felt like an idiot. He felt like a child. He knew that if his uncle were here he would have been told off.

Frowning to stop himself from crying he shouldered his pack and trudged up the side of the river once more. The trees here felt a little more natural. There were fewer old and dead ones and the forest felt younger. It felt more vital. Maybe it was this different air or the brighter day, but Jack's foul mood was difficult to sustain. He knew that from the way the river was twisting that he must be further up the valley than he had thought when he first came to the river. This meant that he should soon head directly West and away from the water. It felt like he would be able to draw a line behind him with the river. A little flame of hope was within him and he clung to it.

Chapter 7

After half a day of uneventful hiking Jack had got to a point where the river was quite narrow. It plunged down over large rocks and gathered in deep forbidding pools before plunging down again in a series of rapids. Soon he must head West but for now he was almost enjoying the walk. The sun had come out its strongest since he started his journey — probably the strongest he had ever seen it although a thick cloud still hung overhead — so he made best use of it and had strapped out his wet clothing to the back of his pack, then opened a solar panel on top to charge up a portable battery. He could use the battery to run the Solarpedia or spectrometer if need be. While the sun had brightened his day it also made him keenly aware that he may now be quite visible from the mountains he had climbed down the day before. Anyone with a good scope would be able to pick him out as the largest thing moving in the landscape. He shied away from the river bank as much as possible, keeping in the trees, but by this point there was scarcely any forest and just a scattering of tall pines, some in groups of half a dozen or so, most old and dead but with a few young saplings springing up out of the grey remains of what used to be heather.

The only thing to dampen his spirits were his boots that were still soaked through and the knowledge that he would be unable to dry them without lighting some kind of fire. A fire that would no-doubt draw too much attention to his whereabouts. What he really needed was a

sheltered spot and the mist to come back in to mask any smoke from it and so he stopped to have a snack at what he assumed was mid-day and surveyed the river bank. Standing in the shelter of a group of long-dead but still upright pine trees he looked out over the water and land but while the bank he was on was quite close to the water; the other side rose steeply as the water can cut through large rocks and then receded - doubtless it would fill all the channels and hollows again if it were to flood. AS it was now there were a couple of spaces on the far side big enough to build a sheltered campfire and be almost invisible from above, if only he could find away to cross without getting wet again and a way to hide the smoke.

Jack could think of neither so sighed, shouldered his pack and headed back away from the water towards the last stand of trees. Seb followed quietly behind him, glad of the reduced pace and easier ground that they were traversing today. As they meandered from copse to copse they were climbing higher and higher; although the climb was gradual, by mid afternoon they reached a point that would normally be enveloped in cloud and Jack wondered if he should wait here until that happened so he could build his fire. The urgency that had driven him away from his ruined home was still there, though, so instead he focussed on the route ahead to see where would be a good place to abandon the bank of the river entirely and strike t as near to a Westerly direction that the terrain would allow.

He pulled the scope out of his bag and stood behind a tree, keeping it to the East of him and then scanned the hillside ahead. Just as he was about to stow it he noticed something a little odd about the riverbank further upstream. Half buried by dying tees and hidden by a natural rocks of the same colour was a building. Something small, a bit like the ruined cottage they had slept in. This seemed to be too close to the waters edge to be a cottage though. Immediately Jack froze and fixed his gaze on the structure but he need to have worried; just like the cottage this was along dead and whomever used it for whatever purpose was likely long dead as well.

As Jack approached the structure the ground began to rise steeply and the river was now banked by large rock formations. Even when he was quite close it was difficult to make out exactly it was—or what it had been—so he crept up to it warily, Seb silently prowling behind him. About a hundred metres away he stopped at the last stand of trees between them and the ruins and in front of them lay an open stretch to scrubby grass, pock-marked with hollows and covered in a scattering of dead or dying shrubs. He could hear the river crashing over some rapids but it was ll out of sight now and following the bank with hi eyes he could see that part of it looked to be unnatural, almost too square underneath the shrubbery. The straight edge lead up to ta small clump of bushes and then the ruin was behind that. Leading away from the ruin and away from the river was another unnatural like; a ridge, or so Jack had thought when he was further down the valley, but now looking at it there was something of a constructed quality to it. He surveyed the ground in front of him again, it was too open; a bad place to get trapped.

Still curiosity had the upper hand and it looked as though some low cloud was finally coming in to provide a bit more cover. Moving slowly and cautiously he stepped out from the stand of trees and made a straight line for the structure. The distance was short and he was soon standing in front of it, just next to the river bank with the man-made ridge stretching out behind him. All the time through the crossing he had felt exposed though and even now crouched beside some bushes he was wary. He felt around with his feet, working closer to the buses and the edge of the river. At the edge the ground dropped away vertically down to the water and he realized they were standing on some kind of platform. Not made out of rock, but concrete like his habitat was. This was old though, much older than the habitat and had succumb to nature to be enveloped with plants and shrubs before all that had died away leaving only a mound of half decayed debris. The poison had even wiped out most of the microbes that would eventually break down vegetation so there was no telling how old it really was.

Turning his attention from the platform to the structure that had brought him here Jack could see it was using the concrete as a base but it itself was made out of stone. The only way to get a better view of what it actually was would be to retrace his steps slightly and find a way up on the man-made ridge. Moving away from the view he slowly worked his way along and up, scrabbling through the freezing mud that sucked at his hands and seemed to cover his clothing in minutes. Every time he reached for a shrub or something to help him up the slope it would snap or disintegrate in his hands and a couple of times he nearly slipped all the way down to the bottom. Seb was much more sure-footed though and simply plodded on up behind him.

In one last scrabbling effort he lunged himself over the edge of the ridge and rolled partly to one side, careful not to let the rucksack with his drying clothes attached touch the muddy floor. At the top he was on another platform but this was different. It wasn't quite as flat as the other one and had a lot more vegetation growing on it, also it was narrow but stretched away in a Westerly direction before disappearing into the increasingly misty sparse forest. Jack suddenly realized he was on a road, an ancient road that had all but disappeared completely but now that the vegetation was dying and rain had washed some of it away the old stones that made up this section were starting to poke through once more.

Turning away from the ancient roadway Jack got his first close-up view of the structure that had brought him here and it was clear now from this angle that it had once been a bridge. It had been made out of stone and then later re-inforced with the large concrete platform on either side. Walking up to the bridge remains he could see that the water raging below in a narrow tumultuous gorge. The far side had collapsed completely—presumably into the water—and he could only just about make out what he thought was the concrete foundations. No hope of crossing here, but then now with the roadway leading in about the exact same direction he needed to travel his original plan to build a small fire and dry his gear was being supplanted with a plan to use the track to cover as much ground as quickly as possible.

If he did this he presumed it would take him out of the valley and into a land he had never even seen—not that he was exactly in familiar territory now having only surveyed this valley from the top of the Eastern hills.

Looking back now he realized that without realizing it they had climbed quite high up the valley towards the head where the mountain ranges formed a horseshoe. The one he had climbed over was about half-way up the side of the horseshoe and the track he was about to take would lead him almost out of the top, hugging the side of the Northern mountains. It would be good to get away from the feeling that they were constantly being watched from the peak of the mountains. Jack cast his gaze back, retracing the path they had taken as best he could in the encroaching fog. Was there anyone down there following him? On impulse he looked up to the top of the mountain they had climbed over and then froze. Right at the top he caught a glimpse of something strange, it was a ball of light, shining with its own internal power...or was it just glinting in some shaft of reflected sunlight? Without moving from the spot he turned and looked at where they were. Mercifully the old bridge and decayed shrubbery should give them at least partial cover but he was trapped. There was no cover on the road and no way down back of the wood without exposing himself. Behind the ground rose steeply and they would be even more visible trying to climb up the side of the valley. He cursed. How long had that thing—whatever it was—been up there? Was it watching them now? The road was still his best bet, it led away from the thing and if he could get past the first couple of hundred metres then they would be shielded by some more trees. Beyond that he couldn't see but hoped fervently that it would lead to another valley out of this open and exposed one. Panic was rising in him now but he forced himself to sink slowly into a crouch and wait. The cloud was thickening and that would be the best cover available to him. He just had to wait, and then wait a bit more, keeping his eyes fixed on the top of the mountain. The light was twinkling now and he was

certain it could not be from reflected sunlight because the fog was coming in thick and fast, rolling over the highest peaks of the horseshoe to the North and down into the decaying forest he had tramped through the day before. Soon the mist was thick around him and he carefully, slowly, packed the clothing and solar charger back into the main pack. No use these being there now and if was going to run he didn't want anything flapping around drawing unnecessary attention. His pack, clothing and Seb's coat now had a fine sheen of droplets on from the mist. The mountain top had all but disappeared and was just a shadow in the gloom...but the light up there was still strong. Suddenly it flickered, flashed and then was gone. Now, Jack thought, now I must go.

Without standing fully he turned and set off in a stumbling run up the remains of the road. Perhaps the first person to traverse it since before the contamination had ruined the land. The ground underfoot was treacherous, stony and slippery, slick with a slime that seemed to be the only slow force of decay here. He slipped often, falling to his hands and knees, the the point where he was soon covered in the slime and mud. Shaking the freezing gloop off his hands he would pick himself up and carry on. The distance was only short, about two or three hundred metres, but it felt like five times that to Jack.

The first stand of trees approached and he lunged at them. Diving into the welcome cover that they offered and the chance for a moment of rest to catch his breath. Seb as ever stopped beside him, obedient and observant. He wiped some of the slime from his hands and stroked her head to which she nuzzled back appreciatively, they had made it. This far.

The distance to the next stand of trees was even greater but now the fog had thickened to the point where the mountains behind him were completely invisible. Nobody would be able to see his flight but Jack was not about to wait to see if someone had spotted them so off they set again after a moment rest, though this time they went at a slower, more careful, pace. Here the old forest had been thicker and in places had rotting branches or the remains of fallen trees strewn across the roadway, half buried in the grey-brown mud and sometimes invisible until they stumbled upon them. The mountainside to his right rose and steepened until it was more like a cliff-edge with the path cutting into the rock. On his left the ground was falling away as well so that by the time they reached the edge of the trees for the next clearing it would be impossible to go any way but forward or back.

With the increase in elevation came a welcome change from the thick cloying mud to a more sturdy stone path. Jack soon realized that if the road kept rising they would be above the level of the treetops and out of cover completely. He paused and peered at the gloomy fog—even thicker than the day before—but could not see if they were going to rise any higher or not. He decided that the best thing would be to walk quickly and hope that they would lead out of the valley; at least it was heading in the right direction. Checking his compass just to be sure he secured his pack and then set off at a march almost due West along the ancient roadway.

Chapter 8

Jack's marching soon became the only sound in the world punctuated by little rattles where his feet found stones on the roadway and scattered them to the embankment on his right. Early on he had decided to stick to the right as much as possible, wary that the old stones underfoot would give way and send him plunging down into the devastated forest on the other side. It seemed that while the younger trees were regenerating the valley below near the river, up here they were all frozen in a half-decayed state. He had climbed about to the top of the last few standing trees and then the roadway had plateaued.

Now they were alternatively turning South-west and then North-west in a series of lazy curves as the path hugged the contours of the mountains. Every so often, part of the mountain was blocking their path—a long ago rock slide or simply a large boulder that had tumbled down from above, its progress arrested half-way down the hill by the man-made trap. So far though nothing was impassible and it usually only meant a short delay. Only once did Jack have to carry Seb up and over one of the larger boulders. She let him without complaint and was clearly too tired to make a fuss. Her fur was matted with the grey mud and slime but so too was Jack's clothing and now after walking over the rocky section for a couple of hours it was starting to dry out and fade to the same colour as the stones around them. Grey on grey, surrounded by a thick grey mist—it was the perfect camouflage. The almost sunny weather he had experienced earlier that had brought a tinge of hope was now bleached from their memory.

They had rested in the lee of the large boulder that Jack had carried Seb over and ate a small snack from their rations. Jack did not dare make a fire yet, and since there was no clean running water here it would be no use. He longed for the crisp clean pools of the stream next to his habitat but could not picture it now without seeing the scout bleeding into the water. He wondered what it was light now, where there other people trampling through that beautiful water? Rummaging through the remains of the habitat to find his history; his life?

It was about an hour since they had their snack and well into the afternoon when the fog began to take on a darker hue to signal the approach of night-time. Jack paused and looked at the roadway ahead; he could see nothing different. Mountain, track, a couple of straggly treetops, fog and then nothing. He did not relish the thought of making camp on the road - if the fog cleared in the night they might be in a terrible position—but neither did he look forward to trying to continue in darkness.

Choosing the lesser of the evils, Jack set out on the path once more with Seb silently following. About half an hour of walking did bring a change although he was not entirely sure if it was a change for the better. Suddenly, looming out of the fog he could see a large embankment on the left where there had previously been trees. He cautiously approached the edge and as far as he could make out the forest floor had been rising slowly but he had not noticed because the trees themselves were getting smaller, or had fallen completely so their tops were invisible from the road. Now the first ran out and ended in a cliff and the road turned Northwest, plunging into a cutting in the cliff-face instead of following the curve of the mountain as before. There was no easy way down the steep side of the road and back into the forest and no way up the even steeper cliffs that the roadway was cutting into. Jack sighed wearily—he had unwittingly walked into this place, removed any choice except to go on or turn back. For all he knew the valley behind him could be filling with scouts and soldiers by now. No, he decided, turning back was not an option.

They passed the threshold without incident and in fact the roadway was reassuringly similar, although there was perhaps even less of the mud and slime than before. Jack's scuffling footsteps were soon echoing off the walls before being stifled in the mute air and he felt an uneasy sense of being trapped. Nothing to do but to continue and hope that they didn't encounter a major rockfall that would force them to turn back.

Another half-hour slid by in the monotonous world of grey before they came to their next obstacle. Looming up ahead was another cliff but this time it was a cliff right across the track. Jack initially thought it was a massive rockfall—perhaps one side of the road had fallen in—but it turned out to be nothing of the kind. They had to get quite close in the gloom before noticing an even darker patch right in front of them and Jack slowly came to realize that it must be a tunnel. The road

simply went straight into the side of the cliff, swallowed up by a great yawning hole. This opening was wide, high and dressed with stonework—it was clearly once beautifully crafted and remained imposing in its majesty.

Jack stood for many minutes simply taking it all in. Even the habitat which had been his whole life seemed tiny now by comparison, despite it being a large labyrinthine network of corridors set deep into the hillside. This tunnel was quite different, it was bold, open to the elements and dark. A low murmur of wind was moaning from the darkness, as if the mountain was still pained from the ancient injury cutting into its side.

Not sure what he should do, Jack crept a little inside. Seb followed so clearly she did not sense any danger and this gave him enormous comfort even if it could not fully settle his nerves. After a couple of metres inside he quickly realized they would be in complete darkness and wondered if he should risk a light. Looking back the roadway curved slightly and then vanished into the mist—surely nobody would be able to see his torch if he turned it on; but what about the other side? All of a sudden he felt a pang of loneliness. What if there wasn't anyone on the other side? What if there were only himself and the faceless enemy left in the whole world? No, Jack snorted to himself, he could not believe that. He would not believe it.

Busying himself with distraction, Jack pulled his pack off and found the torch tucked into the top pocket. Plenty of charge left in it—he didn't know how long the tunnel was going to be so clicked it onto a low setting. Immediately the grey black fog was forced back by a yellowing glow. It warmed his heart to see the light as it played across the cut stonework inside the tunnel. Parts of it were dressed in brick but others just had the natural mountainside as faces. It was these places that his gaze was drawn to. Under the torchlight they danced and sparkled as the quartz and mica crystals trapped with the rock reflected his beam. Jack played around a bit, enjoying the escapism, it was probably the most beautiful thing he had seen—almost like the stars that he had only ever imagined. After a moment, Seb nudged him and he realized where they were and that he should not be playing with the light like that. Clearly she found the torch a little unnerving. Good girl, he sighed and stroked her, it was time to turn his attention to the passageway ahead.

Although he had no way to know the exact time Jack had assumed that night would fall while they were there inside the mountain. He had no idea how long the tunnel actually was and pessimistically assumed it would be a long trip, that and the fact that dusk had already been fast approaching when they entered made him wonder if they were going to be spending the night there. He could not get totally down though, because it was some of the easiest walking he had done thus far. The elements had been largely kept away except for trickles of water coming down the walls and some strange looking fungi clinging in odd patches. The further they went from the entrance even the fungus died back leaving only the rocks and water on the walls. Underfoot though it was a revelation; wide, flat, hardly and blemishes except maybe the odd crack. Jack let the torchlight play over the ceiling as he walked and every so often he would come upon what he assumed had once been lights for the tunnel—they were evenly spaced out, although some were missing entirely.

The lights both cheered and disturbed him. Unlike the stone cottage that he had found so unnerving this place had a sterile feel to it—humans had only been in transit here, they had not invested time or emotions in this place and Jack could feel no connection to the road he had been following; it simply felt like part of the mountain. The lights, however, were really the only constant reminder that this had been constructed for human use. People *had* been here, even if it were only for a brief moment as they passed from one side of the mountain to the other, but he was determined not to relive his fears from the previous night so focussed on the positive. There used to be power here—the cottage was an old isolated ruin—but this tunnel was *connected* to some other place. At the habitat all their power came from a turbine that was buried under the bank of the stream and hidden

from view. Jack's Uncle painstakingly maintained it and the other systems and had instructed him on some of the basics—he would have to learn one day how it all worked.

Jack stopped. That was it though...he would never have to learn how it worked now. It was all gone. He looked at the next light fitting emerging from the gloom and forced back tears. Maybe there had been a man here, just like his Uncle, who had carefully maintained these systems long ago. Where was he now, or his children, had they all perished in the conflicts that Jack had only a vague notion of. "Something terrible happened", his Uncle's words again, "but we are safe. We are free."

Although he was only imagining it, the voice seemed to echo off the stone walls in the silence. Jack felt an intense wave of loneliness again in the tunnel and he almost stopped again. He fought through it. Fought back the tears. The path was open and clear but he was fighting through treacle to make headway; every step a new turmoil of emotions would claw at him, dragging on his efforts and turning it to an insurmountable effort in his mind.

As he had many times already on this journey, Jack forced himself to concentrate on the immediate surroundings. The physical world was terrifying on one hand but satisfying that the walls did not judge or second guess. They simply were; the rocks, path, the lights and sparkles from the walls, trickling water. All of it was here, now, unmoving and solid. He ran his hand across the pool clammy stones, feeling its every flaw and feature. Ahead of him was an unknown, behind was guilt and pain but here there was a kind of peace. What I do now is what is important, Jack thought with sudden clarity, this will be my world. And it was easy to make it all his world, so confined as they were. A world of light set in a universe of darkness, passing by, slipping through the mountain.

The sound of rushing water broke into his stream of consciousness and he realized that they had been hearing it for a while. There must be an underground river nearby, he thought as they walked. The sound increased until they came to a point where the roadway started to crack into large slabs, the walls were made of more and more brick held together with crumbling mortar. When the noise was almost deafening a great hole emerged from the darkness on the wall to the right. From the way bricks still clung to the edge of this opening it had once been filled in, or at least sealed from the roadway, possibly to prevent people from falling into river that was rushing by on the other side. With the torch on its low setting Jack could only make out little splashes of froth that were flung up from the turmoil of the water but he did not dare take a step closing to the opening so turned the torch up to its maximum for a brief moment. Suddenly the shadows jumped back and the tunnel was filled with a bright white light. Jack hoped that there was nobody watching because such a bright light would surely shine out of the tunnel like a beacon, he was hoping that because the tunnel had not been following a straight course would obscure at least some of the light. Quickly he focussed the beam into the hole and was greeted with a terrifying site of a large waterway only metres from the where he was standing. The water was dark and impenetrable and he had no idea how deep it was but further back it was cascading down a small waterfall with remarkable violence. Instinctively Jack shrank back to the other wall and although the water was several metres below the roadway in his mind he could see it flooding and spilling out into the tunnel. Perhaps it had done once before and that brought down the wall. Now though, as angry as the water looked and sounded upstream there didn't appear to be any present danger. The water flowing past the opening was fast but not rising and as quickly as it appeared it turned away from the tunnel to disappear into a narrow opening in the rock.

While the torch was still bright Jack made a quick survey of the path ahead. Large cracks had appeared, no doubt from when the underground river had burst through. He crept up to the edge of one of them and could see more water below but this did not appear to be flowing. Beyond this section of cracked roadway it all appeared to return to normal. Seven large cracks fractured their

way across the path—the widest about as long as his arm—but they all looked as though it would be possible to jump or step over. Probably best not to loiter he thought, and the sound of the river was setting him on edge so he clicked his torch back to low and then set about traversing the broken floor to get to safety.

After getting across the first four cracks with no problem they were faced with the biggest one. Careful not to dislodge any loose parts of the edge Jack examined the gap and was reassured that the best thing to do would be to take a running jump to get across. Not sure if Seb had the strength to make it, he picked her up, tightened his back and started running. About half-way to the crack there was a loud rumbling underfoot and Jack felt the earth heave beneath him. Too late to stop and think, he simply quickened his pace and launched into air over the black water. With a crash they made it. He landed partly on his hands, scuffing them against the rock, but was too pumped with adrenaline to care as he picked himself and Seb up then ran for the next crack, then the next. Only when they were fully across did he turn about and look back at the roadway.

The roads surface was still in motion, crumbling and cracking into the water below. Clearly it had been undermined and the extra weight they had put on it was enough to tip the balance. As soon as he had started running the whole block had begun to tip into the water which had now swallowed up a large section of the road. The other two sections had probably been impacted by the first because they were now crumbling as well, leaning out at a crazy angle and clearly ready to follow into the black pool at the slightest pressure.

Although the path here was now firm, Jack instinctively stepped back a step or two and then quite surprising Seb he started to laugh. Partly because the adrenaline was giving him a boost but mostly because he had now created the best barrier he could to stop those that might be following him. Let them find a way to cross now! He thought triumphantly, and then the cold dark, crept in. His rush of energy was wearing off fast and he was shivering at the shock that they had nearly died—or would be as good as dead if they had ended up in the river—but he also realized the barrier worked both ways. There would be no way back to the habitat now.

Chapter 9

It took Jack and Seb several more hours to come to the end of the tunnel and the rest of the journey proved to be uneventful. They trudged on in the gloomy silence until at last Jack could feel the wind on his face increasing, bringing with it a freshness and new smells. It was so dark by the time they came to the end though, that he hardly noticed they were actually out of the tunnel at all. Unlike the entrance on the other side of the mountain, here the tunnel petered out into a steep sided gorge and without any stars or daylight to give the indication that they were out they had walked about fifty metres from the opening before Jack lifted his torch and realized that the ceiling was missing. Instinctively he turned the torch off then and waited a moment, listening intently. Had someone seen their light as they emerged? There certainly wasn't any indication that they had been spotted and he hoped that nobody was looking out for any kind of lights. With the torch turned off they were plunged into total darkness, and even though they were outside now there was no moon or stars bright enough to penetrate the low hanging clouds. He would have to risk using the torch again if they stood any chance of finding somewhere to sleep.

Turning it back on to a low setting he panned it around to get his bearings. Behind them the entrance to the tunnel stood gaping in the gloom, black and uninviting, and in front of them the road carried on beyond the reach of his light. To either side rose steep sides of the cutting that had been

made for the roadway. No sign of cover here—they would have to carry on along the road and hope something would present itself.

Another half an hour of trudging brought them to a place where the cutting was not so severe and now on both sides his torchlight disappeared into the gloom. He could be in another forest, or high on a mountainside, or anywhere for all he knew. Getting increasingly concerned that they would be walking right into some kind of trap, or at least another threatening situation, Jack decided that they had better make some kind of camp soon. Choosing at random he led Seb to one side of the road and carefully picked his way between some large boulders. It seemed that there was very little vegetation here so maybe they were still high up on the mountain side. Careful not to stray too far from the road, and his only landmark in this gloomy world, he was also conscious that they should try to put in some distance, or at least get some cover. In the end he settled for a short, flat bit of ground behind one of the larger boulders. The mountain seemed to rise steeply in front of him here anyway so further progress would be very difficult. The floor was stony and he had to shift a few of the bigger ones around before he had something resembling a sleeping area.

Careful to keep everything together as much as possible in case something got lost in the dark, he made their camp as best he could. Drank a swig of their now much depleted water supply and ate one of the dried ration packs. That would have to do. He curled up with Seb and drew the tarpaulin over both of them to provide shelter, and perhaps a bit of camouflage, and was soon in a fitful sleep. Exhaustion from the days activity finally catching up with him. Seb stayed alert for a bit longer, but even she soon succumb to fatigue and they were both soon asleep.

Jack woke with a start to the sound of rain drumming on the tarpaulin above his head. He looked out blearily to be greeted by squalls of showers coming like sheets up the valley. It was now light enough to see their immediate surroundings but still early and with the rain it would be unlikely that they would get a decent look at the new valley. Not wanting to get too wet Jack shuffled back down under the tarpaulin. The night before he had used a collapsible walking stick to prop the sheet up above them but it had fallen in the night the clammy material was now clinging to their body heat. He shuddered and propped it back up again before reaching for his pack to check everything over. There was barely enough light yet under the blackout-like material of the tarpaulin but he didn't want to use their torch batteries unnecessarily. It looked like they were not going to get any sun today so charging it up again would have to wait for another day. Most of the gear was covered in dried mud or slime from the previous day but at least it was all contained in the pack—all except his clothing and rifle. Conscious that the weapon might be their only chance of survival he spent nearly an hour cleaning it off to get all traces of the mud out of it, wiping it off with one of his shirts that he partially dampened by holding it out to the rain. After it was all clean he oiled it sparingly and then wrapped the shirt around it before securing the gun to the side of his pack as best he could to ensure it would remain clean, mostly dry and undamaged. There was a waterproof cover that would go over the whole rucksack and should cover the rifle too because its barrel was not overly long.

Once the equipment was sorted there was nothing more for them to do but eat a sorry breakfast of cold rations washed down with some rainwater that Jack had collected while he was cleaning the rifle. At least they had a good supply of water now—which he had diligently checked with the scanner...even though if the rain had been poisonous they would probably be suffering already—also they had been lucky in that the ground underneath had remained almost entirely dry. Small comforts to them as they stepped out into the squalid weather. Jack pulled his Uncle's hat out of the pack and put it on to keep the rain off his face; his jacket would do a good job of keeping his body dry but his legs would just have to get wet. The boots were still damp from the previous day so no change there. Seb just glowered as the water trickled down her fur. 'At least you'll get clean!' Jack muttered and tickled her behind the ear.

The rain had now turned to a freezing sleet that collected in any crevice to form a grey slush. Careful on the newly coated rocks, Jack led the way back down to the road. The quicker they got off this mountain and back to somewhere warmer the better. Some more shelter would also be a bonus.

While Jack had been cleaning his equipment the day had brightened to its fullest—which with all the rain was something akin to dusk—so they could see relatively clearly. The steep sided gulley that the road had been cut into was now nearly at an end and it spilled out among scree and boulders into a flat moorland. No trees that he could see, barely any sight of life except a few scraggly bits of heather desperately clinging to the sodden earth. Still at a high elevation they left the rocky side of the mountain behind and headed out along the road, now once more a simple track almost lost in the mud and remains of vegetation.

Chapter 10

It wasn't long before they were struggling to make headway through the moorland. The road had all but disappeared now and was just a vague echo of its former self. At times Jack wondered if he were actually following the path at all or was simply wandering aimlessly but then they would pick it up again and follow on ever Westward.

The moorland had once been covered in thick heather but most of that had decayed into the peat so that if he did stray too far from the road they soon found themselves sinking into the boggy ground. Progress was slow and all the time the rain came down without respite in a constant deluge of freezing sleet. Jack had long since given up trying to stay totally dry and instead concentrated on keeping in motion as a way of keeping warm. At least his jacket had kept the worst out of his body, although at about midday even that was had started to give up the fight.

They did not stop to eat a midday meal and carried on walking well into the afternoon but at long last a break in the weather appeared, rolling in towards them from the West. There was not going to be any sunshine today but at least there was the promise of a dry spell. Jack took advantage of the break in the rain to stop and have some of their high-energy rations. He only had a few of them and should really have been saving them for emergencies, but with the morning they had just gone through he was in desperate need for something to cheer his mood.

They had found a couple of large flattish rocks near to the pathway to sit on and eat the short meal. Seb would have to go hungry for now Jack thought, but she didn't seem to mind so much and seemed content with the pause in their march across the moorland. She shook herself mostly dry and then spent the rest of the time licking her fur in a vain attempt to get clean. Eventually giving up and just lounging on the rock until Jack made a move to continue walking. For his part Jack ate the rations and then turned his attention to the landscape around them. He did his best to ignore the cold wet clothing but knew in the back of his mind that they would have to make a fire soon—if not tonight then in the next day or so. Pulling the scope out of his pack and with the new-found visibility brought by the dry spell he scanned their surroundings.

First he took a good long look at the path they had come along. The ground was mostly flat with occasional moraines and small hillocks until it got to the foot of the mountain which was even now still surrounded by fog. He could not make out any of the other mountains that must flank the one that they had emerged from and could see no sign of pursuit. Perhaps his accident in the tunnel really had worked to keep anyone from coming after him. Eventually though, he thought grimly, they would find probably a way to come around or over the mountains—even though he had no

idea who or what they were or what they were looking for he still felt the threat of their potential. Just one of them had managed to destroy all the things that made his life, who knew how many more would come after that scout, how much more destruction would come?

Jack sighed and turned his attention to the rest of the moorland, surveying it quickly in one smooth sweep. Either side of the road the vista seemed to stretch and then merge into the sky at an indistinct point. Almost as though he were standing in the bottom of a big bowl with the sky and moorland made out of the same stuff. Perhaps it was just as well that they had the remains of the road to follow for without it they really would be wandering aimlessly. It was to the road that he turned his attention now and was rewarded with something different. Focussing the scope at its maximum zoom level he could make out something at the very edge of their visibility. A large bank of different colour. Black instead of grey. The road ran straight into the middle of it. It looked as though it might be another forest and Jack fervently hoped he would be able to find some wood to make a decent fire. Buoyed up by the thought that they might actually find their way out of the expansive moorland that night Jack put the scope back in his pack, shouldered it once more and made set off once again squelching through the muddy terrain.

The rain came crashing back in with force about half an hour after they set off but it did not manage to dampen his mood entirely. They were heading *somewhere* at last—they had a goal to aim for—even if they did not actually know what that thing was. His pace quickened as best he could, though in truth fatigue was starting to tug at him. He had always been very fit but the last few days had been slowly wearing him down. He ignored the tiny voice inside his head that was whispering for him to stop and just sit. Just sit for a bit. Taking inspiration from Seb he plodded on without a complaint. She would not be thinking about stopping Jack thought. She will be with me to the very end.

It was hard work though and their faster pace soon slackened back to the slow trudge. The rain now was colder and at times turned to snow. Hard driving snow that would build up on any of the stones that lay in their path making them treacherous. Just as soon as the snow had built up the weather would warm fractionally and rain would come lashing down again to wash it all away. The changeable desperate weather was almost as tiring as the walking and Jack soon stopped looking for the next squall of icy rain or flurry of snow. He bowed his head against the elements and set about making the best progress his aching muscles would allow.

Another two hours of walking and he had no idea if they were actually any closer to the black thing he had seen on the scope. The visibility had drawn in again leaving them isolated in a tiny world of sleet and rotting heather. The lack of any way to mark their progress was maddening and suddenly Jack was angry.

He kicked out at the heather and bellowed to the wind. His hoarse voice quickly carried away and buried in amongst the half-frozen raindrops. With clenched fists he shook his arms and stamped with futility at the remains of the roadway. Why had this come to him? He cursed, why could he not be back home, comfortable, warm, safe? Eventually the force of his emotion became a wave that engulfed him and he stopped dead and then sank down sobbing. The anger evaporated and left him kneeling in the freezing mud with nothing but a scared dog next to him and an empty feeling deep inside his chest.

It was a sound that roused Jack from his melancholy. A strange sound that he could not place, could not understand. A brief clattering noise like a frying pan hanging up to dry and bashing off something in a sudden gust of wind. Only this frying pan must have been large and far away. Jack looked up and strained his ears, taking off the hat despite the rain and being rewarded with an icy blast of water to drive any clarity into his mind. The noise came again. A distant church bell from a

broken belfry. An idle-minded deity clattering through some giant pots. As soon as the sound had pierced his consciousness it was gone again and Jack was left listening to the sigh of an increasing wind and the relentless drum of sleet. Disheartened he stuffed his wet hat over his soaking hair and rose to his feet. He had no choice really; not if he wanted to live. A few more hours out in that cold with the equipment he had and he might never leave that moorland having succumb to the elements.

They started walking again but now more cautiously. The noise had troubled him but he could not quite work out why. Perhaps because it was so unnatural. He was used to the only unnatural sounds being that which he or his Uncle made as they went about their daily routine. All those sounds were familiar, they had a place in his mind, they were reassuring. This new sound did not fit and he was feeling a growing sense of unease as they progressed towards the unknown shadow ahead. As they squelched through the mud Jack realized that it wasn't so much the quality of the sound that had disturbed him, it was the direction from which it came. The same direction that they were now heading. Whatever it was he would find out soon, and with all that had gone on the past few days he was not sure he wanted to. Looking back at the featureless bogged down grey landscape behind them though, he reasoned that really they did not have any kind of choice.

Chapter 11

It was almost nightfall when they finally reached the dark smudge Jack had seen through his scope earlier in the day. He was conscious that they should have been making some time too look for a suitable place to make camp—even though there was little chance of getting a fire going in the damp perhaps he could burn a few sprigs of the dried up decaying heather to make a warm drink. They could share body heat under a tarpaulin. It would be a miserable night but then the prospect of being out in the open was even more depressing so Jack had pushed them on regardless with the hope that the shadow he had seen at the edge of the moorland was a forest which would provide ample wood for a fire and decent shelter too.

His hopes were soon dashed though. Even from relatively far away he could see that whatever it was it was far too tall to be made up of trees. Far too wide and unbroken to be a forest in this dying landscape. It must be a cliff, he thought, despondently, as the mass in front of him started to take shape. At least at the foot of it they might find some shelter. Maybe the old roadway went through it like it did the mountain? They moved closer with step after cloying step and soon the cliff towered above them in the sleet but they did not seem to be any closer to the bottom. Jack began to feel a sense of unease again which he could not quite fathom. He had felt it before though, and the memory of the plantation and his first encounters with the roadway surfaced in his mind. Peering through the gloom up at the wall with the sleet stinging his eyes he felt a sudden dread. This cliff was too regular. Too straight. Too out of place in the landscape. The black mass before him just did not fit with what he supposed the world should be like—even though he had only ever lived in a tiny corner of it—some primal instinct was at work within him. The closer he got the worse the panic was but he forced it down, partly with weary resignation of their fate, and partly with the knowledge that his panic in the past had not had a good outcome.

The closer they got the more of the old scrubby heather began to fall away and soon they were picking their way through large rocky boulders. It must be a natural cliff, Jack thought, and this is just the base of it. Crumbled ancient stone, falling down from the rock face over centuries. Rounding a particularly large boulder that obscured his view though, he soon found out the truth and it stopped him in his tracks.

It was a wall. A massive wall that towered above him like a natural cliff, but made with the most

unnatural regularity to set his nerves on edge. In the sleet filled gloom of the early evening he had had to come very close to the structure before he realized what it was and now stood agape looking at the piece of work that was in front of him. And what a piece of work it was; the top nearly lost in the fog, buttressed and re-inforced, but all made out of a sheer black glass-like material. He could see no visible divisions of masonry or construction lines—it was merely a solid black thing with sleet melting and sheeting off the side to form little rivulets at the base. Right at the top, almost obscured in the poor light were a series of poles whose tops disappeared completely into the low cloud. These poles it seemed were the source of the strange mournful clanging he had been hearing on the wind. Jack marvelled at the wall—he had no idea how any human hand could have constructed such a large mass and it filled him with dread. Some super-power had drawn a line across the landscape here and he was humbled, cowering at the foot of it.

Lowering his gaze to ground-level he could see the roadway, now more defined due to the shelter that the wall had provided over the ages. It marched boldly up to the black wall and then disappeared. Jack could just about make out a difference in the surface of the wall there if he peered and squinted but he was rooted to the spot and dare not make a move to see for sure if the road went through an opening. Dare he even try to cross over? The super beings manifest in his mind as something other than human that had constructed the wall had obviously done it to keep the two sides separate. Had he grown up on the wrong side? Or would he be entering into a world worse than his own if he dared step through. Assuming he could even find a way through.

The only mote of comfort was that thus far there had been no sign of life from ahead of him. No lights, no noise, except for the haunted metallic noises above him. Darkness was fast approaching though and he did not relish trying to explore an alien land in the dark. With a concentration of effort he broke his gaze from the path ahead and turned back to look at the rocky terrain around him. Just to his left there was a cleft running between two large boulders. It would do for now he thought, just enough room to crawl into.

He stretched the tarpaulin over the rocks and weighed down the corners with some stones and then pushed his pack inside. It was soaking on the outside but he was sure that the equipment would be dry within its waterproof inner bags. Once the pack was under and forming a sort of blockage to keep the worst of the wind out he rolled out a small mat and then crawled in himself, pulling Seb in behind him under protest. The rocks instantly sapped his body heat through the wet clothing but at least they were out of the rain. Seb was restless and unhappy in the tight spot but he managed to settle her with some time, stroking her sodden head until most of the water had been squeezed out of her fur. Then he set about awkwardly pulling off his boots and trousers and donning some dry thermals from the bag. Finally he stripped down his top and wrapped himself up in the blanket. It was a special blanket he had used for hunting trips with his Uncle and was never really big enough to cover his body entirely having been designed that the wearer would still keep his shirt or jacket on while holding a rifle out to wait for game. Despite its small size, Jack managed to scrunch down into it to save as much body heat as he could.

He did not sleep well that night, not really at all. The rain was a constant background noise, drumming on the tarpaulin and shortly after midnight the wind picked up. With the increased wind came an increase in the clattering noise from above the wall. At one point there was a loud screech which had him bolt upright clutching his rifle—ready to fire at whomever or whatever came down the road. The screech sounded again and he realized it was an escalation of the noise caused by the wind—something ancient was up on the wall and protesting at every movement forced by the winds. After a couple of hours the screeching had stopped and the wind settled. Even the rain stopped at this point but his nerves were so fraught that sleep was out of the question. Instead he pulled the blanket around him and simply sat. He blanked his mind to all that surrounded them and fell into a stupefied state. Maybe the cold had finally seeped into his mind...maybe he had just

reached the point of exhaustion with the last few days of constant flight. Maybe he was becoming part of the landscape. He was dying into the moorland, the twisted broken heather; sinking into the ooze like the freezing rocks.

Chapter 12

Dawn brought a welcome respite from the sleet even though it was colder than the day before. The little hovel that they had been encamped in had warmed in the night a little with their body heat but as soon as Jack stumbled outside pulling his damp coat on he was struck by an icy blast of wind whistling down over the moorland. Patches of sleet had built up into something not quite like snow—*islands of ice stranded between the stricken heather*. The fog persisted and he still had no idea what had caused such a cacophony the night before. Even the base of the poles he had seen were obscured and to look at it now you would think the wall was all that existed between the ground and clouds. He shivered violently and pulled on the pair of trousers he had worn through the river a few days ago, they were still damp but considerably warmer than the ones he had worn last night. He couldn't face taking the thermals off in the icy wind and soon they were damp too leaving him with no dry clothing for the next night

. It wont matter, he thought with grim determination, I will find a way to make a fire today...somehow.

Seb was shaking in the cold wind too and he did his best to dry off the last bits of damp fur by rubbing it. She perked up at this and nuzzled him gratefully. Jack had no idea if the weather was going to last but for now he thought they had best have some of the high energy food so he broke one of the bars in two and shared his ration with Seb. It would give him energy but did not satisfy the hunger that was now gnawing at him. He wondered if he should try to make a fire out of the sodden heather just enough to melt some ice and make one of the dried food pouches. Better to find somewhere else he thought, better to keep moving.

Breaking their makeshift encampment only took a moment and soon he was ready to start out towards the wall again. He had strapped his pants from the day before to the outside of the pack, they wouldn't dry in the cold but at least they wouldn't make the rest of the pack wet. The rifle was a bit damp but the effort of oiling it had kept all of the mechanisms working fine. More out of a feeling of irrational and growing dread he clutched the weapon now and instead of putting it back in his pack he looped the strap over his neck and cradled it under one arm in case he needed to fire quickly.

A few short strides and he was back around the front of the rocky outcropping again and staring at the place where the road disappeared. The light was no better than yesterday and he still was not sure what was in store for him so crept forward as silently as he could. It wasn't long before he could make out what appeared to be a short tunnel disappearing into the bottom of the wall and he wondered if it were in face a cliff after all. A few more steps and the tunnel was revealed to be an opening for a doorway. Inside hung a massive metallic door, rusting and battered and looking very out of place against the sleek black material making up its frame. Jack approached cautiously, mindful of the way he had booby trapped the habitat before leaving it. What if someone had done the same here?

Soon he was standing just under the archway and staring at the great mass of metal in front of him. There was no way he would be able to move something like that he thought and walked up to the door, which might have been a barrier for all the good it did them. So what else then? Turn around? Follow the wall? He turned a full circle to evaluate his options. Going back was

definitely not viable, and to the left or right looked equally uninviting. With nothing to lose he felt suddenly emboldened and strode up to the giant door for a closer look. It was largely featureless, except a few giant scars and bulges, like someone had battered at it with a great machine before giving up and turning away. There was ample surface rust but it was apparently so thick it would be many more years before it had rusted to a point of weakness.

Jack was just about to turn away in disgust and try his luck following the wall when he noticed a small panel to the left of the door. It was just the same as the one next to the door of the habitat—the one they used every day to open and close the door. Would it still work after all these years? He didn't know but was determined to try. Their habitat was locked out by a series of access codes which his Uncle had drilled into him saying; These are my codes, but you have every right to use them as your own. Now as Jack approached the panel he didn't even have to think about the sequences, his only hope was that there would still be some power here in this great antique structure.

Clicking the button on the side of the panel he was greeted by a welcome *ping!* and then the screen started to glow a pale blue. He almost wept with the joy of seeing it. Exactly the same as the habitat, maybe they were related somehow, connected. Without pausing to think he keyed in the access codes he had always used and then stepped back out of the archway in a couple of nervous jerky strides. Pulling the rifle into a defensive position he crouched, partly to get a better aim, partly because his head was spinning and he wanted to get some sense of stability. Nothing happened for a long time and Jack's heart finally slowed from its crazy pace to a more sedate rhythm.

Then without warning there was a loud *crack!* followed by a screech of metal on metal even louder and penetrating than the noises he had heard in the night. Instinctively he shrank away as the sound called out across the moorland in a mournful lament. The door moved. Slowly, deliberately, it opened a crack screeching with each inch it moved and Jack finally saw the full thickness of it. Over a metre of solid metal and it was moving with some awesome ancient power. Then just as suddenly as it started it was over. With a shudder that seemed to pass out through the frame and under Jack's feet the whole thing ground to a halt. Then there was another squeal, this one higher in pitch that escalated into a whine and then silence. The door was stuck leaving a gap of about a metre into the world beyond. Jack was stunned and Seb had fled to hide behind some of the nearby rocks.

Recovering some of his senses he soon realized that the noise might well have been heard for miles around. Who would know what this means, he thought, who will now be coming to investigate? With a rising panic he ran back to the rocks, grabbed Seb and ushered her in through the doorway. He had no idea what lay beyond the black shadowy opening but clung to the hope that it would be better than what he was leaving behind.

ACT 2 - FIGHT

Chapter 1

On the other side of the door Jack found himself in a high ceilinged corridor, not unlike the tunnel through the mountain but in much better condition. There was obviously still some source of power in this structure because the lights glowed faintly. Perhaps it had taken the last reserves to open the door which now stood behind him framing a tall narrow window into another world. At first Jack thought he must be going into some kind of underground space like he was used to at the habitat but as his eyes grew accustomed to the artificial light he realized that there was another door at the far end of the tunnel. The space in between was devoid of any feature, simply black like the wall outside. Even the floor seemed to be made up of the same smooth material which felt very strange to walk on for Jack and Seb who were used to wading through mud or over natural stone. His footsteps boomed off the walls in as he made his way slowly through the passageway.

The door at the far end was not nearly as thick or imposing as the one he had just managed to open and this one it appeared had been left ajar for a much longer time. As they approached the debris littering the floor increased until they got to the doorway and found piles of broken branches, scrub brush and heather all dead and in a partially decomposed state. There certainly was no shortage of good material for a fire and Jack felt his hopes surge.

Pushing through the detritus he clambered out through the gap and into the world beyond. At first he felt a sudden disappointment—the scene that greeted him was not at all different from what he was used to. An ancient forest crumbling with decay just like the one in the valley he had crossed on his second day of flight. Trees had obviously once grown right up to the wall and their branches must have formed an arc over the roadway. It must have once been magnificent and even now in the drifting mists it maintained a certain grandeur. The sleet had been falling here too and many of the stricken trees were covered in a thick layer of ice. It was probably his imagination but seemed to be much colder here than outside the wall. Jack shivered and hugged his body. At least the roadway was better defined and it seemed that the decay had been kept away from the surface of the road somehow and it now formed a bold flat path leading away from the wall. Jack let his gaze follow the road now to see what would be in store for them, it seemed much the same if a lot less muddy.

He tightened his pack and shrugged, what was he really expecting in here he wasn't sure but couldn't shake the feeling that there should be something else. Setting out on the roadway he hadn't gone far when the mists started to clear a bit as the morning wore on. Clambering atop a large set of rocks by the roadway he could see quite far and realized that they were in a relatively narrow space. What he had not been able to see the day before was that the wall joined two large rocky outcroppings which were in themselves a natural barrier, although the features of those cliffs were lost to him they at least seemed to be rock and not the black material of the wall. The forest seemed to fill the enclosure completely which was at its narrowest point where the wall was and then widened swiftly. At last he was able to see that atop the wall was a string of turbines, mostly broken and a few had even fallen off but the one above the doorway appeared to be intact and was moving ever so slightly in the light wind. With the a sigh of relief Jack realized that it was only the turbine making all the noise the night before. He let out a little chuckle at the thought of it when he considered all the other scenarios that had played out in his mind. The mist had cleared even more when Jack turned back towards the road and their direction of travel. It was only now he could see they were quite high up still and the road would soon be joined by a stream and they both would their way downwards. Down to a town.

Even though it was still a few miles away Jack crouched low on the rocks as soon as he saw it and

brought his rifle to bear on the roadway in case anyone was coming up. He had never seen a town before, not in real life anyway, only in pictures and videos. It looked magnificent to his virgin eye, a beautiful, terrible place but the more he looked, also an abandoned ruin. Once there had been tall skyscrapers that now lay horizontal or twisted into monstrosity of their former glory. All around the town the vegetation had flourished, trees had grown inside the buildings and then they all had died leaving a devastated vista. Here and there were large craters, some filled with icy water, some with half rotten vegetation. Across it all lay a cold haze that collected into banks of fog and swirled through the mass of concrete driven by an icy wind. Another ruin, Jack thought glumly, a bigger grander place; but just another ruin.

The town beckoned to him all that day but he was wary and decided instead to strike out away from the road and towards one of the rocky cliff faces he had made out from near the wall. Here he would make a camp, dry his equipment and observe. They had enough food for the moment and he wasn't going to rush into a place that was so desperate with decay. He thought it quite likely that the land down there would be poisonous, so better to stay high up in the valley and wait for his thoughts to come to some kind of coherence. He needed a plan.

Chapter 2

Picking their way through a jumble of fallen trees was an all too familiar task for them after the past few days but the forest here was different. Although at first it had appeared to be just as bad as the ones he had passed through before, on closer inspection it appeared that the regeneration had begun earlier here—or at least was more advanced. On several occasions he came across solitary young trees that appeared to be standing and healthy, although much of the woodland was made up of deciduous species so it was difficult to tell which ones had shed their leaves due to the cold and which were dead standing. A couple of small pine trees in full health and vigour, albeit with what appeared to be stunted growth, did give him some encouragement. He thought back to the ones the other valley and wondered if there might be signs of deer here too. Thus far on his journey aside from the signs of animal life near to the valley the habitat was in he had not seen any sign of anything alive. The first thing he would do after finding a suitable campsite was to set traps, he decided, at least then he might snare something.

Perhaps because of the lighter mood he was feeling, or maybe it was simply that they were not trying to move as quickly since the threat of pursuit had diminished in his mind, the journey to the edge of the valley did not seem to take as long as he had feared. Soon they were standing at the foot of an almost sheer natural cliff that held a relatively straight line while the valley dropped towards the town. It would be a great vantage point atop what he could only assume was some kind of plateaux but there did not appear to be any easy way up, also it would likely be fairly inhospitable up there with the weather they had been having.

They cast about first towards the wall and then retracing their steps and towards the town but no suitable places for an encampment were presenting themselves and they day was wearing on. Jack wondered if they should cross back over the road and try the other side of the valley. He had paused near the stream which wound its way from its source somewhere deep underground to the road and then down towards the town and decided to descend to the water to refresh their supplies before heading back to the other side. The stream was in a narrow rocky gully so he had to scramble down to it but once there on the bank he realized that there was actually a narrow path following the stream. Clearly people had once used this as a route to somewhere but he couldn't fathom where they would be going. The task of filling their water bottles quite forgotten Jack followed his curiosity and picked their way between the boulders upstream. It wasn't long before

they were nearly at the cliff face where the stream appeared to tumble straight out of a fissure in the rock when they rounded a bend and came upon a flight of stairs cut into the rock. They were slick with water dripping from the cliffs but seemed to be quite sound. He climbed slowly and warily, not so much worried about finding anyone as about slipping and falling down to the water below. After about ten metres of climbing it became apparent that the path led to a jagged opening in the rock face about the size of a door. This could be perfect, Jack thought; clearly others in the past had thought so too because he saw as soon as he was inside that people had once been living inside the cave.

He was getting used to finding the remnants of previous lives but this place raised all the hairs on his neck and he shivered in one violent shudder. There was no life inside but the memory of life was haunting. On one wall was a makeshift hearth with grill for cooking and under his torchlight the blackened wall was clear evidence it had been well used. The smoke appeared to have risen into cracks above, presumably to then disperse and find its own way out of the mountain. Jack made a mental note to test the firepit later as soon as he had enough wood gathered. It would be a relief to have a way to make fire without anyone being able to see it. There were some old metal framed chairs dotted about that had once had a fabric netting-like cover which had frayed and tore easily when Jack put any pressure on it making them useless for sitting on. The wall opposite the fire was the most troubling though and Jack spent quite a bit of time shivering in the chill air before approaching it.

Part of the wall had been carved out to form a small platform a bit like a narrow table and atop this were bundles of clothing a few bags what appeared to be a stuffed toy sitting in pride of place atop the pile. The damp and shrunken teddy lay back against the rock and its eyes glinted in his torchlight with a mocking wisdom. Jack wasn't looking at the bear though; his gaze had been arrested by the body propped into a sitting position next to the table.

The remains were old, the flesh shrivelled and gone, leaving only a layer of skin preserved to hang off the skeleton. Its hair had been quite long and possibly once red but now was a faded brown colour and was clinging damply to the sunken cheeks. Jack had no idea if it was a man or woman—indeed he had never seen a woman—because the clothing was nondescript. Combat fatigues, an old military jacket, stout boots. Uttering something of a strangled gurgle that brought Seb into the cave to her master's aid, Jack sank down, shaking his head with an almost involuntary motion. The body was dressed exactly as he was.

Chapter 3

Jack recovered from his shock of finding the skeleton slowly and did not sleep in the cave that night. It had already been quite late in the day when he made the discovery and decided, quite rationally, he thought that staying in the cave without first clearing it out would not be the best idea. He didn't want to admit to himself that the remains had scared him deeply. Even in his flight and seeing his Uncle pass away he had never had to come to terms with his *own* mortality. That body, though, could just as well be him. Indeed he might end up joining it or facing a similar fate in a another cave or hovel somewhere. Jack didn't like the idea of dying hidden away like that, he suddenly decided, it would be fine to hide there while he was alive but when it came to death he wanted to be out in the open. Snorting in derision he chided himself—how would he have any control over where it happened?

That night was another miserable and damp one curled up with Seb under the tarpaulin in the forest below the cave. Jack did manage to sleep but his dreams haunted him, the sunken face seemed to

take on a new animation and laughed at his fears in a grotesque mockery of life. He woke frequently and clutched the rifle or Seb; whichever would give him the most comfort depending on his dreams. Eventually he rose before dawn had even brightened the sky and set about preparing some snares and traps under torchlight. When the day finally broke they scoured the forest for signs of life and set down the traps in the best places. Possibly a chance of rabbit, though he would have to check it over carefully for contamination. Even in the valley where he grew up with its relatively lush vegetation and animal life they came across animals that were dying from the poison. Often they were driven mad by it and were the first to be caught in the snare where they would writhe and thrash in their delirium.

Eventually by mid-morning he returned to the spot that was their encampment. This side of the valley the road was closer to the mountains so he had managed to cover the entire section between the wall, road and stream and was starting to build a mental map of it. If nothing presented itself in the next day or so he would venture out further afield but for now he was content to stay within a manageable area. Not being able to put the task off any longer because he really did not have anything else to do, and really should be trying to dry out his equipment, he faced the cave again.

Hauling some of the driest branches up to the opening took another couple of hours but he soon had a good supply of wood to last longer than he needed. He arranged the wood in a corner, found a couple of hooks driven into the rock and strung a bit of wire up for his clothes to hang off. Then he sorted the hearth out, clearing out the old sludgy waste. Water was going to be a bit of a problem because every time he needed some he would have to clamber down the steps. Not relishing the thought of doing that in the rain or at night he found a large pot next to the fire pit and scrubbed it clean in the stream. It was a little rusty and would give the water a metallic taste but better than nothing. Once all that was sorted he pulled the fire kit out of his belt pouch and after a couple of presses on his plasma lighter was rewarded with a small blaze in the hearth. He put the plasma away carefully, now that he was away from his old home there would be no-where to recharge its energy cells so he would have to resort to more primitive method once it was exhausted. Ever the pragmatist his Uncle had instructed him in the use of flint and steel, but he found the process unpredictable and laborious so would only do it as an absolute last resort.

The fire brought him instant joy and filled the room with a dancing light. He spent some minutes just staring at the flames as they devoured the old wood. It was damp on the outside from the constant deluge of icy rain but quite dry and seasoned on the inside. His clothes were steaming now and he hoped would soon be dry; Seb too had overcome her trepidations about the cave and was busy cleaning herself next to the fire. Looking forward to some warm food at long last he put some water on to boil and readied a sachet of the dried rations he carried with them.

After all that was done he was left with a few minutes to sit and wait for the water to boil. The corner with the table and skeleton had thus far lain untouched and it was to this that his gaze was drawn now. The skull seemed to dance under the light from the fire, its deep eye sockets full of black mystery. He would have to deal with what he had been putting off soon and knew it, but decided that food was more important. Also he had no clear idea what to do with the remains—all he knew was that there was no way he was going to share his space with them.

Chapter 4

Jack knew that in the past they had buried the dead and thought that would be the best thing to try and located a suitable location near to the base of the cliff that held the cave. It was a slightly raised area of ground and seemed to never have had any trees growing on it so the ground was bare except

a few forlorn looking bits of grass. Having no decent tools for digging he picked out a stout stick and attempted in vain to scratch out a hollow in the frozen earth. Quickly realizing it was a folly to continue he then cast about for another means to handle the remains. It didn't seem right to leave them out in the open but he felt he had to do something.

Eventually he returned to the cave and opened up the Solarpedia to see if it had any useful information about burying the dead. It had far too much information and he lost an hour scrolling through parts of its database he had never had to confront before. There seemed to be countless different burial practices across hundreds of long gone civilizations. Each one he came across gave him a pang of guilt that he had left his Uncle's body lying where it had fell. Eventually the frustration of not finding any answers got too much and he shut the device down and decided that he would find a pile of rocks and construct a cairn to bury the body under. He wondered if it really mattered since there was nobody else here to care, but felt a vague sense of obligation to the former occupant of the cave.

Gathering sufficient rocks to make the cairn took most of the rest of that day and it was already nearly evening when he returned to the cave to face the body once again. Seb stayed warily in the corner almost as if she sensed that this was something Jack had to face alone but that she would be close enough to offer emotional support if he needed it. Jack did not wish to use any of his own gear to transport the remains so first he started to sort through the pile of clothing on the rock table. Much of it was damp and decaying but he found a kind of plastic tarpaulin thing that would do. A useful piece of fabric, he reflected, and decided there and then that he would keep it once the body had been moved. Much of the rest of the clothing was too far decayed to be of use so he arranged it around the fire to dry out. Once dry some of it could be used as fuel to start fires in the future, or he could turn it into char-cloth for the time when he would have to resort to using the flint for fire starting.

The table was now sorted and he turned to the body, not being able to delay any longer. First he inspected it closely, the remains themselves did not bother him because he had been around many animal carcasses over the years, it was what the remains represented that he found really disturbing. Someone had come through here before him, dressed the same way, perhaps from a similar habitat? He had no idea but felt an overwhelming sadness that thus far aside from his Uncle out of the only two people he had met in the world, one had tried to shoot him and one had been dead for years.

The jacket yielded a few small items from the pockets; an old knife which was probably too small to be useful, a worn out plasma fire starter and a wadge of paper that might have once been a map or book but was now soggy and unreadable. He put it all on the table anyway and then turned his attention to the belt which contained a much larger blade. He eased the blade and belt off the body together, sliding it carefully around the pelvis conscious that it was really only the clothing and shrunken skin that was keeping the skeleton together. The belt might be useful but the knife was in fairly poor shape. He would keep it anyway and try his luck at restoring it if they had a chance. The boots were unfortunately too small, and likely too badly damaged to be useful so it looked like there was only what it was holding in its hands that would be of use.

The hands had fared less well than other parts of the remains, with the skin cracked and bones poking through at odd angles. In its left hand there was a small round device that Jack did not know what it was. It looked like an electronic device, similar to the Solarpedia but without the roll-out screen and solar panel. He placed it carefully on the table and then turned to the other hand. He had not noticed at first because the jacket had crumpled as the body lost its vitality and hidden the fact that this hand contained a gun. It was definitely a gun, Jack thought, but like nothing he had ever seen before. All their weapons in the habitat had been designed for hunting animals and were long-barrelled rifles. This gun was short, a bit like a cross between a pistol and a rifle. The body

had been holding it by the trigger in a ready-to-fire position before it had slumped down. Jack realized then that the body was positioned in such a way that it would be able to defend the door without having to move.

Prising the skeletal fingers from the grip of the weapon Jack marvelled at its light weight and apparent lack of corrosion. It was made out of a similar alloy to his hunting rifle and had obviously been well cared for while in use. He did not know if it was loaded, or even if it could still fire or if it would explode in his hands so carefully put it down on the table, feeling a little shiver of nervous excitement as he let it go.

After the inspection there was nothing left to do but move the body. He laid out the tarpaulin and then stooped over the skeleton. Supporting its head much the same way as a baby would be supported he half scooped, half dragged the body onto the tarpaulin. It flopped and writhed around inside its baggy clothing before coming to rest with a sickening hollow clunk on the stone floor. There was no weight to it, in fact the boots seemed to almost weigh as much as the rest of the body, so Jack could easily bundle the tarpaulin up into a makeshift sack and carry it over one shoulder down to his chosen burial site. Once there it was simply a matter of sliding the body off the tarpaulin and then folding it for later use. He carefully stacked the rocks into a long low cairn and then stood staring at it in the failing light. He wondered if someone would do the same for his Uncle, and felt another deep pang of regret. He had treated this strange corpse with more reverence than he had treated his own family.

Chapter 5

Jack felt drained both emotionally and physically after his day with the body and so that night he crawled up to Seb and they lay in a bundle underneath his blanket by the embers of the fire. It was still too cold in the cave to be still for long though and every couple of hours he would wake shivering and stock the fire again. He decided that if they were going to be staying for any length of time in this valley he would have to find some means of sleeping that was off the stone floor.

The next day despite the interrupted sleep he awoke feeling more rested than he had done since starting the journey and stood looking out from the cave entrance to the valley that might well be his temporary home with a new sense of hope. First to check the traps, he thought, then he would return to the doorway that brought him through the wall and see if there was any way to seal it back up again. He would not feel any kind of safety in the valley if he could not find a source of food and a means of protecting it from whatever army might be marching through the hills the the East.

The day brought a new level of cold to the air but with the cold also came a clarity which he was unused to. In his home valley the visibility was seldom perfect and usually the clouds were hanging low over the mountains.

Here though, it seemed that the world had opened up to him both horizontally as well as vertically. From the vantage point of the cave entrance he could survey a vast valley system with the town crumbling at the foot of the forest and then what appeared to be marshlands stretching out beyond. After that there was the vaguest glint of light on what might be water but he was not sure, and even though the clouds had drawn up away from him they were still a thick blanket over the sky. It was one of the best days for charging any of his solar gear though so he set them out on the path leading up to the cave, he was determined not to miss any opportunity that presented itself.

Although it was not raining the air still had a chill damp feel to it, and where there had been slush or

sleet piled in pockets these had now turned to ice. Jack carefully picked his way down the path and back along the stream. On a whim he followed it all the way down until it reached the roadway and was rewarded with several large pools that might be useful for washing in and, he hoped, might even have fish. Where the stream met the road it had been channelled into a canal so that it would follow the path exactly. It seemed that the further down the valley they went the more signs of civilization were evident. Standing on the road now he could see a few small structures which might well have once been houses standing beside the waterway and would definitely be worthy of investigation. After all this time of decay and abandonment there was likely to be nothing he could use, but it was worth a look anyway.

Turning his back on all the possibilities that were opening up to him he decided to face the challenge of sealing up the wall again. Now that he was getting more familiar with the small section of the valley that he had notionally carved out as his own territory he had no qualms about striding boldly up the road to the wall and into the corridor at its base. For long moments he gazed back out the way he had come toward the mountains that were now quite visible to see if there was any more signs of pursuit but nothing presented itself. On the inside of the doorway there was another panel like the one he had used to open it and it still had power but no matter what command he keyed into it the door refused to move. The lighter mood he had been feeling all morning evaporated then, he had opened a doorway into this valley and now anyone would be free to come through.

With a growing sense of gloom he went around the snares they had set but nothing was in them so he moved a few to what might be better places, thought about going to the stream to fish and instead decided to return to the cave and think of some kind of plan for moving on. He would not be safe in the valley if the doorway could not be sealed. Also, he thought, as they trudged back to the stream and then up its winding course—which was easier than fighting through the forest—he had that strange device the skeleton had been holding, maybe that could offer him some kind of help...

Chapter 6

It was early afternoon when Jack returned to the cave and set about examining the device he had found with the body. He had stoked up the fire and was sitting in the best position to give him the most workable light while still being able to keep warm and was now turning the ball over in his hands. He had never seen anything quite like it but was encouraged by the fact that it seemed to have interface ports that were similar to the Solarpedia so therefore he might be able to connect to it somehow. There were also a few buttons around the edge but these seemed to do nothing. The first thing to try, he decided, would be to see if he could connect a battery to it—doubtless it would need some charge before it could do anything. The backup solar battery he carried also had a connector for the Solarpedia so he retrieved that from his pack and plugged it into the ball. At first nothing happened and then a little light came on, then it beeped twice and fell back into its dormant state. Jack decided to leave it to charge while they ate some more of the rations.

He did an assay of what they had left in the pack and realized that they would have to find some food in the next couple of days or they would soon be in fairly serious trouble. They only had one of the high energy rations left and out of the rest he probably had enough for another week if he really eked it out. He ate the dried food mixed with a little hot water from the fire slowly, making every mouthful last, and tried to ignore his stomach. Even now they had been eating so little he had started to feel the pains of hunger and it was really only a few days since they were forced out on the journey.

His scant meal concluded he turned back to the orb and decided to risk pushing on of the buttons. Gingerly placing it on top of the stone table he pushed a button at random and was suddenly greeted by a flash of light. He ducked out of the way instinctively but recovered quickly upon realization of what had caused the flash. Out of no-where a glowing image of a woman's face had appeared, floating ethereally above the orb. He stared in wonderment—they had some technology at the habitat such as the Solarpedia but nothing as advanced as this—but not only that; he had never seen a woman before, not a three-dimensional image like this anyway. It was moving, distorting and shimmering as if it were responding to currents in the air. He was staring for a good few minutes before it dawned on him that the woman he was looking at was the person that the skeleton used to be. The knowledge that this brought came with a wave of sadness. She looked gaunt, haunted even, in the picture and had died alone only a metre or so away from where Jack was sitting. It struck Jack as desperately unfair that she was gone and he was now alone in the same cave—even though there were years separating them he felt a desperate connection to this stranger from the past. Perhaps he was just so lonely now he would look on anyone with a deep sense of longing.

Suddenly curious he decided to see if there were any other pictures in the orb so reached out and touched the orb, careful not to disturb the image hovering above it, and pressed another of the buttons. Immediately the image wobbled and then disappeared and Jack was just about to see if he could get it back when it was replaced by another one. This was of the woman's face again but the angle was different, like she was looking down at the camera. Also, this image was moving and talking. Jack watched in rapt attention at the short film and scratchy audio track. It kept distorting and the speech was sometimes garbled but the power of her anguished voice was clear even through the tiny speaker.

*fourth day stuck here...left us behind and gone through the wall but the door
is now shut...running low on food*

*now and cannot find anything alive in the valley. Could go back to the town
but it is still burning and they're*

looting everywhere. Have to go back soon. Its so cold up here!

*...I hope they rot in hell the bastards...leaving us behind. Al and Jamie have
gone to find food from the*

*town...we can't go on like this, the pain its getting worse...think she has had a
dose...have to get the*

medication...

*no sign of them for days now, must be dead, I must be alone now...struggling
to keep alert but...wait...someone*

is down there...someone is coming...

*if you are seeing this then take the book back to...you need to know the
truth...make them pay for this...there is...*

The last message was also the worst to watch, although Jack forced himself to watch through the entirety of it again. He wondered if there were others in there or if the device had become so corrupt that was all he would ever get. Even once the cave was silent once more with the light and heat from the fire dying to a low ebb, Jack sat staring at the orb. He was holding it in his hand now,

cradling it, and was lost to a world not his own. She looked so terrified in the last messages and so near to death that she resembled the skeleton almost exactly.

Eventually Jack was roused by Seb who had come to sit next to him, paid no heed to the strange visions and was now getting restless because the fire had gone. He tickled her head for comfort and then reached out to fold her into a tight embrace. He might not have anyone else but at least he was not alone. The cold was starting to seep into his bones again so he knew it was time to stoke the fire and probably fetch some more wood for it. At least they were not in danger of running out of wood, he thought wryly, having a whole dead forest to work through. At the bottom of his pack was a small hatchet but he would have plenty of branches and easily snapped small dead trees to work through first before he had to resort to using it. Despite these thoughts, he did not move and simply sat staring into the growing gloom of the cave. The day was wearing on and soon it would be completely dark inside despite the valley clinging to the last light from the sun filtering through the thick cloud cover.

It wasn't until Seb had fallen asleep in his embrace and the temperature had dropped to a dangerous level did Jack finally begin to move. He had been shivering for a few minutes but was so lost to his surroundings it took some time to notice. His legs had gone quite numb in the cold and with the prolonged time sitting still so he had to shuffle awkwardly to one side to get the fire going again. Seb protested initially but then once the flames began to warm her fur she settled down again curled into a little ball by the hearth. Jack rubbed the circulation back into his legs and then suddenly he wanted to be out of the cave. Not wishing to disturb Seb he told her to stay and then stumbled out of the door to the small outcropping between the path and the cave entrance. He hugged his jacket around himself and stamped against the cold, breathing great plumes of moisture into the twilight. He wouldn't be able to stay out for long but wondered if they had enough wood to see off the sudden cold snap without having to get up in the night and get some more. There was just enough light left for him to make it down to the valley and get more wood but he wondered if he would actually be able to make the return journey, and in the end decided against such a venture. They could keep the fire on low and use the blanket and tarpaulins if it got too cold. In what little time he had left before the valley was fully enveloped in darkness he stood leaning against a large boulder at the side of the cave and surveyed the land before him. The town was really nothing more than a large town he thought, counting up the buildings that he could see in the gloom. Still it was massive compared to what he was used to and the crumpled buildings represented a wealth of human effort that he struggled to comprehend. Suddenly he wondered if his Uncle had passed this way. He knew that unlike Jack he had not always lived in the habitat and had come from some other place but had never told him where from. An extra level of chill passed through Jack in a ripple—what if his Uncle knew this woman here, what if he was one of the ones who had left her behind, sealed in the valley?

Picturing his Uncle's kindly, weathered face, Jack said 'NO' loudly to himself—his hoarse voice echoing briefly before getting lost to the forest below. He could not make himself believe that was true. His Uncle must have come from some other place...or some other time.

Chapter 7

After the evening standing out in the cold Jack was grateful to return to the relative warmth of the cave and curl up with Seb by the fire. He slept fitfully and all his dreams seemed to feature the woman from the video. Sometimes she was alive and sometimes an animated skeleton with terrible empty eyes.

Arising just before dawn he put the last of the wood on the fire and made a small hot breakfast and then set out to check the traps. He had already made his mind up in the night that they should be moving along today and decided that he would pack his bag before leaving the cave. The orb was wrapped carefully and placed in a waterproof bag along with his other electronic items. At least all of his gear was dry now, he reflected, although he had no idea how long it would stay that way. Finally with his bag set and the early morning light seeping in through to the cave he turned his attention to the weapon he had found with the body. He carried it carefully outside and told Seb to stay where she was for fear of it going off accidentally. After only a moment of examination he was able to remove the magazine and check its contents. It was empty and therefore no use to them. Wondering if the gun had actually been used in defence of the cave or somewhere else he checked around the entrance for any signs of bullets but if there had been any evidence it had long since vanished. The best thing to do, he decided, was to leave the weapon behind. He was unlikely to get any more ammunition for it and it would only be extra weight that he didn't need to carry. He put it on the table next to the large cooking pot, ready for the next person—if there ever would be anyone else—then shrugged, shouldered his bag and started the climb back down to the forest.

The morning was cold but he felt a curious sense of excitement as his boots touched the forest floor and even finding the traps were all empty could not quite dampen his mood. He was going to the town and all the mysterious promise contained within its tumble-down walls.

The road seemed to be easier going than before, perhaps because the forest had thinned a bit as he progressed and there were fewer trees blocking the way. They soon found themselves at the row of dwellings he had seen from near the stream. They were just empty roofless shells and gave little indication of what they used to be or who used to live there. Even though they were much newer than the cottage he had stayed in on the second night of his journey they seemed to have even less connection to him. There seemed to be little or no presence of humanity within the simple concrete walls. Jack didn't want to linger at the featureless ruin so instead strode out and down the valley. Every so often he would come across a lump of worked stone, concrete or twisted mass of metal. He had no idea what they were but clearly had been totally destroyed by some unknown force. The metal structures were always twisted, misshapen and half corroded so that they gave no indication of their previous use. Quite a lot of them were actually in the roadway and Jack wondered if they had been some kind of transportation, or maybe it was a fortification to block the road and prevent anyone from advancing on the town.

Coming to the crest of a low hill that sloped down to the outermost buildings, Jack soon realized that if they had been fortifications they had failed utterly. The devastation was even worse up close. Whereas in the forest there had begun a kind of regeneration with a few young trees and other hardy plants showing signs of life, this close to the town there was only death. Large pools of black water were surrounded by burned out houses and empty wasteland. There were not even any dead trees or signs that trees had ever existed here. The buildings had once stood proud of a marshland on a low-lying protrusion of rock but whatever bombardment had befallen them had also cracked the foundation stone and let the water come seeping in. The poison that had been laid down had then spread out into the marshes, killing all that it touched and leaving behind only water, mud and the sinking remains of human activity.

A causeway had once struck out across the march taking the roadway with it but now was badly torn to near oblivion. Jack wondered if it would be safe to cross, if the poison would still be bad enough to harm them and if there was any real point in going to the town at all. He felt a crushing defeat as his fantasies about what might be found were slowly trickling away. Now that he was down to the valley floor he could make out another way which appeared to lead around the marshland in a Northerly direction, a narrow pathway that hugged the foothills of the mountains and

disappeared into the haze.

Deciding to put off the decision until they were at least a little bit closer, Jack set off down the slope and away from the signs of life he had been clinging to. There certainly wouldn't be any food down here for him to trap and it was unlikely that the stream contained any fish for they would have all perished by now in the poisoned water. He came to a point near to the causeway where the waters from the stream mixed with marsh and his senses were immediately assaulted by the stench of ancient decay. The cool clear water from the stream was surging out into an oily blackness and getting lost among the mud banks. A small bridge, remarkably intact took the smaller road away and over the stream. Jack crossed it carefully and looked down toward the black bogged landscape in-front of him. He made his decision then and with a swift finality, pushed out the last hopeful fantasies and turned his back on the town.

Their progress was needfully slow due to the ever present danger of slipping off the path and down into the black pools below but it did not take too long before they had climbed up to a similar height of the low hill on the main roadway. Here they stopped and Jack turned to survey where they had come from, the wide opening of the valley with the town at its mouth, narrowing towards the old forest. He wondered if they should turn back to that forest now, with its promise that there might be rabbits or other game and not for the first time longed to be back in his old valley with its plentiful supply of food. Maybe going back to face whatever people had come into their valley would not be so bad; after all, he thought, the alternative might be starvation.

Shrugging off that thought he set out again on the winding path, climbing slowly along the side of the cliffs and up until they were high above the marshlands. One wrong foot here and he wouldn't have to worry about poison—the fall would surely finish him off. Soon he had rounded enough corners in the craggy folds of the mountains edge that the wooded valley was completely cut off and the town only visible when they rounded bends. Still feeling a conflicted sense of disappointment and relief about being robbed the opportunity to explore the ruins he did his best to ignore any sight of it—it was his own fears that had kept him away from the place, fears of poison but also an underlying mistrust in the past. He was getting used to coming across relics of a bygone civilization but with every revelation that presented itself there seemed to be more to dislike. Throughout his journey down and then away from the town he couldn't get the image of that woman's face out of his mind. Were her friends somewhere still within the walls, entombed there for all time, or had they perished and disappeared long ago? Making a concentrated effort he focussed on the path ahead and where it might be leading them. Thus far it seemed to be a monotonous journey disappearing into the haze of the middle distance. On one side there were the craggy foothills of the mountain range that he had come through and on the other was the wide open, decaying bog that seemed to be sapping the life out of the land around. He could not see the other side and wondered how large it would be. Surely such a feature like that would be on some kind of map, he thought suddenly, and found a suitable place just off the path to stop and open his Solarpedia to look for some maps. His Uncle had once said that it used to be able to find its location within the land, that all the devices used to be tracked and monitored but now it was impossible to get a precise fix. Jack lost an hour trying to find out where they were before giving up in disgust. It contained lots of information but much of it was of no use to their current situation so as soon as the cold started to seep into his fingers as they clutched the device he decided to put it away and move along. They would have to find some kind of shelter soon and Jack wondered if it would be worth clambering up into the hills away from the path—it would mean going back in an Easterly direction for a time but since the way West was blocked by the expanse of dead marshes he was wondering if they had any choice in the matter. Go into the hills to the East and try to find some shelter, or perhaps some life amongst the scrubby grasses and stunted trees or carry on North and risk being still on the road when night fell. Jack decided they had not quite come far enough away from the town to make his encampment secure—

even though they had seen no sign of pursuit for days—so he set out up the path again and carried on going until the buildings were completely lost to the haze.

They had probably gone too far that day and darkness was already creeping in before they found a suitable place to camp. It was a little bit away from the road which had itself turned slightly inland away from the marsh and was threading its way through some low rolling hills. Everywhere seemed to be covered in a strange type of grass that he was not familiar with but never-the-less appeared to be mostly hardy to the conditions, even though there were still large patches of frozen muddy earth, bare of all life. Jack was careful to skirt around these patches as he sought out a campsite and eventually settled for a small hollow between several small bushes. They seemed to still have some life in them but were not evergreen so had lost any leaves they might once have had and were instead in a kind of dormant state, waiting for warmth and sunshine to bring them back to full glory. Despite this, they did provide a shelter from the wind and somewhere to set up the tarpaulins that would from now-on make up their sleeping accommodation.

Even though the path was now cutting between hills instead of along the side of the marshlands it had resolutely stuck to a Northerly direction and Jack was encouraged by the fact that the dead expanse appeared not to be eternal. There might yet be a way to turn back in a Westerly direction and come out on the other side. Not that he was even sure if going West was still something they should be aiming for. Perhaps the North would be just as suitable a direction to take to get away from the scouts of the unknown army that threatened them. They didn't even know what they were looking for, he reflected as they munched through a bit of dry rations and sipped on the now precious clean water, but then maybe sticking to these ancient roads and paths was the wrong thing to be doing. Surely if they were following him they would take the same routes? Maybe he needed to strike out away from the road, find some quiet valley that was still alive and settle there. That night the wind and rain stayed mercifully away and he drifted off to sleep full of fantasies about a lush valley, hidden in the mountains with no threat and ample food.

Chapter 8

Resolving to follow his fantasies at the earliest possible convenient moment, Jack set off the next day as soon as it was light enough to make out where they were going. They would go North on the road for at time, he decided, and then strike out off the road in a Westerly direction. Hopefully they would be far enough away from the marshland that they would still find a decent place to camp, and then once they were on the other side it would be a nice barrier between them and their pursuers. All that morning he clung to the idea that there would be some kind of beautiful valley on the other side of the marshlands but knew in the back of his mind that his was incredibly unlikely. How could anywhere escape the devastation of this land? Even the habitat was only in a tiny pocket of life, and was only really able to sustain them because of its ample reserves buried deep in the hillside. They had added to this in the later years by growing crops and trapping some of the local wildlife but the yields were still low, the rates of disease among the animals still high. To set up again in an entirely new untouched valley would be almost impossible, but he was determined to keep going until they found something. In truth he had no reason to keep on running unless he believed that they were running toward something that was better than what they had now.

By mid afternoon they had passed through a copse of dead trees and were back into rolling country again. There had been no further signs of human habitation since they had lost sight of the town on the edge of the marshes and even the road here was little more than a well-worn furrow between the hills. Probably the only thing that had kept it clear all these years was the lack of any kind of proper forest or vegetation to fill the hollow—whatever had once been on its surface as a roadway was

long since worn away by the weather. At least here the ground was semi-frozen so they had no trouble making good progress, unlike the cloying heathland that butted up to the great black wall.

The only sound was of their own making and Jack suddenly realized he had not heard any birds since the buzzard had broken his reverie back in his own home valley. They must be heading out into worse country he thought glumly where everything had been wiped out. He wouldn't care if the animals here were diseased, as long as there were some, but it did not seem likely as they shuffled through the endless rolling hills. After the open vistas of the valleys he had come through these hills felt claustrophobic, like it he was walking along the surface of a giant duvet and it would only take a little bit more weight for him to sink into it with the hills closing over the top of his head. He kicked out at the scrub grass in frustration, and to create some more sounds so they would not feel alone, but even that was deadened by the landscape, muffled and subdued.

As they walked that day they the muddy terrain slowly gave way to a more rocky landscape and by the time they had gone as far North as Jack felt was necessary it was clear they had been climbing back into a mountainous area again. The peaks here remained on the Eastern side but the rest of the area was also at a relatively high elevation. Jack could feel the cold air stinging his lungs as he breathed, gasping a little with the exertion of the fast march he had set and the increase in altitude compared to what he was used to. Going further North from this point would take them back into a high country which he was just starting to make out through the low cloud. It appeared to be even more stark than the mountains he had crossed thus far and from what he could tell the peaks were wreathed in a thick snow cover. Icy blasts of wind were coming in waves from the path ahead and buffeting them as they rested and ate. Taking advantage of the increased visibility Jack took his scope out and examined the path they had taken through the low hills. They were now high enough to see the hills in almost their entirety and just at the edge of the scopes range he could make out the crumpled spires of the town. It was now even more apparent that whatever had befallen it was even more severe than he had at first surmised and from this angle it appeared that the shelf of rock which contained the town had been tipped slightly on its side, almost as if it were a tray and someone was trying to empty the town into the boggy marsh as you would crumbs into a bin.

The marshlands were flat, black and featureless from this viewpoint but he could see now that they did come to an end and a route was presenting itself almost due West around the top of them, following a rocky plateaux that formed a barrier between the mountains to the North and the marshlands below. To the East there were more mountains and somewhere contained within them was his home valley, habitat and all the food they had been preserving just in case a code snap. Jack stomach was empty now and the thought of all that food simply rotting in the remains of its storage containers made him angry. Looking at those mountains now he wondered if there was a way they could circle back around and come down from the North over the peaks which he had tunnelled through but as soon as he came up with the thought he dismissed it. Whatever force had sent the scouting party would no-doubt be in that valley now. Thinking of them now Jack turned his gaze back to the low hills and the citadel and an extra chill ran up his spine. There was movement. The lens was not powerful enough to pick out detail but in the sterile landscape anything moving drew his attention immediately. Several black shapes were creeping along the road now away from the citadel. He was lucky to spot them because no sooner than he had they turned a corner and were lost in the folds of the cliff-edge, just as Jack had been the day before. Then there was nothing to see. He waited for them to re-appear on one of the bits of the path that he could make out clearly but nothing came. Were they hiding now? Watching him?

They were only a day behind him again and he cursed having wasted so much time in the cave, despite the warm dry clothes that he was now wearing. He also felt terribly exposed and was crouching now while glancing about furtively. The path was leading North and into the high

mountains. Once there it disappeared and could either go through them as before, or over a mountain pass. Either way would be a great place to get trapped, or to freeze to death on the climb. Jack considered his clothing and decided that he did not have anything warm or strong enough to survive a trek over the top of the peaks and he could not risk getting trapped up there. That left going East and trying to return to the valley, or going West and facing being out on the open plateaux when his pursuers finally came to this point in the road and could survey the world as he could. Keep going West, a small voice inside him said, and he knew it was the best option. He would have to move fast though so quickly strapped his bag up tightly so nothing would jangle loose, secured the rifle, took a sip of their much depleted water and gave a bit to Seb before setting off at a low loping run Westward away from the road.

He managed to keep up the pace for an hour or so before having to stop for their first rest. After the years of hunting and working with his Uncle he was lithe and fit but the cold and past few days of poor nutrition were starting to take their toll. He sank down to the ground and managed to get his breath back to something like normal even though the air was burning his lungs now and his throat was ragged. Allowing himself only minutes of rest before taking a sip of the water, he set off again at a slightly reduced pace but still moving quickly. He had already decided that they would keep moving right up to the point where light failed them completely and then make a simple camp of just sheltering together under the tarpaulin.

They were moving quickly but blessed by the terrain for once, it was hard and rocky. Almost unnaturally flat, as if some great force had come and scooped off the topsoil to leave only bedrock and a sprinkling of loose stones.

The wind had clearly ravaged this open landscape and collected some of the smaller stones into low dunes but they were seldom high enough that Jack couldn't step over them in one stride. It was an eerie place and his footsteps boomed out for all to hear as they ran but were taken away with nothing to echo off and vanished into the thin drifts of mist that curled and whipped around with a mind of their own.

Jack hoped that they would make it far enough so nobody would be able to see them, hoped that the mist would thicken so they could hide, or that the people behind him would slip down to the bog and sink like the town. Running did not occupy his mind enough, it was too routine, and as they progressed along the plateaux he fantasized all sorts of terrible fates for the people who had killed his Uncle. He did not make any distinction between the lone scout and the people now in the valley behind him and in his mind they all had the same face, the same armour, the same murderous intent.

They pressed on at a relentless pace for another four hours, stopping every hour to rest, until the gloom of the evening was thick around them. After stumbling to his knees for the third time Jack reluctantly decided it was time to make a camp. He cast about in the darkness and found a particularly large mound of stones and then set out his tarpaulins on the Westward side. The one he had got off the skeleton was almost the same grey as the rock so he put that on top, and then the other one underneath in case they had rain in the night. Then, exhausted beyond the point of reason he rolled himself up under the sheet, dragged Seb inside and fell almost immediately into a deep sleep. Seb was awake for a few minutes more, nuzzling up under the chin of her master for comfort.

The night did not bring rain as Jack had feared but it brought a different change to the landscape. Jack woke to find the tarpaulin bowed and pressed down on his cheeks with an icy touch. He shivered despite the layers he had put on the night before and knew that he would have to get up now or might freeze right there. Struggling to get his muscles to move he pushed the suddenly heavy tarpaulin to one side and poked his head out.

Snow was falling in big grey flakes like he had never seen before. Staring in wonderment and without thinking first he opened his mouth to taste one. It was foul, tasted like burnt plastic and he suddenly felt a panic. Reaching back to his pack he pulled out the spectrometer and checked. The longest moment passed while the device did its work and when it came back with a green light Jack let out a long ragged sigh. It tasted foul but was not unduly harmful. In fact, the thick curtain of flakes were ideal cover and would provide a boost for their drinking water...he would just have to stomach the bad taste. Smirking at yet another turn of good fortune he roused Seb and set about packing up the makeshift camp.

He was halfway through the work when he heard a crumpling noise followed by a thud. Immediately they flattened down behind the pile of stones which was now even higher with the thickening snow. Jack pulled his rifle to a defensive position and breathlessly checked it was loaded, ready to fire. Raising his head just above their defences he strained into the falling snow to see anything. Another explosion sounded out, this one perhaps a little closer and was followed by a wind carrying acrid smoke that buffeted the relentless grey flakes. All Jack could think about was the habitat and in a maddening moment of delirium he fancied they were back in the forest again staring down at the remains of their home. A third blast and then a rattle of gunfire brought him swiftly out of his reverie and he cowered down, shaking from the cold and from the creeping fear that was enveloping him.

There was silence for a long moment and he did not dare move a muscle. Expecting someone to come jumping over the snow drift at any moment to attack. After a few minutes that seemed like hours with nothing happening, Jack risked moving. He pulled his pack closer. Did a hasty check of it and awkwardly strapped it to his back while still in a semi prone position. The scuffling of his boots and equipment in the snow sounded terrifyingly loud but he persisted until they were ready to flee if necessary. He finished his efforts by jamming his Uncle's hat down over his head to keep the snow off that had melted into his hair giving his face a grey streaked look. He pulled Seb close, ready to give the command to run and then looked out over the plateaux. Visibility was down to about fifty metres and he could not see anything but suspected the sound was carrying from much further away.

There was a sudden shout, perhaps four or five voices calling out together and then another rattle of gunfire followed by three whumping blasts that were something in between the large explosions from before and the small arms fire. This was followed by silence and then a wailing, blood curdling, cry lasting for minutes until eventually a single shot brought it all to an end.

Jack stayed silent, unmoving for half an hour and strained to hear or see any movement, but there was nothing except the falling snow. Dawn had come in fully during the firefight but the thick cloud meant it was still a gloomy twilight. Jack decided to make a move before it got any brighter, or the weather broke and he would be visible again. Moving as quietly as he could he led them away and ever Westwards. He gave a silent thanks again to the weather that was quickly covering their tracks but hoped it would not persist for too long. Walking would get increasingly difficult as the snow thickened.

Soon his trousers and boots were sodden from pushing through the snow and everything was

streaked with grey ash left behind where the flakes had melted. Finishing one of the water bottles Jack had reluctantly filled it with

some of the snow from the ground and it was now inside his jacket melting to something like drinking water. At least they would not suffer from thirst, even if they only had a few more days of food left.

They pushed on and soon Jack could feel the ground rising again, not that he could see well enough to be certain at first but they increasingly found themselves slipping down and he realized they must finally be at the edge of the plateaux. The running across it the evening before must have done the trick and it was about midday they found themselves back into some kind of rolling hill country. No sign of any more vegetation here though, just a change from hard flat rock to semi-frozen mud underneath the snow. The cold was pervasive and much of his clothing was sodden once again so when they took a moment to rest at what he thought might be the crest of the

highest hill so far although really was nothing more than one of many dune-like peaks all the same, he soon started shivering violently. A fire was needed again, he thought wryly, but where would they get wood from around here? Better to press on and find some more wooded country.

Despite the cold wind that was now blowing the snow sideways across their path Jack forced himself to stop and listen, cupping his ears against the freezing onslaught. For many moments he was still, trying not to shiver too violently, trying to hear the sound of pursuers who may or may not be following. There was no sound to be heard and Jack was at once encouraged and disturbed—he did not know what had happened on the plateaux and the ignorance troubled him.

By mid afternoon the snow had come down so thick that he was pushing through it at knee level. It was hanging together in a slushy mess and had not fully frozen to the ground so he frequently found himself slipping. Seb had no choice but to follow the channel formed behind him. It would take a heavy fall of snow to hide the tracks they were making now but Jack was hoping that whomever had been behind him was either dead or had gone on towards the North where the road was. Camping that night was not going to be a pleasant affair, he would have to find a way to wrap them up so as not to get wet from above or below.

They had walked all day through the featureless landscape; combined with the exertions from the day before and the excitement from the morning Jack was once again exhausted by late afternoon. The snow had now thinned and he could see a bit further but there was no let up from the wind which was howling across the drifts and whipping them up into flurries. Also the increased visibility brought no more cheer to him as he surveyed the bleak landscape that he was now in. All of the small rocks or features that might have once populated the hills were obliterated by the grey carpet of ashen snow. If there were any bushes or other life it was now buried but Jack had come to the conclusion that this was a dead place, and one to get through as quickly as possible. He realized though that they were not going to get out of it in one day and sank down to his knees, turning his back to the wind to block it out a bit with his pack. They rested for up to an hour before he felt the emotional and physical strength to continue and once they were back on the trail again progress was painfully slow. The cold air was hurting his lungs again and the effort to push through the snow was making his leg muscles ache and burn. He was driven on by an insane fear of what lay behind him and a determination to conquer, to beat this terrible landscape and come out to something better.

He was clinging to the hope that there had to be something better as he made their miserable camp by rolling the tarpaulins together in a hollow he had carved into the snow. It was damp and cold and they spent most of the darkness huddled and shivering together. He barely slept at all and

simply lay in the cold darkness listening to the wind howl, whistle and bluster across the top of the snow.

Chapter 10

Morning brought no change in the weather and the next day was set to be overcast, windy and cold. At least there was no fresh snow coming down and the wind was whipping up the existing layers to reduce visibility so nobody would be able to see them or their tracks until they were quite close. It was scant comfort, Jack thought, as he checked the compass reading and struck out due West through the snow. They made slow progress and he was worried they were not moving quickly enough to escape the dead lands before they ran out of food.

They slipped and stumbled down one slope before facing another and with each one they seemed to get steeper but in reality it was just that they were getting more tired. There was no end to the undulating land and at the crest of each rise Jack would stop, catch his breath, draw out his scope and scan all around. Nothing was moving now except the two of them and the flurries of snow.

At about lunchtime while they stopped to drink some of the foul meltwater and eat a miniature meal the weather turned and wispy snowflakes started to fall. The wind had been dropping all morning and now the snow seemed to hang in the air, floating with an almost unnatural slowness before it settled into a fresh layer atop the existing grey slush. They resumed their walk and as Jack pushed through the air the snow tumbled into a turbulent dance behind him, twisting in a thousand directions before scuttling on the ground. Another time it might have been beautiful to watch them but the only eyes looking in that direction were Seb's and she had only enough wit to follow behind her master obediently.

Jack had given up holding the rifle out for defence, it would only get damaged as he tumbled to the ground on the slippery descents or scabbled up the inclines, so he had stowed it back on the side of his pack. He had pulled a pair of gloves out of the pack but they were soon sodden and provided little benefit to the cold. His feet could not remember a time when they were dry and the only thing keeping them from crying out in pain was the numbness that was claiming Jack's extremities. If they stopped for any length of time now he was afraid they would never get up again and was not looking forward to the night ahead.

It was not until well into the afternoon that Jack made his terrible discovery. For about an hour they had been hearing the sound of water on and off, carried by the currents in the air. It had cheered him simply because it was something different, something to look forward to. Further lifted by the snow stopping and a vague brightness coming back to the sky he was in relatively good spirits as they tramped up yet another rise only to find that this one did not slope gently down like the others. The other side of this hill was a steep bank slipping quickly down to a stream thrashing its way through a rocky bed. On the far side of the stream the land was flatter and then rose up to a more rocky terrain. It would be easy to cross the stream using all the large boulders that were in its bed, but more than that, the prospect of having some cool clear water to drink instead of the disgusting melted snow made Jack laugh out loud. The noise started Seb and she cowered, looking about to see if she was going to have to run or fight. Jack tickled her ears and muttered to her reassuringly and then set out for the stream with a broad smile.

Kneeling down beside the water he lowered his pack and then set about digging around inside it to find the waterproof bag that contained his electronic items to get the spectrometer and test the water...but it wasn't there. In a mad fit of panic Jack emptied all the contents of the pack onto the

slushy bank of the stream scattering pellets for his rifle and tossing his few remaining dry clothes down to the damp ground. Everything was laid out before him. His fire kit, his food, the clothing, tarpaulins, rifle and hunting knife. But no Solarpedia no spectrometer and no battery. Even the orb he had found in the cave was missing.

Jack could not comprehend what had happened and for long moments simply stared at the remains of his belongings scattered on the ground. He did not want to admit that in the confusion of the firefight the day before he had left them lying in the snow, covered no-doubt by a fresh layer. He shook his head and then sank to his knees. A wave of sobs racked his body and he bowed his head down into his hands mixing tears with streaks of grey from the snow giving his young face a sudden pallid look like he had aged fifty years in a moment. He had no idea how he was going to survive without the ability to test water or food samples and then he laughed with a manic burst of self loathing—he would have no need to test food samples because there was no food. The forced mirth dissipated quickly and left him feeling empty. Worst of all he had taken the orb from the cave with its record of the life of that woman and then carelessly discarded it. It was a betrayal, a desecration to her memory. Somehow even though the orb was of no use to him for survival that betrayal seemed to be the worst thing he had done. It took on an almost physical quality and made him sick.

With a mechanical despondency Jack packed up the remains of his belongings and made sure this time there was nothing left lying in the snow. He felt a sense of despair, a careless abandonment now and poured out the foul water from his pack, scooped up a new load from the stream and drank deeply. Let the poison take me, he thought and then cried it out. Shouting to the snow and the stream and to Seb who had shuffled back and was eyeing him warily. Let it poison me and end this hateful journey, he muttered again and then took another deep swig from his bottle.

The water was cool, ice cold, and refreshing with a vaguely peaty taste to it. After a minute there was no sign of illness so Jack waited. An hour passed and nothing. Perhaps this would be OK, Jack thought eventually, perhaps he could just risk the poison and come out lucky. Rested and even invigorated by his new careless attitude he stood, shouldered the pack and brought Seb up close. She gratefully drank on his command and once they were both satiated it was time to move on.

Instead of heading directly West now, Jack thought he would take a slight Northerly direction and follow the course of the stream. Maybe his luck would hold and they would stumble across something upstream that could bolster their meagre food reserves.

Camp that night was little better than the night before but they did find some rocky outcroppings which meant he could stretch one tarpaulin out so it wasn't so claustrophobic. The night brought a welcome warming to the weather—only by a few degrees but it was enough to start melting the snow. All they could hear as they drifted to sleep was the running stream, the trickle and drip of water everywhere. The wind had changed too and was blowing from the South but with it came a foul stench of rotting decay mixed with the vaguest hint of burning. Jack tried to breath through his nose because the odour on the wind gave him a horrible taste a the back of his throat. He found that he was drinking more and more of the water to take the taste away and to fill up his stomach. After a while the cold water started to give him cramps so he forced himself to stop and put up with the foul taste.

When they arose in the morning the Southerly wind had brought in a thick foul smelling smog that had reduced visibility and made him choke if he breathed in too hard. Wetting a cloth in the stream he wrapped it around his face and even though it was warmer—it could have only barely been into double figures—he shivered at the application of the cold mask. It brought welcome relief to the atmosphere though. The meltwater was swelling the stream and they would have to make a move soon or get swamped by it, not that there was any need for any kind of ceremony over breakfast.

Without the ability to make a fire, Jack softened some of the dried rations in the water from the stream and then just chewed through them. It might have been his imagination but he was sure that Seb was looking half starved, she had always been a fit dog but now it seemed as though there was just a little too much rib on show. He gave her an extra bit of food, not that it would make much difference, he reflected, they would only have a few more days left anyway.

The stream was still running mostly clear but where the snow had laid upon the ground around it a slushy grey deposit had been left, like the remains of a massive fire. It gave the land a strange feel and sat atop mud or rock alike, not really mixing at all but ready to slide out as soon as any pressure was applied. They made careful progress up beside the stream and on until a point where the land to the West flattened and opened up. The mist made it impossible to decide which direction to take and Jack was weary from making decisions that led to nowhere so for many moments he simply stood, turning from one direction to the other. Westward had been their direction from the outset, but the stream was coming down from the North. Thinking that they could always double back and pick up the stream later he filled all of their bottles and then set out back in their original direction. The terrain was undulating in much the same way it had been on previous days, a series of frozen muddy dunes, but there were more moraines and scatterings of stones for them to pass which initially meant they felt like they were making faster progress but soon he couldn't tell one moraine from the next. By midday the snow had almost completely gone so they could see the features of this muddy land for the first time and as he had feared there was no vegetation hiding under the snow, it was all mud, rock and now grey sooty pools slowly seeping away. The whole land seemed to be trickling and bubbling as the water drained down to some unseen layer or ran off in little rivulets down to the larger pools.

Without the compass which Jack had now strapped firmly to his jacket they would have been completely lost. The fog was now so thick it obscured all but the nearest rocks and pools and was stinging his eyes as they pushed through it. The rag over his face was doing nothing to keep out the foul smell, even though it was stopping him from choking, he would often have to take it off and bend over to retch and cough. There must be something foul carried in the mist he thought, and longed for a proper mask like they hanging up in the storeroom back at the habitat. He had played with them as a child until his Uncle found him and told him off, then seeming to change his mind in an instant, instructed him on their proper fitment and use. After that he would sometimes drill Jack and send him rushing down to the nearest locker, to pull on a mask and chemical suit, all the while he would count out the seconds. If Jack was too slow his Uncle would snort in disappointment and pull a sour expression or make some comment and if he did it quickly enough there was no encouragement, just a silent nod. What Jack would give for that silent nod now. Tears from the acerbic air and his own musings mixed together and streamed down his face, leaving streaks in the grey ash from the days before. He pulled the cloth up higher and secured it with a knot at the back then carried on stumbling through the smog.

When night-time finally darkened the grey mist to blackness they it seemed as though they had hardly travelled any distance. They had stumbled near to the edge of the muddy wasteland but Jack had no idea and no vision of what lay ahead. Instead he crawled coughing and choking into a ball and then pulled the tarpaulin around them to give a small pocket of cleaner air to breath. He didn't really sleep so much as fade in and out of consciousness, racked by alternate coughing fits and bouts of shivering in the cold. He could feel his energy slipping away into the sooty pools and seeping into the ground, he was sinking into a muddy world where everything tasted burnt and the only sound was his hoarse rasping breath.

The next day brought them little relief from the smog which now seemed to cling to everything coating it all in a foul slimy layer. Jack was forced to wrap the cloth all the way over his face and make some small slits for his eyes but still the air stung them. They were now red, swollen and angry from the exposure, his nose and ears streaming as his body tried desperately to expel the fumes carried by the foggy air. Trying to keep it off him was impossible but he tried to at least protect his nose and mouth. Even Seb who had gone through the previous day without too much trouble was starting to show signs that the toxins were working in her body too; her nose was streaming and she kept coughing and sneezing. Jack had nothing he could offer her except to stroke her head and mutter some words of comfort that he could not quite believe.

Once awake, Jack did not waste time on breakfast. He stuffed a small amount of food in his mouth, wrapped up his face and chewed it slowly as they made their way Westward, trying to block out the foul taste. The wind seemed to have died down now and the fog was simply hanging over the landscape. Perhaps the way out would be to find some high ground, Jack thought, but his eyes could not see far through the mist and his own tears. He pulled another layer of cloth over his face and stumbled forward, coughing and wheezing. It would not be long before they were unable to continue and Jack wondered if they should simply lie down, cover their faces with as much cloth as they dared and try to wait it out. He wondered if their wrappings were actually doing anything to keep out the toxins though and felt a despondency that if they stopped now they would never get back up again. Although progress was stumblingly slow, at least they were moving and hopefully toward something better. Some pocket of clean air that was waiting for them ahead.

By the afternoon no pocket had appeared and they were now in an almost delirious state. Believing the air was cleaner down at the ground, and because he was sick of falling over, Jack had started to crawl on all fours alongside Seb, sometimes even using her for support. His knees were shredded slick with mud and battered from the rocks he kept crawling into, his hands were numb to the pain but never-the-less torn and bruised. He paid no heed to his body, ignoring the pain, blotting out the coarse scratchy feeling in his lungs and throat, closing his stinging eyes. Jack did not know what force it was that was propelling him forward but it seemed to go beyond reason, a mechanical drive that kept putting one knee in front of the other over and over. He would pause only to check that they were going in the right direction and then they would be back to the crawl. Hand over hand, knee over knee, coughing and rasping their way forward.

It was like this this they eventually came to the edge of another stream, although Jack had been so intent on the effort of propelling himself forward he paid little heed to the sounds of rushing water ahead. It wasn't until his hands sunk into a brown sandy bank did he look up in startlement to see the rushing water only metres in front of him. Driven by the pain and discomfort streaming from his eyes he immediately sprang forward and plunged his head deep into the cold water. No longer was he worried about the water being toxic, not straight away, how could it be worse than the air around them. It was cold though, bitterly, and the shock of it snapped him to his senses for a moment. The mist had been thinning, he realized suddenly, they were in such a bad way they had hardly the ability to notice. Now, clearing the fog from his eyes with the freezing water he could see almost clearly. The stream was big, fast flowing, almost a river and had a sandy bank stretching out either side of him, across the water was a bundle of boulders. It reminded him very much of the first river he had crossed on his journey, but there were no trees here, only rock, mud and sand.

Without realizing it they had crawled down a long low slope and were actually underneath the thickest fog. It was hanging a few metres above the water like an impossibly low cloud but Jack wasn't about to question the reasons for it, he was just relieved that they could breathe with some sense of normality, although there was still enough of the toxin in the air and in their bodies to force him into bouts of coughing that would double him up and sometimes cause him to retch, his stomach bringing up nothing but pain. The cool water was like a tonic filling them with a new

energy and now he had to decide where they would go next. Westward was across the water but that would take them up into the fog again and he had no plans to do that any time soon. The stream was flowing South like the previous one and he wondered if they should follow it to the North for a spell. Maybe it would come from some mountains and they would be able to climb out above the mist.

Standing was still too close to the low cloud for comfort so Jack carried on his crawl, this time up the side of the stream, leaving an odd trail carved in the sand. Progress was slow and it as it was looking likely that they would have to spend the night on the bank, Jack cut his losses, chose a relatively flat section and made their camp. As before he crawled under the tarpaulin and fell into delirious half-sleep broken by coughing fits, he hugged his hands and feet close in to this body and shivered. In the conscious moments that night he began to worry about them, they had been too cold and too wet for so long that he couldn't remember feeling his fingers or toes fully. As he hugged them the circulation came back in slowly but not fully, and with it came white hot pain shooting through him. It was enough to disturb his sleep but not enough to keep him entirely awake and he drifted into unconsciousness frequently through the night, his body bereft of its once ample energy reserves.

The next morning he awoke with a start, the day was already well underway and he had slept through dawn—finally slipping into a deep sleep just before light brightened the fog. Now it was as light as it was ever likely to get and something had brought him to consciousness with a jolt. The stream had swollen in the night and was dangerously high, but it was not that which had brought him out of sleep. Seb as crouched next to him, ears

pricked back and alert. He scrambled to a kneeling position, clawing the covers off his body and face and then they listened together. Something was coming up the stream from the South and before he had time to think about panic, or action, a man was upon them.

He was dressed in the same suit as the scout had with a helmet and had a mask down over his face. Although he had clearly been following Jack's trail he stopped in apparent surprise at the sight of them, then shouted something in a language that Jack did not understand and raised a pistol in his left hand. The pistol made a couple of clicking noises causing the man to curse and then throw it down on the sand, in doing so he pulled a long knife out of his belt and started toward them. Dressed as he was his body was featureless in the mist, a silhouette, but Jack could clearly make out that this man was a giant, easily half a metre taller than himself. He also appeared to be moving strangely, his right arm almost limp at his side as he danced and weaved up the bank. Jack suddenly realized that the man thought he might have a weapon but in truth his rifle was wrapped up, unloaded, and his only knife buried safely in the rucksack. He could only defend with it and so picked up the pack now ready to swing.

At this movement the man changed his approach and rushed quickly toward them, Jack was caught by surprise but Seb was not. Turning to pure instinct she had transformed into a wild animal with teeth bared, her ears flat back against her head, she dived at the man tearing his legs with her powerful jaw. The man stumbled then, but the suit appeared to have taken the worst of the bite and he quickly regained his footing then lashed out at Seb, first with the knife which she dodged and then with his boot, catching her high on the shoulder. For a sickening moment she flew sideways and then crumpled into some boulders and didn't get up. Without any heed to rational thought, Jack uttered a guttural cry, a wail of fury, and rushed the man then. More by luck than design this move took their attacker by surprise and Jack managed to get up and under the knife before it came to bear. He had never been in a fight before and knew nothing of how to act but was working purely on rage and fear. The force of his charge knocked the man down, who was already off balance from kicking Seb and now flailed on his back with Jack on top of him.

Jack had little strength left to hold the man who pushed him off roughly and brought the knife up again for another attempt. They were both wheezing now in the cold foul air and while Jack was smaller he was also younger, fitter and probably better fed. The man did not appear to have any pack or food rations with him and was moving in a way now to protect his right-hand side. Jack could see the suit had formed a protective bond over his arm there and wondered if he had suffered a similar wound to the scout, with the suit holding him together. He was shouting something at Jack now from behind the mask but it was all words that he did not understand so all he could do was breathlessly shake his head, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on the blade. As they circled they came upon the makeshift camp, Jack was backing away a bit and suddenly tripped over something long and hard. It was his rifle, half buried by the tarpaulin but he could just make out the end of it. The man had obviously spotted it too and they both moved together, Jack diving to the ground to get the gun and his attacker lunging forward with the knife. The blade came in a swift stabbing motion that pierced Jack's clothing and scraped along the side of his rib-cage but was mercifully off its target. With another howl, this time of pain and anger, Jack swung the rifle around as hard as he could, gripping the end and using the butt as a club. It worked better than he was expecting and found the side of the man's helmet, the force going through to his head with a sickening crunch. Immediately he dropped the knife and staggered then appeared to reach out to Jack, the blank mask of his face at a crooked angle, before walking backwards a few steps and falling into the stream. Now he was half floating in the flow which was tugging at him, a long red rivulet coming from his head and mixing with the ash grey floodwater. Remembering the scout and how he must have recovered Jack realized he couldn't take the risk that this man might wake up so he walked into the shallows and started to push at his boots. The body twisted and writhed in the water as if there might still be some life left in it so Jack pushed harder until it was in the fastest part of the stream and began to get carried away, following its bloody trail downstream.

The gun was almost totally destroyed with a bent shaft and twisted stock but Jack dropped it to the floor without even giving it a glance. He was focussed on Seb now and ran up to her prone body. She was still breathing but there was blood in her mouth that had trickled down and was matting her fur. Without wanting to distress her any further Jack moved her off the rock and onto one of the tarpaulins laid out on the sand. There was a welt on her shoulder where the man's boot had scraped some of the fur off and on the side of her head a large lump. The blood appeared to be from where she had bitten her tongue but he was unsure if it was anything internal. Getting one of his shirts from the bag he dampened it and cleaned off the blood, wiping her face and body. She breathed deeply but did not wake up. Jack sank down beside her with the adrenaline wearing off he sobbed into her fur, rubbed her head and babbled nonsense through his tears.

In the quiet stillness that followed, with only their ragged breathing and the gurgling of the stream, Jack suddenly became aware of his own injuries. First a throbbing pain and then a searing agony every time he moved, as if the knife was going into his left side again and again. He knew he would have to bandage the wound but was terrified to disturb it and invite more pain in. Eventually reason prevailed and he found his cleanest shirt and a small kit of bandages in the bottom of his bag. Stripping off to his waist revealed how gaunt he had become, with blisters and sores on his arms from the crawling and ribs clearly visible through the taut flesh. He immediately thought of the skeleton in the cave and smirked irrationally at the thought he was just a skeleton walking around, dead but refusing to admit it. The wound was not deep, but it was a long gash going from his

front almost to the back under his arm at about the level of his elbow. Clotting had already started but with the removal of his shirt it had opened up again and was weeping his life down to his belt in a crimson wave. Using the stream as his only source of water and hoping it was clean enough he removed as much of the blood as possible and then took out a bottle from the medicine bag. He had used this stuff before and was not looking forward to it, but it would help to disinfect and seal the

wound. Tensing he lifted his arm, was rewarded with a shooting pain as his ribs expanded and then sprayed a line of the fluid across the gash. This brought another searing shot of pain that made him cry out and whimper but he persisted and did another line. Already it was congealing the blood, forming a coating which he wrapped in a bandage for further protection. There was no pain relief in his kit so he simply had to wrap it up, put on a clean shirt and then try not to move as the waves of pain slowly subsided to a manageable level. Then it was back to Seb's side and to the waiting. The physical pain had dried his eyes, brought him to a cold grey reality, and now he simply sat with his hand on her head, kept the compress cool with fresh water and waited.

Chapter 12

They spent the rest of that day sitting beside the slowly receding flood waters. Jack had gathered and sorted his belongings into a camp around Seb. He even retrieved the pistol that the man had been carrying but after a brief inspection he tossed it into the water, it would be of no use to him. He also put the rifle to one side along with the ammunition for it, there was no point in carrying the extra weight of a broken weapon. If they did ever come across a source of meat he would have to improvise another way to catch and kill it. The knife might prove to be useful, it was long and wicked looking with a dull black blade that seemed to absorb light but gave nothing in return. Jack put it to one side and then strapped his hunting knife to his belt. It would be no use if it was in his pack but he had no way of strapping the new knife there so he resolved to carry it out and ready.

The rest of the pack was looking meagre, pathetic even, a bit of food left some cooking equipment languishing in the bottom, then his increasingly ragged clothing then some snares and a small tin with line and fish-hooks. He still had the ability to make fire, if they ever found any more dry fuel, and his compass was secure but apart from that they had no other devices, no other technology. Even the relatively isolated habitat they had plenty of labour saving devices, their own electricity supply, gadgets and comforts. All of that was a long way off now though and here his most precious possessions were ones that would keep him warm, or keep him alive.

Although his ribs protested at the pain, he had struggled into another layer of clothing. Without the heat generated from walking, or crawling, he had begun to feel the cold again and while it wasn't as bitter as it had

been in the previous days it still sapped him of energy and made the day draw long. At least the mist had finally started to lift a little, raising to a higher level and revealing more of the wide sandy valley they found

themselves in. There was no sign of any pursuit, although the scope had been attached to his rifle and was now smashed Jack stood for many minutes each hour to survey the land as it opened up around them. His eyes were still streaming and sore if he strained them too much though so he stayed for the most part downcast, focusing on the ground around camp.

Even though there was no sign of any more attackers Jack knew that they really should be moving on and soon but Seb was just too weak. She had regained consciousness a few hours into the morning but had remained listless and dizzy. Trying to stand and be the dog she always was but instead flopping limply and repeatedly down to the ground until Jack instructed her to stay lying. She slept a lot, snuffling what might have been a whimper for a normal dog, and in her more lucid moments did not seem to be entirely whole as if a part of her had been kicked away. Jack was worried, not so much that she would make a recovery, he felt in his heart that she would do so, but more that he would have to force her into action before she was truly ready. For now, though, they would wait, watch the water die down to its former trickle and try to stay warm.

With the increased visibility Jack was able to plot a route to a more hopeful place. He had decided that even if Seb was no better they would head there first thing the next day, even if he had to carry her. The route he had in mind took them across the stream and he hoped it would not flood again in the night; it would be unpleasant enough to wade through it at its normal height. Although he had no way to be sure, he felt the best hope that he had for a long time that ahead of them were trees. Even if the whole place was another dead forest it would somewhere where they could build a fire, get warm and bring some cheer back into their world.

On a whim, and because they were forced to stay static for a whole day, Jack cast some lines out into the waters which although subdued should still be big enough to hold some fish if there were any left alive. He had no suitable bait though so chose some lures from his tin, cradling them for many moments. His Uncle had taught him how to fish, had even made some of the lures that he carried and now it was a bright speck of clean colour in the drab and empty place. Would there be any activity that would not remind him of his Uncle in some way, Jack sighed and stroked the little plastic feathers. It was made from an old bit of clothing, entirely plastic and nothing like the sturdy garments that Jack wore from the stockrooms of the habitat. The tunic had belonged to his Uncle before the trouble had torn the land apart, it was a tiny tenuous link to another universe. Jack held it tightly and dreamed of another, sacred, peaceful, place until the hook pricked his finger and brought him back to his world of pain. The moment had gone and now it was just like chasing shadows, in truth Jack did not know the world his Uncle was from, he could never know it.

ACT 3 - STARLIGHT

Chapter 1

Although Seb was seemingly well enough to make a short journey there was no way she was going to be able to cross the stream without Jack's help so as soon as they had finished their meagre breakfast he stripped off his trousers, boots and socks so that he may wade across and still have something warm and relatively dry to put on at the other side. He shivered in the light breeze coming down the water as he secured everything they were taking forward to the pack, the gun would stay in a broken pile and the man's knife was temporarily sheathed in one of his shirts inside the pack. He would retrieve it first for defence as soon as they were across.

The icy water cut into his gaunt legs like a hundred fresh knife wounds. There was little flesh left to offer any insulation and it seemed that the cold was going straight into the bone. He only had to wade a couple of metres but with carrying Seb and the pack and the cold he was soon gasping for each breath. By the time he got to the other side he could only managed to roughly put her down on the bank before exploding into a series of wheezing coughing fits. Despite frostbite being near and the fact he was shivering violently it was many minutes before he summed up the energy to retrieve the dry clothing and get dressed again. Even after he was fully clothed it took nearly an hour of stumbling through the rocky terrain before he could feel his feet again. He wondered if circulation would ever get back into his toes. Despite rubbing them every night, and the constant walking, it felt like they were dead to him and the pain when any circulation did come back soon made him wary of trying.

They were now walking through a more rocky version of the other bank but at least had a goal to aim for. A long stand of what appeared to be trees, although Jack knew better now than to get his hopes up and it could easily be another giant wall in the distance. The haze persisted but with the wind coming down from the North it appeared to clear the toxic air and they could breath with a sense of ease for what seemed like an age. Every breath of cold air still brought a rasping pain to his lungs from the inside and if he inhaled too deeply the wound on his ribs would protest with striking agony. Progress was slow. Seb was struggling too and at times would appear to wander listlessly off in the wrong direction before Jack goaded her back to him. Once he had to go back and found her simply lying on the ground, as soon as he approached she sprang up as if nothing had happened but he was worried that the impact might have caused some permanent damage. He promised her that they would rest as soon as they reached the treeline.

It had taken them nearly all day of trudging with frequent stops to rest when either one of them, or both were feeling dizzy or exhausted. Jack's energy levels were at their lowest now and he worried that even if they made it to the trees he would not have the strength left to hunt out some food. He had been fantasizing about a forest full of life, green and growing, but when they did finally get closer to the edge of it he was greeted by an old pine plantation, dead and twisted. Winds had long ago scattered the trees into tumbledown piles where they had partially rotted but remained at a formidable height. It wasn't a wall but might as well have been, a wall made of twisted fallen trees. Here and there a single tree had remained standing often propped up by the trunks piled around it but stripped of most of its branches. Solitary guardians watching over a forlorn battlefield. Jack knew he did not have the strength to clamber up and over the trees as he had done coming down from the mountains next to his home valley. He would have to venture in a North Westerly direction and skirt around the plantation. Partially because he was so exhausted, partially because the woodland was so perfectly broken, this plantation did not elicit any sense of forbidding in him as before. More like a sense of resignation. Another obstacle to get over, around or through, with no hope of finding life.

At least they now had the means to make fire and there were ample pools of brackish water which he could drink when they got desperate and ran out of what was in their bottles. He would even be

able to boil it first. Not least because it was almost nightfall, but also because he couldn't stand walking any more, Jack decided to make camp, build a fire and cook a hot meal almost as soon as they were in reach of the first dead branches. He gathered sufficient wood, which was damp on the outside but appeared to be so long dead that it had seasoned itself, then slumped down next to the pack and Seb. After a long moment to restore his energy he set a spark to some tinder using his primitive fire kit. A few weary strikes and he soon had a small flame. The fire consumed the wood hungrily and Jack found himself adding a lot more than he had originally planned. It spat angrily and crackled but he was driven by a primal need to push back at the gloom and for the moment he cast aside fears of pursuit and set large blaze going. Then he realized it was useless for cooking with so set another smaller fire, there was so much wood and he had gone without any light or fire for what seemed like an age although in reality it was only a few days. Soon he had a rolling boil in his cooking pot into which he stirred one of the last ration packs to make a thin gruel. He sipped at it grimly, feeding the other fire until it was towering and throwing sparks high into the air. The old wood still contained some of its pine resin it seemed and burned with a hissing ferocity, causing shadows to dance along the wall of tumbledown trees like a host of demented demons. Jack marshalled them, conjured more and drove them into showers of sparks as he loaded the fire, laughing a quiet mirthless cackle as the flames consumed everything he could find.

The heat was such a relief at first but it brought circulation into his extremities and for many moments he would sit hugging his fingers or toes as they coursed with pain. The evening had slipped by and he had only half eaten the ration soup, Seb refused to eat and only drank some water. Now Jack decided to let the fire die down a bit. He strung out his clothes using some fishing line and a few sticks shoved into the drying dirt and then set the tarpaulin out to reflect the heat from the fire. Then he allowed himself to finish the soup, savouring every last mouthful. They curled up together in between the fire and the tarpaulin with only the occasional wisp of smoke curling into the camp to irritate their aggravated lungs. He drifted off to sleep while stroking Seb, and idly wondering if anyone else was watching the flames, perhaps from afar. Perhaps they were marching through the night to find them, he thought idly, but couldn't find the energy to care.

Chapter 2

Morning brought the stench of burnt pine to the air as the remains of the fire smouldered in the mist. Jack was immediately reminded of his flight from the habitat and was immediately homesick. He scratched around inside the pack but could only come up with food for another day; two more meals. They would move on without any breakfast he had decided, and then looked at Seb and wondered if he was being callous. Would it be kinder to let her drift away here? Maybe they could just drift away together? Bringing out the wicked looking knife he eyed its sharp edge that had already cut him once. Maybe we should just end it here, he thought, and then shuddered. Even if that would have been kinder, he couldn't bring himself to face the thought. They would move on and quickly he had decided. The hot meal and drying clothing had given him a last energy boost and he was determined to use it.

In the morning light he could make out the edge of the forest as it disappeared into the mists a few hundred metres away. Visibility was closing in again but the air was still clean. It seemed to describe a curve to the North West so that was the direction that they would take. Packing did not take long, there was so little left to pack, and soon they were underway again. The rest appeared to have done Seb a world of good as well and she was almost back to the same old dog that he had known all these years.

Despite the constant swirling dizzy spells that were plaguing him and gnawing hunger, Jack was in

a carefree mood that morning. The pain in his side had dulled and it looked as though the spray had sealed the wound almost perfectly except where it was weeping around the edges. As long as he didn't move to much on that side it would be OK, he thought but had wrapped another of his shirts around his side anyway. In spite of all this he felt optimistic and was rewarded mid morning by the forest opening up, the bank of tumbledown trees thinned to reveal a more natural woodland mixed with other species. They carried on along side it anyway for some time before deciding to go into the wood in a Westerly direction. Jack had wanted to see if there was actually a way around but after a time it became apparent that the woodland was curving back around in the other direction and if they kept on following it they would start heading North East. At that point he chose the most open part he could see and then led Seb in amongst the old decaying trunks.

Although there was no canopy, once they had gone past the edge and into the woodland properly, Jack felt an uneasy sense of claustrophobia. The ever present mists meant that they were unlikely to see much anyway even if there were no trees, but the presence of dead standing and fallen wood gave rise to an oppressive closeness. The air too seemed to become still and take on a breathless quality as if it were sucking all life and sounds from them as they staggered forwards. After a few hours of scrabbling through thick semi decayed branches and fallen trees Jack was completely exhausted. The wound in his side was throbbing painfully and he had a headache that was growing. Each breath came as a ragged struggle and he often slipped down to the floor. The clothing that was dry in the morning was now slick with a layer of freezing mud once more but he was driven on by an almost manic desire to get out of the woodland, to find something green and alive.

Jack had not eaten all day and the constant exertions had made him dizzy to the point of collapse when they finally stopped to make camp, finding a small dry patch of dirt to lie down on. It was only late afternoon but he really could not continue, and the closeness of the forest made the world seem darker than it was. Striking a small fire, a pale effigy of the one from the previous night, he cooked half of their remaining food. One small ration to be shared between the two of them. This night Seb ate hungrily and drank her fill from one of the pools of water that seemed to be everywhere and then curled up into a grateful and deep sleep. Jack ate his more slowly, trying to make it last, and then wrapped as much of the clothing around him as he could before settling down next to Seb. The wood here was damper and the fire subdued, enough for cooking on but not enough to give much warmth. It crackled and spluttered weakly as Jack drifted off to sleep, finally resting his aching head on the floor and passing out into a dreamless slumber.

Chapter 3

Jack woke with a start and blearily scanned the forest around him. Something had woken both of them. Seb was glowering at the thicket behind him and he turned slowly to see what she was looking at but there was nothing there. He had almost convinced himself that there had been a sound, a bird or animal had called out, but now coming fully awake he decided it must have been in a dream. His own startled arousal had simply disturbed Seb, Jack decided and set about packing up the camp.

Despite the cold that was creeping back into his bones he had slept fitfully past dawn. He had been vaguely aware that they should be up, that they had to on Westward, but simply couldn't sum the energy to raise himself up. Now his mind had played tricks on him, or so he thought, he had been jerked into the cold mid morning. The pain in his side was worse, the headache persistent and he had lost the feeling in his fingers and toes again. For a brief moment he wondered if it would be better to stoke the fire and get it going again but after drinking a few mouthfuls of foul water from a pool at the base of a large upturned tree he decided it would be better to keep going. There was no

breakfast again this day, and they only had one more ration pack left but Jack pushed away any thoughts of despair. Now it was just about survival, for as long as possible, to get as far West as possible, to find the green land he had been fantasizing about for days.

They stumbled forward through a world of aches and pain and in between the twisted wreckage of a once magnificent forest. It had started to rain in a light drizzle which soon was running down his face, trickling into his collar. The droplets clung to his coat and seemed to hang in the air for longer than was reasonable before settling down to land on something. Even the wood seemed to shirk this rain, and it formed a hundred tiny beads of water along every surface it landed on. This made their job of clambering over any fallen trunks wet and tricky. Jack had taken to using the large knife as a sort of lever, striking it into the wood and then using it to steady himself as they clambered over. The hope he had felt the day before had all but evaporated once more, drifted off in the night or frozen into the cold earth as he slept. Now it was back to a mechanical motion, walking, stumbling, clambering, on and on they went for what seemed like an age but was really only a few hours, until eventually they came upon a wide opening. It might once have been a set of fields, or perhaps just a natural break in the forest, but it did provide a much welcome break and easier walking.

Jack could feel his muscles protesting and knew his body was weakening now as they strode out across the meadow. It had once been covered in grass but if there was any left alive it was dormant in the cold weather. The soil was stony and rough but at least they could walk without fear of sinking into the mud and they started to make good progress. For a time Jack stayed next to the treeline but the forest was opening up and soon he could not see the other side of the clearing. Deciding to keep going West, he eventually struck out away from the wood and over the flat hard packed earth.

It had clearly once been open farmland and several times they came across the remains of boundary walls or rusted strings of fences, mostly fallen down with random bits of barbed wire sticking out at jaunty angles. The further they went into it the drier the land appeared to get, free draining soil which had once frozen hard and now seemed reluctant to let go of its grip on the ice. They left a scuffling trail through the soil which was a joy to walk on after the forests and rocky terrain they had been used to thus far. Except for the fences, though, the land was featureless, a wide open expanse made to feel even more remote by the mist that was drifting lazily around.

A few hours of stumbling through this weird plane brought them to some buildings which brought Jack to a stop. They were not directly in their path but he could make out a series of low barns just on the edge of the visibility and they disappeared into the mist. From where they were he could not make out if there was any life in them, or even if they were complete or merely a ruin.

Remembering his disappointment at not being able to visit the ruins of the town, and vaguely hopeful that there might be some food yet preserved in the buildings he changed course and headed straight for them. They loomed out of the mist getting ever wider until he found himself amongst a vast complex of barns and outbuildings for a farm. Almost without exception they had no roofs, or were missing walls and some had clearly been gutted by fire. Jack approached cautiously, holding the large knife out in front of him and fighting to concentrate through a bout of dizziness.

They came up to the back of one of the largest structures, a black metal barn covered in rusty holes with the roof caved in, and then rounded it into the main courtyard of the farm. Either side were more buildings, some older and made of stone and one other metal one which appeared to have fared better but was still a rusting hulk. Despite the fact they were mostly broken Jack felt a sense of awe at standing so close to such a large set of buildings, he felt small all of a sudden and reached out to the barn next to him, shrinking into the metal wall almost to glean some of its greatness. For a brief moment he stayed there and then jumped around at a sound behind him. There was nothing

moving in the misty farmyard but he was sure that there had been the sound of flapping wings, as if a small bird had taken flight without uttering a sound and then vanished into the mist. Seb was glancing warily in the direction he was looking, and then back at him again, not sure of herself. Doubt was creeping into Jack's mind as well now he was surrounded by an aching silence and he could feel his muscles relaxing. There was nothing there, just his imagination, he thought and suddenly felt a rush of disappointment pushing the brief spurt of adrenaline out of his mind.

They struck out across the farmyard, their footsteps echoing strangely amongst the walls. Dotted around were odd twisted remains of machinery and glass was scattered carelessly across the floor. He had no idea what it all could have been for, but it was clearly in a bad state of repair, rusting, smashed and ruined. There didn't appear to be any living quarters, he thought suddenly, all these buildings were for equipment or storage.

Casting about in a circle he examined all that they could see and it was confirmed. No house, just a series of barns, but there must have been somewhere for the workers to live. Jack warily scoured the courtyard for evidence and despite its apparent abandonment, kept his knife out ready for defence. After a second full circle of the courtyard he decided to widen his search and clambered out the opposite side from which had entered, over some corrugated metal sheeting which bowed and boomed as he stepped on it. The sound was alarming and made him freeze, but there was still no evidence of life, so after a minute or two he continued out to the far side.

Here the land was different, some trees had obviously grown once along the backs of the barn and an ancient set of walls had enclosed several areas which Jack assumed must have been for animals. An old skull stared at Jack with hollow eyes, some beast he did not know, with big horns and a wide face. He shuddered but raised his eyes to look around the enclosures and finally found the house he had been searching for, or at least what was left of it. It was standing a few hundred metres behind the complex of barns on the other side of the animal pens and had obviously been beset by some terrible fate because over half of it was missing. Clambering over a couple of crumpled walls Jack came up to the building which was precariously poised on the edge of a large crater, partially filled in with soil and with the rest of the house in a confused pile of stone and timbers. He stayed for a long moment then, wondering if it would be safe to enter, if there was anything useful to be gained by looking around the ruin.

Chapter 4

Jack spent the rest of that day carefully creeping around the building. After walking around it twice he decided it was probably safe enough to enter but didn't want to venture near the second story. In any case once he entered the building it became obvious that there was no way up because the stairs had obviously been in the part that had been destroyed. What was left was pitiful and barely resembled much of a house. There were two rooms left mostly intact one in front of the other with a doorway separating them. Inside was the remains of some furniture, sofas that had been partially burned out, partially rotten, the fabric almost all gone with what remained hanging off the frames like skin on a skeleton. A few other half destroyed items that Jack could not identify were scattered about. Whatever fire had swept into the rooms seemed to have been extinguished before it had a chance to totally consume their contents but it had not left much behind...or perhaps the room had been cleared of useful things afterwards.

On one wall in the sitting room was the remains of paper, a bold floral design, and in the corner a single picture frame hanging defiantly in place. The glass was cracked and whatever had once been contained within was waterlogged and illegible. Some writing on once cream, but now discoloured,

paper and a red seal in wax. The ceiling had caved in in that corner and clearly water had been dripping down the frame preserving a small damp section in the otherwise dry frozen buildings. Along the wall from the certificate was the remains of some kind of cabinet, charred and tumbled together into a pile. Jack picked up a bit of the wood, then searched through it. There were a few bottles with glass that was smoked with age, most were broken but a couple still contained their liquid, thick and full of sediment. He picked them up and set them on one side, just like the picture the labels had faded and were singed around the edges. Jack set them aside, shuddered in the chill air and looked through the rest of

the remains which were devoid of anything except some cups. He wondered what sort of poison was in those bottles now, and opened one. Immediately a wave of fumes escaped from the rotten fluid causing him to cough and rasp then cast the bottle down where it glugged into the remains of the carpet. He dared not go near the other bottle and instead decided there was nothing more to be gained from staying in that room; the rest of the room was largely empty except for odd piles of plaster that had come down from the ceiling.

The room next door had clearly once been a kitchen, even Jack could see the similarity between that and the small galley they used in the habitat. It appeared to have survived without any fire damage at all, except for charring around the door frame and the ceiling was made out of what appeared to be a thick cladding so had also remained intact. On one wall was a long narrow table and the rest was made up of cupboards with hollows that might have once contained equipment such as the cooker and washer they had at home, but Jack was unsure, it all seemed to be from another age and not as pristine or integrated as the stainless steel clad room he was used to associating with food preparation. Hopeful at first that there might still be food reserves left behind Jack started to search through the cupboards but they were despairingly empty of anything useful. A few pots, rusted cutlery, some rolls of plastic and metal wrapping and some plastic containers stained with food from years before. Jack shut the doors with disgust and then gazed out of the glassless window to the courtyard beyond where Seb was stubbornly sitting having refused to come inside the house. Jack didn't have the strength or the will to persuade her to do so and had simply let her sit as she was, her head bowed in fatigue and a slightly glassy look to her once strong eyes. The view might once have been idyllic, a wide open courtyard flanked by trees and set with dressed stone leading down to a fancy stone wall which separated the farmyard from the house. Jack tried to picture people filling the space, standing where he was, perhaps tending to animals or bringing in some kind of harvest. He could only see himself and his Uncle and his mind wandered back to his own home. There were no more faces here, no people to bring life to the farm, only a hollow shell. Straining he tried to picture the face of the woman who he had found in the orb, but realized with a sudden disappointment that he could not see her clearly. Only a vague impression remained, a haunted echo of the face he had seen.

Jack stayed in the kitchen for a long while, lost in his thoughts and propping his weary body up against the worktop. For the first time since fleeing he was having real doubts about the point of continuing. Would it be better to collapse and die here amongst the remains left by some of his lost ancestors, or by the side of some unmarked trail out beyond the ruined fields. The fog had seeped into his mind and he was rendered mute and still for a long time.

Eventually he roused himself and went out to Seb who gratefully got up and nuzzled him. Jack had decided that he didn't want to stay, even though it would mean some shelter for the night and firewood to cook with. He felt a strong sense that he didn't want to cling to this unknown past, if they were to go then it would be better to go in a place of his own choosing. Someone else had chosen this place, it was theirs, their home and their ruin. Jack longed for the habitat with a pang of homesickness that seemed to take on a physicality, a hollowing out of his chest and a throbbing pain in his mind. With his memories twisting his face into a bitter scowl, Jack shouldered his pack for

what he thought might be one last time and headed away from the farm.

It did not take long for the buildings to be swallowed up by the mist, but Jack was not looking back. He was trudging onwards with his head bowed and mind as blank as it could be; his body was automatically putting one foot in front of the other. His mind was automatically checking his compass, but he was thinking of nothing else now. Thinking was just too painful.

They made a pitiful camp that night on the stony earth beneath a small patch of scrubby bushes with dry and cracked wood that Jack used to build a small fire. While the wood was dry it lacked any resin like the pinewood from the fires he was used to so instead of spitting into life it merely smouldered with a quiet heat. It was enough to breath some cheer into them though, and enough to cook their last meagre packet of food. Even though he was ravenous, Jack forced himself to savour every mouthful but it as soon gone. Seb had a small amount and then licked out Jack's bowl for many minutes to get at the last morsel. Jack then simply lay next to the scant heat from the fire and gazed up as the smoke drifted out of the light and into the impenetrable clouds above them. The pain in his stomach was still there, and only going to get worse, he thought, even a big swig of their water did nothing to diminish it. He ran his hands down his shirt, feeling the ribs as they stuck out from his shrinking chest. The wound in his side had finally formed a crust of dried blood and now that side felt stiff where the shirt was matted and stuck to him. Without a good supply of clean water to wash it he was loath to touch it in case the wound opened again. With an awkward shuffle he tried to shift his weight around on the ground so it wouldn't hurt so much but no position seemed to be without pain. Eventually he gave up and shut his eyes but could not seem to find any sleep even though darkness was upon them and Seb had begun to snore softly where she lay curled up with him.

Jack was feeling especially uneasy because ever since leaving the old farmyard he had the distinct feeling that something had been watching their slow progress across the frozen and dried up fields. His head was still aching from the lack of food and whatever strange fumes had been in the fog but many times he was convinced that he could hear a buzzing sound above or around them. Like a hive of bees from a distance. There had once been some bees living in the valley where he grew up and he remembered a few glorious years when they would go out dressed in chemical suits so they wouldn't get stung and collect some of the honey from the hives. It was a wonderful taste and so unlike anything else they had that it stuck clearly in Jack's mind. Even though they were always careful to leave behind most of the honey for the bees to use themselves the weather was simply too cold, with hardly enough sun to sustain plant growth let alone the flowers that the bees needed. Jack could still remember the bitter disappointment when he found that the colony had collapsed and he had hunted throughout the entire valley for another one but never did find any more. If there were any bees left they had moved to another place entirely...and then today Jack had been hearing the sound of bees on and off. Sometimes he was convinced it was so close that he would stop and search around but each time he strained to listen the sound seemed to fade into the chill mists. Eventually he got frustrated with chasing the phantom noise that he tried to block it out entirely, but now he was lying in the quiet with the only sounds being Seb and his own breathing or the wind rustling the twigs around them it was hard not to imagine the buzzing noise again. This time it felt different though, felt more like a memory and less like an actual sound but eventually after hours of lying still in the dark he was unsure if he was remembering the sound of bees from their valley, or the sound of buzzing from that day. At long last he drifted into a frustrated broken sleep full of dreams about honey.

Chapter 5

Perhaps it was the dreams he had been having, or the knowledge that they really had finally run out of food, but Jack woke feeling more hungry than usual and sore from the night of fitful sleep. He drank half a bottle of water for breakfast to try and dull the ache in his belly and then regretted it instantly as the foul liquid they had collected from forest pools a few days ago almost made him retch. Nothing came up and the retching turned into a coughing fit that seemed to split his side in two where the knife had found his ribs until he was left shaking on his knees.

Seb gazed at him with an almost incomprehensible look, it seemed like she knew more than he did and had accepted their fate even though Jack was still fighting to continue. She was loyal though and would continue until either her master dropped down or she did.

Eventually Jack raised his head, which was spinning with dizzy spells and did his best to pack up what little they had left. He then found a large bit of wood from one of the bushes and hacked it into a makeshift walking stick, using the large knife as a kind of machete. This effort left him spluttering and he nearly collapsed again but righting himself using the stick he finally managed to stand fully upright and did his best to ignore the pain coursing down his side or throbbing in his head.

It was time to move on, away from this dry desolate system of fields and to whatever lay beyond. Jack checked his compass and peered into the West. Even if the mist had lifted his own vision seemed to be blurry that morning and there was nothing ahead of them that he could see, only more fields, but he knew that there was nothing behind them either so with only another cursory glance at the compass he set off again. His stride had been lessened considerably by the fatigue, hunger and seemingly ever increasing pain he was feeling in his ribs. The night on the hard ground had done him no favours and now the ache was flowing down his side coming to rest on his hip bones.

The day seemed to wear on with an eternal slowness in spite of a brief spell in the morning where he heard the buzzing again and this time so loudly it seemed to come from every direction and made him shout to the mist around him alternately waving the knife and stick; challenging anything to come forward. Eventually the sound seemed to fade away and he never did see anything so cursed his own mind for making it up and then continued trudging Westward. They found a small stream which gave them another drink as their lunchtime meal and filled their canteens for what would undoubtedly be an evening meal of the same quality. Jack pushed the thought of hunger out of his mind repeatedly but it kept coming back to the point where he would find himself wandering along and could even taste food that he liked, his favourite rations which he had not seen since leaving the habitat, then when he started salivating a pang of hunger would course through his stomach and bring him back to their crushing reality.

At least the ground had started to change now and despite the fact it was steepening into a wide slow rise that made walking more difficult, Jack was hopeful it signalled the end of the field system that they seemed to have been in for an age. They had been climbing up for about an hour when they came to the first definite change since leaving the forest. A large black wall loomed out of the mist at them. At first Jack thought it was another fortification like they had found after coming through the mountain, but then realized that they were much closer and this was a smaller wall. It was still enough of a boundary that when Jack was standing up close it stood about half a metre over his head, and as before it appeared to be made out of a smooth black material. This wall, though, was in much worse shape. It had cracks all down it, the top was worn and in a few places it had large holes blasted through it as if some giant had given it a kick, scattering broken fragments into the field. Walking parallel to it until he came to one of these holes, Jack gazed at the land that was before them. It was as dead as the land he was leaving and the only thing that marked it out as

any different was the frequent stands of bushes or trees. All twisted, stripped by the wind of their bark and standing as skeletons. There appeared to be more rocks here too, some quite large, and the land had obviously not been as well prepared, or even farmed at all as the field system they were leaving.

Jack shrugged, it was just another place to try and cross, to see find out what lay beyond; another disappointment. Once out beyond the wall the wind seemed to pick up, although it was probably just his imagination or that there were now things for the wind to whistle through and rustle past. Some of the old wood creaked a little and the wind struck it but most was used to such an onslaught and simply stood or lay unmoving. The fog was clearing as well and the further they went through the scrub the more he could see even though a vague blurriness persisted around the edges of his vision. As if something was making the corners of his mind darken.

By evening a strong wind was facing them and Jack knew it was more than his imagination because with it came a strange odour he could not place. It almost felt as if the smell carried the promise of life, but he could not separate it from a feeling of decay because the closest thing he could remember smelling like it was the marshlands. The wind was a welcome change, even if it came with confusion, because it had finally started to blow the mist back completely and as darkness fell Jack finally got his first real view of the stars.

At first he wasn't sure what to make of the sky because it took him so by surprise and almost seemed to sneak up on them as they prepared the camp for the night. Having stumbled through the scrub all day and made little progress Jack had decided he could not face another boulder to clamber over or dried bristly bush to push through so had cleared a small patch of the worst stones and built a small fire. It would not give them any cooked food but at least would help to cheer his mood a little and there were ample dried twigs to burn. He had been sitting with his back to their direction of travel, feeding sticks into the blaze and watching as they were consumed while sipping on some water but Seb kept getting up and staring Westward. Eventually he realized something was different about the way she was acting so he turned around too and was stunned. The clouds had been pulled back and sky to the West was ablaze with light. At first he crouched down, afraid that it might be some kind of attack, but then the realization came to him and he stood in wonderment. Jack had never seen a sunset before and this one was the perfect introduction to them. The sky was still heavy with streaks of black cloud but their underside were now a hundred shades of yellow or gold. More than that, Jack realized they were standing atop a long low rise and while the foreground was obscured by the bush, the distance he could see water. A vast expanse of water glinting in the reflected light.

Almost as soon as the sunset had arrived it seemed to vanish and in its place the sky turned the most beautiful shade of bluish purple. Jack sat down now with his back to the forgotten fire and simply stared as the wind pulled open the curtains of cloud and revealed the wide expanse beyond. Just as soon as he thought it could not get any more beautiful; the stars appeared to shine. One by one they came until a glorious host of twinkling lights were flying high above them. Jack rubbed his eyes and stared, then lay down and simply watched agape as a universe of ancient light was revealed. His aches and pains were forgotten, his hunger momentarily banished and he felt himself almost floating somewhere between the hard cold earth and the starlight. Then he began to cry, small silent tears trickling unabated out of the corners of his eyes which he blinked away so he could still focus. He thought of his Uncle and felt a world of sadness come over him because he had died without seeing the sky open up again.