

ROMNEY HOLE

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CHAPTER 1

When I look back to that summer of '76 it would have been impossible to predict that there would be such a major transformation of our lives. What had, up to that point, been an enjoyable but rather mundane life on a Yorkshire dales farm, was about to change. Our minds would be opened to expand into an undreamed of awareness.

Oh! By the way, I'm Zachary, but everyone, except mother, calls me Zach. Back then I was a bit of a gangly fifteen-year-old, going on sixteen, and quite tall compared to most. Fair-headed and fair skinned, although we tanned easily I was grateful not to share my younger sister Rachel's freckles. Her longer hair seemed to be bleached by the sun to almost blond, during summer months.

After a wonderful week's holiday with Aunt Anne and Uncle Gordon at their cottage on the North Yorkshire coast, overlooking Whitby town, the time had come say our goodbyes. Mum and Dad picked us up in the old Land Rover and the journey home to the farm on the outskirts of Brough took two hours. Two hours during which we never once stopped talking and recounting our holiday exploits. All too soon, supper over, we were in our bedrooms, mine next to Rachel's, talking quietly through the open doors.

"And there's still four weeks holiday left," I said.

"But there's nothing left to look forward to now. Just another boring holiday at home," she said.

"Oh! Come on, Rachel. The weather's fine, there's lots to do on the farm, and Bob 'n Alan will be back from their holidays in a week. That'll still leave three weeks for the gang to be together before the new term starts".

"I suppose you're right," she said, sleepily, "but I would have liked to stay at Whitby forever and ever."

"And then it wouldn't be like a holiday at all. Just think, now we've got a whole year in which to look forward to the next time."

"Urn..," she grunted before she snored.

And I too fell into a contented sleep.

The next few days on the farm left little time for either of us to worry about what we would do next. Life on a hill farm can be pretty hectic, particularly when dad's only full time worker, Jim Bradwell, was away on holiday with his wife and their two sons Bob and Alan. Jim, everybody called him Jim, lived in a house on the farm, about a quarter of a mile from the main house, and he was cowman and shepherd and anything else that was required. There were only six cows remaining after the previous month's cattle auction, but that year's lambing had brought our sheep herd up to around two hundred and fifty. The ten goats, four pigs, twenty hens and Jim's two Highland Collies, Shep and Andy, made up the rest of our stock. It wasn't until late on Wednesday morning, when mum thought we had all caught up on the work that we had some welcome time off'.

Rachel made up some sandwiches and drinks, I packed them into my rucksack and off we went, deep into the dales and hills we loved so much. We followed the brook up Langdale valley, scrambling up the hills and rocky slopes towards Pike Head. The climb up the Scar, where the brook tumbled seven metres in a single drop, tired us out. We rested at the top, dangling our feet in the crystal clear, ice cold water, while the sun dried the perspiration on our faces. I suppose you just have to admire a girl like Rachel. Almost fourteen, blue eyed,

long blonde hair, freckled nose and really, I suppose, just a little bit pretty. She could run, swim and climb just as well as any member of the gang, even though she was the youngest. Alan was two months older than Rachel, his brother, Bob, was a month or two away from fifteen and, almost sixteen. We never thought of Rachel as a girl, she was just - one of the gang.

She said, "It's nice to be on our own again," just as I was thinking how much I was looking forward to Bob and Alan coming back. "Yea! It's great," I said with a smile.

"Come on then," she cried, pulling on her socks and trainers. "Let's head for Romney Hole."

"Better not. We'll only get into trouble if we go over there without letting mum know. And anyway, we've not brought any gear with us."

"We're not going in," she said. "Just having a look around."

She didn't have to try very hard to persuade me. I was enchanted by that area of the moors where the hills dipped and climbed haphazardly, where dark openings disappeared into the blackness of the rocky outcrops and twisted and turned in the tortured ground, forming a honeycomb of tunnels and caves and passageways. It took some twenty minutes of brisk walking to reach the hill top overlooking Romney Hole. There we sat down on the coarse grass tussocks with our backs to the afternoon sun and scoffed our refreshments.

"Wish we,d asked permission," Rachel said, tentatively.

"So do I, but it's a little late to go in now," I said. "We'll see if we can come back tomorrow."

"That would be great."

"We'll get the gear ready tonight and set off immediately after breakfast."

"Roll on tomorrow," she said and flopped onto her back sucking at the sweet petal stems of pink clover flower heads

I was quite surprised when I glanced at my watch to see that time had flown by. "Come on, Rachel," I said, grabbing her hand and pulling her up. "Time we were getting back. Race you to Scar," and I was off.

Rachel cried after me, "That's not fair. You didn't start properly." And then petulantly she shouted, "I'm not racing unless you start again."

I thumped to a stop and slowly turned around. "Come on then. Start from here."

After a count of "3, 2, 1", I gave her a three-second start and off we careered down the dale towards Scar. Several times she squealed when I got within a few paces of her but I didn't mean to overtake, not until the very last moment. Rachel was gasping now and the Scar was in sight. I gradually lengthened my stride and drew level with the bounding bundle of determined girl. Then I decided to show her. Two steps clear. Three steps in front of the grunting. I turned around in full stride to laugh at her efforts and tripped. Flailing arms failed to halt the inevitable and I fell flat on my face.

Rachel charged past on the last few yards to Scar then collapsed onto her hands and knees in a chest heaving heap. I crawled towards her menacingly. She looked under her arm and laughed until tears ran down her cheeks.

"I won - gasp - gasp - I won you - gasp - Zach."

"Yes! You won!"

"And it was all fair and square. Wasn't it?"

"Yes. It was fair. Until you tripped me."

"I didn't," she shrieked, launching herself at me for revenge. We tumbled and rolled in mock fight for several moments before lack of breath halted us.

A short while later we climbed down Scar using the knotted rope dad had rigged to help us up and down. No one used it going up but it certainly helped on the way down.

We walked along the ridge overlooking Langdale Beck, in silence, watching the wildlife of the dales go about its daily routine of life and death. Brook trout darted in the shallows feeding on spent flies and unlucky minnows. It was too early to catch sight of the otter family but there was a statuesque heron waiting to spear the next trout that strayed into range. Overhead, swifts swooped low, collecting insects on the wing. Occasionally they skimmed the water, skillfully scooping a beakful without wetting even a wingtip.

Over the hills a kestrel patrolled its beat occasionally hovering, watching for the telltale movement of grass as a shrew or mouse hunted for worms. It made several false dives before it eventually caught some small morsel and flew off towards its nest on Pike Head.

Closer to the farm we saw the old barn owl silently launch and glide effortlessly over Langdale Moor, only rise before the house. Sheep and fast growing lambs scattered as the dogs bounded feet above the ground, lifting over the dry stone walls with hardly a beat of its wings. Then we heard Andy and Shep barking. They'd spotted us as we appeared over the last noisily towards us.

"Down, Andy," yelled Rachel when he jumped to lick her face. The black and white collie obeyed but then started to snap playfully at her heels. "Stop it!" she shouted. "I'm too tired to play." Shep, Andy's mother, was the more sensible of the two. She had more white on her coat with a black patch that exactly matched the one around Andy's left eye. She walked to heel and nuzzled my hand for a gentle head scratch. Together we went through and closed the wooden five-barred gate behind us with a clang of the steel-sprung latch.

"They're back, Marge!" I heard dad shout.

Mum's voice floated through the open kitchen window. "Tell them to get cleaned up, Ray. Dinner's ready in ten minutes."

"Nice timing, kids," said dad, straightening up from behind the old Massey Ferguson tractor. "You heard the boss. Ten minutes to get yourselves tidied up for dinner. And I think you'd better get out of those jeans and T-shirts before mum sees the state you're in. Where have you been?"

"We wandered up to Romney Hole," I answered. "But we didn't go in."

"But we'd like to go in tomorrow. Can we, dad?"

I suppose that must have been one of the advantages of being a girl. There seems to be a way of asking straight out for something, with a sort of tilt of the head and a coy look in the eye that almost always gets whatever it is they're after. And, I must admit, it mostly seemed to work because dad did not say no.

"Let's see what mum has in mind for tomorrow before you start making any plans."

After washing we met at the top of the stairs, each smelling of soap, faces

shiny clean and hair damp at the front. "I'm not putting a dress on tonight," she said as she struggled out of her knee-length jeans, wrapped them in her T-shirt and threw them towards the linen basket.

"Mum won't like that," I grunted, picking up her clothes which had missed the basket by a mile. She shrugged mischievously and skipped into her room. I changed into clean jeans and a blue shirt, combed my hair flat and started down the stairs. Rachel yelled, "Wait for me." Then ran down them two at a time and squeezed past me. "I'll win again." And with a giggle she was gone, looking, I must say, almost appealing in white shorts, socks and blouse.

We joined dad, already sat at the table, just as mum started to serve the vegetable soup. To follow there was creamy potato mash with mushy peas with a thick sliced ham. By the time we were finished eating our plates were quite spotless. It seemed a shame to have to wash them but we did, while mum made coffee and dad lit his old black briar pipe.

"Mum, can we go to Romney Hole tomorrow?" I asked, again, for it seemed she had avoided my question the first time.

"It's alright by me, Marge," dad said, between puffs on pipe.

"I'm not too keen on the idea of going on your own," mum said, pouring coffee. "It's better when there are four of you. What would happen if one of you fell and perhaps broke something? One would have to be left on their own while the other tried to get help. No, I'm not sure it's wise."

"Oh! Come now, Marge. They're sensible kids and the potholes must be bone dry. There hasn't been any rain for at least five weeks. I'm sure they can be trusted not to do anything stupid."

I knew that coy look from Rachel had had the desired effect. "We'll clean the byre and feed the pigs and milk the goats before we go," I offered enthusiastically.

Mum smiled, took a sip of coffee and nodded. "You win," she said.

"Great!" said Rachel, almost knocking over her chair in her haste to get up. "I'll get the gear ready now, Zach."

"There's no need," said mum. "It's all together in the bottom of the hall cupboard."

"Thanks, mum," I said. "I meant to put it all into the rucksack after our last trip."

"Always full of good intentions, aren't you? Well just you make sure all the chores are done before breakfast, and I'll make some sandwiches for you. What time should they be back, Ray?"

He thought for a moment. "Five thirty latest. That should leave plenty of time to clean the gear and have a bath before dinner." Rachel wrapped herself around his neck and awarded a noisy kiss. "Thanks, dad," she said.

An hour or so later while Dad was reading the sports pages; mum was knitting and watching television, apparently simultaneously; I had my balsa wood model glider kit spread out on the dining table trying to figure out how the ailerons worked. Rachel had by then changed into her pj's and was draining the last drops of her hot chocolate. After which she kissed mum and dad, winked at me and started off to bed. "I'll give you a prod, real early in the morning," she quipped.

"What do you mean?" I retorted. "It's always me who's up first. I bet you're

still snoring at eight."

"Stop bickering," said mum. "I'll call you both at six. If you get down to some hard work you'll be away by about eight o'clock. Now off you go, Rachel. Zachary won't be long behind you. Goodnight darling. "

"Night all," she shouted, bounding up the stairs. Then it was peaceful, so quiet, and I got on with building the glider, slotting nylon lines between the ailerons and the battery operated actuators.

CHAPTER 2

We were both wide awake long before six o'clock. By seven o'clock I had finished hosing down the byre and Rachel had long since fed the pigs. As I coiled the hose pipe over the wall hooks she collected the goats into the small milking parlor at the side of the house. This was one job where Rachel really excelled. I could never match her speedy rhythm and to be honest nor could I calm the goats the way she did. I think it had something to do with the tune she hummed while she was milking. Perhaps she mesmerised them. Anyway, at twenty to eight, we carried four pails of milk, each almost half full, into the kitchen outhouse and emptied them into the large brown urn. Then we scalded them out and left the sparkling, stainless steel pails inverted, to dry ready for the next milking.

By ten minutes to eight breakfasts of gypsy bread and bacon was being devoured. Mum had made a flask of coffee and a box of ham sandwiches and left them next to the cooker, on the wooden worktop.

"Rachel," I said. "You bring down the gear and I'll pack the food."

"On my way," she said still chewing the last of the eggy bread.

Mum must have heard her clattering down the stairs, the helmets scraping down the banister rails. She came into the kitchen as we were going out. "Take care you two!" she warned. "And no later than five thirty home. O.K.?"

"OK, mum," I shouted, closing the door. Then off we went. We reached Scar in thirty minutes, scaled its face in five and took a further twenty-five to reach Romney Hole. The Hole was, in fact, a small cave in the side of a hill. The casual observer would never realise that after squeezing through the narrow opening, hidden at the back of the cave, it quickly gave access to a whole complex of

further caves and passageways.

It was another fine, sunny day but we didn't sit around, just long enough to change into strong fell walking boots pulled on over long, thick woolen socks into which were tucked our dark blue jeans. The helmets were fastened under our chins, battery packs clipped around our waists, lamps clipped onto helmets, packs slung on backs and coils of rope hung diagonally over shoulders.

Down we went into the cool darkness of Romney Hole, into the echoing chambers and tunnels, into our playground wonder world under our equally wonderful Langdale Fells.

We made our way without conversation through the first series of smooth-walled tunnels to Cathedral. The morning sun slanted through the roof hole of the magnificent cavern illuminating the spires and organ pipes in glorious hues of yellows, browns, reds and greens. Stalactites in places hung so low as to almost join the stalagmites which appeared to reach up out of the bedrock to meet them. Rachel unhitched her haversack onto the small raised plinth of rock which we often used as a table and spread out our tattered map. It was an old ordnance survey section which dad had given us two or three summers ago. Now it was covered with a web of thick pencil lines and rubbings out and shorthand notations, depicting the extent, direction and, where possible, the elevation of all those tunnels we had explored in the past.

I directed my lamp onto the section radiating north-east from Cathedral.

"Let's make for Pike Head," I suggested.

Rachel replied, "I'd rather go to Cauldron Falls."

"It's awfully wet up there," I said, "and anyway, there are lots of tunnels

running off the Pikeway we've not explored yet."

"Well most of them are wet too!" protested Rachel.

"Tell you what," I said. "No arguments, we'll spin for it." She agreed so I tossed a coin into the air and missed catching it. "I'll have 'tails'," she shrieked, searching around the stone strewn floor. "Here it is," I said, stooping to pick it up, "and its 'heads'."

"Let me see," she said unbelievably, and then "Alright. You win, let's make for Pike Head."

It's strange I suppose, how when we walked the tunnels we knew well, we were never afraid, but as soon as we took a new turning things went quite quiet. Not that we were ever really frightened, just that... Well, one never knew what lay around the next corner.

We climbed steadily up the long sloping Pikeway passage which still carried the remains of the chalk-drawn arrows we had inscribed on the walls when we came this way the first time. On many of the side wall tunnels, there were white arrows with a straight line across the arrow point. That signified a dead-end. Some of the arrows had wavy lines over the point. That meant there was a water obstacle of some sort; sometimes a cave with a pool that stretched from wall to wall; sometimes a tunnel that dipped downward into a deep pool of water which completely sealed it off from further exploration. We weren't equipped for scuba diving.

Just before we reached the last half mile of the upward climb to Pike Head Rachel stopped beside a passage which branched off to the left. "What's along this way?" she asked.

"Don't remember. Isn't there an arrow?"

"Can't see one."

I joined Rachel and we scanned the sides of the opening with our torches.

"Here it is," I said "or at least what's left of it. I can't make it out. Dig the map out Rachel."

Holding the map as flat as we could on the rock wall I traced out our path until I found the pencil line I thought was the right one. "It seems to head west for a while, then north for about a quarter of a mile and then the line just stops."

"Doesn't it say what's up there?" asked Rachel.

"No," I replied. "The line just stops."

"Let's go in and explore," she suggested.

I thought about it for a while. Pike Head was where we were headed, but the real thrill was exploring something new. The lure of the unknown beckoned. "Come on then, slow coach," I said.

Our yellow torch beams sliced the blackness, carving a way through the dark, dank, still air.

We reached a point, roughly indicated where the pencil line on the map had stopped, without encountering any obstacles. After a brief exchange of 'should we', 'shouldn't we', we went on. Within a few more paces Rachel spotted another chalked sign and asked, "What does this sign mean Zach?"

It was a U-turn arrow.

"I don't remember seeing one like this before," I replied, puzzled. "It can

only mean that whoever came this far turned round and went back."

"I wonder why." said Rachel.

"I'm only guessing, but perhaps Bob and Allan have been here, on their own, without us. Just like we are now. Suppose they got this far and then realised it was time to get back home. They left the sign to show how far they had come and later Bob has added it to the map without telling us."

"Possibly." she murmured.

"Probably." I guessed.

"Do we go on?"

"Of course!" I said.

We went on, deeper into the unknown. Every stumbling step was a step into uncertainty. Perhaps human feet had never passed this way before. It was like being the first man on the moon. There is no other way of describing the combination of excitement and fear, the not knowing.

We were both affected and I could sense Rachel keeping just that one step closer to me. Within twenty or thirty metres the tunnel widened and we came to the edge of a bowl depression in the rocky floor. It was about four metres across and about one and a half metres deep, with almost perfectly smooth sides.

Our beams scanned the area. There was a tunnel sloping away from us on the other side of the bowl and a broad chimney that led up towards an unseen roof. A ledge skirted the bowl on both sides, about forty centimetres wide. It looked safe enough to cross.

As a precaution, we roped together for the first time and made our way

carefully over to the opposite side with our backs pressed firmly into the cold walls. The floor of the tunnel then sloped away quite steeply, and again it was smooth.

"I think this is the bed of a river or stream." I hazarded a guess.

"Mm!" she said "Well there's no river now, so, where has it gone? Or, for that matter, where did it come from?"

I shone my torch down into the solid base of the bowl.

"If it didn't come from down there, it must have come down from up there," I said swinging the beam up into the chimney.

"Could be," Rachel ventured.

"Must be!" I countered. "Just think, Rachel. If Bob and Allan did come this way and the water was flowing they would have had to turn around, so, they left a U-turn chalk mark."

"If they had got this far they would have chalked a wavy water sign." Rachel said. She was right of course. We decided that because of the recent dry spell the stream had dried up but as there was no sign of rain or water now, we would go on for a little while.

The smooth sloping floor made it difficult to get a firm foothold so we stayed roped together on a longer rope. Slipping and sliding we made our way another thirty metres, or more, further down the tunnel. Then I slipped and fell, but continued sliding on my back. Rachel checked my slide and tightened the rope. I slithered to a stop.

"Thanks, Rachel," I managed to gasp, but then realized that my feet were

hanging over a ledge. A drop. It could have been ten centimeters, ten metres or forever. I didn't know. How I kept calm I'll never know. I was scared.

"Rachel," I hoarsely gasped. "Keep a tight hold on the rope. Don't let go."

She knew I was in trouble but she didn't panic either.

"Just hold the rope tight, Rachel. Don't try pulling in case you fall."

I felt her brace and tighten the line. Slowly, very slowly, I inched back towards her. She kept the line taut until our hands touched. Only then did she let go of the line and helped me to my feet.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I almost slid over a ledge. I don't know how far down it goes but I've had enough. Let's go back."

"Let me look first, Zach," she pleaded.

Typical, I thought, always wanting to know the last gory detail.

I braced against a protrusion in the wall and slowly she inched forward against the restraining rope. Eventually, she called "I'm coming back." And when she did I asked, "Well then?"

"I couldn't see how far down it went. My torch isn't powerful enough to reach the bottom. We'd both have been dead if you'd gone over."

"Well, thanks to you, little sister, I didn't and we aren't. Now can we go back?"

Shaken as we were by the close call we managed a laugh and set about retracing our steps back up the smooth incline.

We were almost back to the basin when Rachel stopped. "Hey! Zach! There's a narrow opening here. We must have missed it on the way down."

I came alongside her. A dark hole near the roof just above head height beckoned.

"Haven't you had enough?" I asked.

"Oh Zach, do let's at least have a look."

"OK! I suppose we can," I conceded to her indomitable determination, her unquenchable enthusiasm, and her downright persistence to extract the maximum from whatever situation she found herself in. I bent my knees. "Climb on my shoulders. Careful! You'll have us both over again."

I straightened up, lifting her higher and stared at the grey wall in front of my face as she peered into the hole.

"Zach," she whispered. "Zachary."

"What?" I grunted irritably, I was having difficulty keeping my feet.

"It's beautiful."

"What's beautiful?"

"There's a fantastic cave and it's all glowing."

"Let me have a look then," I said impatiently.

Down she came and I grasped the lip of the hole and pulled myself up.

It was like nothing I'd ever seen before. It was like a living work of art. A gentle green glow bathed the inside of the circular chamber.

"Well!" she said. "Are we going in?"

"Of course we're going in." Nothing could have stopped me; the near tragedy of ten minutes ago was now a far distant memory.

CHAPTER 3

Inside we stood back to back gazing around the new found chamber. The curved mirror smooth walls were too symmetrical. This was no normal, water weathered cave. The beams of our lamps bounced back at us adding further illumination to the soft green glow emanating from the roof and floor.

"What is this place?" Rachel asked.

"I don't have a clue."

"Is it real?" she continued.

"Well, we're certainly not dreaming," I said, continuing to rotate.

"What's that up there?"

The walls of the chamber curved to meet about five metres over our heads and from the centre hung a cluster of what could have been four large search lights. The four silver globes pointed slightly downwards, towards the walls.

"Rachel, I've never seen anything like it before."

"Zach! Look! Over here." She had crossed the chamber and was standing in the shadows. I joined her in an alcove where there were six seats carved out of the rock. The seats were arranged in two rows of three, facing into the chamber we had just discovered. Two passages curved away from each side of the alcove. Each was lit by the same eerie glow as the chamber.

"It looks like a theatre or a cinema," I offered, but I was talking to myself.

Rachel was off. She couldn't wait to discover what lay at the other ends of the passages. "Wait for me," I shouted.

The first passage, of about two and a half metres high, was about fifteen metres long. It terminated in another chamber very similar to the first except that it was larger and there was a narrow angled ledge, just above waist height, which seemed to run halfway around it. Rachel was in too much of a hurry to examine it more closely. She had already retraced her steps to follow the other tunnel.

I stood for a while, transfixed, trying to figure out what it was we had stumbled on. I only had a moment to reflect before Rachel came walking towards me from the opposite side of the chamber.

"The other tunnel comes out here too," she said, sounding quite disappointed.

"But it's amazing," I whispered almost to myself.

"It's not that exciting. Not once you've seen around it."

"But it is, Rachel. Stop and think for a moment. First! What makes the light? Second, who made the caves? Who would play a film or act a play for only six people? Who were they? Where did they come from? Where have they gone?"

"There's no one here now. Is there? I can't answer your questions. You can't and I doubt mum and dad would believe us if we tried to ask them." During this minor monologue Rachel wandered round the perimeter of the chamber trailing her hand along its smooth walls. "I mean," she continued, "I know I'm younger than you, and I know I don't know as much as you, but then I don't know anybody who knows an awful lot more than you. So if you don't know, who does?"

As she prattled on I realised that the light had gotten brighter. I hadn't

noticed it getting brighter, it had happened so slowly. "You can switch off your lamp now," I said, interrupting her noisy nothingness. We did so and moved slowly together into the centre of the chamber.

Not only was the floor radiating light but also heat.

"What's happening, Zach? I'm frightened." Her hand clutched mine tightly.

"It's alright, don't be scared," I said, not feeling quite as brave as I sounded. We could have run, I suppose, but we didn't. Perhaps because we were rooted with fear, but I like to think it was because we wanted to know. Strange shapes began to appear on the walls. Outlines of dials and knobs and buttons and screens softly unfolded in the ever-increasing glow around and on the ledge. The floor rumbled almost imperceptibly and we hurriedly stepped off the rising centre dais. Seats and benches rose out of the floor surrounding the central dais and in front of the semicircular ledge.

"It's like an instrument panel," I said. "It's like the flight deck of a jumbo."

Every square inch of wall was filled with a multitude of flashing lights and flickering screens. Then came a tumult. A barrage of noise assailed our senses. The whole structure shook for several seconds and then subsided. The silence was broken only by the intermittent chatter and background hum of electronics.

"How did it start up?" queried the quaking Rachel, peeping out of my arms, which somehow or other had ended up wrapped around her head.

"Rachel, I don't know. I just don't know and we're not staying to find out. Come on," I said, leading her by the hand and inching across to the passageway. "It's time we weren't here." We reached the passage and were halted in our

tracks.

"Please! Don't go. Not yet." It was a pleading voice. Soft. Gentle. Almost commanding. The words were in my head repeating the request. "Don't go. Please."

It wasn't a voice. It was a feeling. "Did you hear it?" I asked.

"Sort of," she answered. "It was inside me, Zach."

The voice appeared to come from everywhere and yet nowhere. It had an indescribably deep melodic tone. I don't think we ever had an option. Whatever it was we had somehow fallen under its spell.

I walked hesitantly back into the centre of the chamber. Rachel kept hold of my arm and followed, wide-eyed. But then I think, my eyes must have looked like saucers too.

"Do not be afraid," the voice reverberated. "No harm will come to you. I am Taras, the keeper of the Earth station. You are the first examples of intelligent earth forms I have seen for many a year. Welcome."

"Where is it, Zach?" Rachel asked.

"I am all around you, Rachel, but I am not a life form you would recognise. My existence is wrapped and embodied in energy."

"You're not a robot or a computer then?" I queried.

"I am partly computer, partly knowledge, partly wisdom and partly life. It rather depends on how I focus."

"Can you see us?" questioned Rachel, less fearful than before.

"I can see. I can feel. I can hear and think. I can act independently or in concert. I embody the complete lifetime knowledge of my creators."

"Your creators?" I said disbelievingly. "But if you're alive how were you made?"

"All in good time," Taras softly rumbled. "Please be seated. All your questions will be answered but first, let me tend to your needs."

"I don't think we need anything, thank you," I said, but we sat just the same, side by side at the smooth, green, marble-like dais.

"Aren't you in need of refreshment?" Taras prompted.

"Well, actually, now that you've mentioned it, I'm starving," Rachel piped.

"Good!" responded Taras. "You're expected home by five thirty. That means you must leave here at 2.30 to allow plenty of time for your return journey. That gives me only a little time to tell you as much as I can. But first - refreshments!"

"How do you know how long it takes to get home? And how do you know we have to be home by five thirty?" I asked incredulously.

"There's very little I don't know about both of you. I have already shared your innermost thoughts and knowledge."

Rachel laughed. "Well, you can't have learned much from me."

"Oh but I have, Rachel," voiced Taras. "I have learned about your spirit of adventure, your sense of fun, your love of nature, and your kindness of soul. And in Zachary, I have discovered a seriousness of thought, consideration for others, qualities of leadership, a keen mind and a concern for the future."

"You've read our minds," I objected.

"More than that Zachary, but don't be worried. I will not harm you. Eat first and then I'll explain."

Taras fell silent. The humming noises remained. We must have sat staring into space for several seconds before Rachel broke the spell and dived into the rucksack for the sandwiches. I'd just taken a bite when I noticed two tumblers on the dais.

"They weren't here before," I said.

"No," she replied reaching for the nearest one. "But let's not waste it."

She drank half of the contents in two gulps. "It's smashing. You try it." I did, much more cautiously.

The tumbler was heavy, rough to the touch and cold. It was made out of a translucent glassy substance. The liquid inside reflected the emerald green light. The taste was indescribable: neither sweet nor sour; it was fruity but not with any fruit I'd ever tasted. Rachel raised her glass in mock toast "Cheers."

I smiled back. "Cheers," and quenched my thirst.

The sandwiches were soon gone, and the drinks. We talked while we ate. It was impossible to make any sense of it. Taras was definitely not from Earth. But where? And why? And when? And what for? Bob and Alan would never believe this unless we could show them. But they wouldn't be back from holiday until late Saturday night. That was three whole days away because we probably wouldn't see them until Sunday. Mum and dad would only laugh and put it down to a vivid imagination and perhaps even forbid us to come back to Romney. It seemed an intractable dilemma.

Taras' voice put an end to our conjecture. "Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?" I queried.

"I now have ninety minutes in which to explain to you as much as I can. Will you come through the Lasergram chamber?"

"What's one of them?" Rachel asked.

"Follow me and I'll show you," Taras said.

I don't know what we followed, or even if there was anything to follow, but our feet were guided, back into the first chamber. Taras began, "Please be seated and do not be afraid. This is a laser operated, holographic projection room. It will help to see my message rather than only to hear it. The green light subsided and we sat on the solid rock seats, which comfortably gave, under our weight. We settled back and the lamps, or lasers, hanging from the ceiling unexpectedly shot out their multi-coloured shafts of light. The narrow beams reflected off the smooth walls and met in a flaming incandescent conflagration in the centre of the chamber. Gradually the area of brightness took the form of a symmetrical ball – a globe hanging unsupported in the darkness.

Taras began, "This is the story of the Sharna, the major planet of the solar system of Tarasium in the constellation of Andropolis. This is the story of my people."