

JACK AND THE SPITFIRES

Book One: The Rocket

by Christopher Stevens

*This book is dedicated to my son James, who shares my love for tales of fantastic
adventure*

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Cover photography by James Stevens

***JACK AND THE SPITFIRES** in the Mines at the Heart of the Sun*

BOOK ONE: THE ROCKET

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Chapter One — SKYLON

Jet Perkins watched her brother's rocket lift off from the far side of the world.

A thousand feet below her, the lights of the city simmered and steamed. Crouching, Jet gripped the railings with one hand and her grandfather's shoulder with the other, and stared up. Beyond the sky, the remote reaches of the Marble lay mostly in darkness.

It was not completely dark. The Ribbon at the centre of space glinted, and behind it the blackness was punctured by specks of light, like stars. All those lights were other cities. Except one.

Almost directly above Jet's upturned face, where the deepest expanse of darkness had been, the burners of her brother Bud's rocket were blazing. Jet saw them spread a red blossom of flame like an eye, staring at her across two thousand miles of atmosphere and void.

She counted the seconds away before the launch, in silence, nodding her head for each beat: thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight... The four thrusters would have to burn for half a minute before they achieved a steady, stable propulsion. If, during these initial moments, the rocket broke free from its cradle of mooring cables, it would spiral into the air and tear itself apart. Or it would topple, and lance sideways, like a javelin into the jungle that surrounded the launchpad.

Nineteen, eighteen...

The fiery eye burned hotter. Jet knew the glass crust beneath the soil of the jungle clearing was soaking up the heat from the thrusters. Directly beneath the four engines, the inner surface of the Marble would already be molten, and the heat would be spreading. Trees around the clearing would be exploding into flame. If the melting glass reached the pylons that anchored the cables, the cradle would collapse. And Bud would be killed.

"Thirteen, twelve..."

She was on her feet now, and whispering the numbers aloud.

Her grandfather, a white-haired man with a swooping moustache, glanced across. "Not yet," he said.

She gestured, pointing into the sky. "Nine, eight, seven..."

Dr Benedict Perkins leant back on his haunches and followed her gaze.

"Six, five," said Jet.

The eye had become as red as blood now, and it pulsed rapidly, as if the burners were inflicting pain on the surface of the Marble.

"Four," said Jet and her grandfather together. Their voices rose. "Three. Two. One. Blast off!"

The chrome rocket, a three-hundred-foot needle so slender that Jet had almost been able to throw her arms around it, seared into the atmosphere. The molten heat of the launchpad reflected from it, a line slashed in red on the sky. To Jet, it seemed as if a single tear had dropped from the eye.

She blinked and rubbed tears from her own eyes. The rocket vanished as it climbed. The red spot in the jungle, hanging like a distant planet above her, was fading. She studied the darkness around it for any flash from a crash-landing, but there was nothing. Jet clamped her hand over her mouth, to stop herself from grinning. She couldn't let that happen before she heard Bud's voice.

Standing with her grandfather beside the cumbersome radio-television, which filled half the parapet at the pinnacle of Lake City's transmitter tower, she waited for the first signal from the rocket.

And waited.

And waited. Jet counted to ten, slowly, and then to twenty. Both hands covered her face now.

The receiver's twin speakers spluttered, as though there was someone crouched inside the wooden cabinet, trying to muffle his own laughter. Jet remembered the first time she had seen its television picture, no bigger than her hands, and how unimpressed she had been — she'd assumed, of course, that the moving figures on the screen were mannequins.

When Bud had removed the backplate to show her the innards contained only bulbs,

wires and valves, Jet had inspected every recess before she could believe this wasn't one of her brother's jokes.

The picture on the screen had frozen. It showed the Skylon rocket still in its cradle, which resembled a crouching spider. Close to the Skylon's tip was a dark speck: that was Jet's big brother, zipped into his flightsuit and strapped upside-down inside the pilot's pod.

Feet-first, the initial acceleration would make his skull feel ready to explode. But head-first, he could black out and never regain consciousness.

Jet counted silently and didn't breathe. And then Bud's voice came through: "This is Skylon, I'm up. Can you guys hear me?"

Dr Perkins closed his eyes and raised his white eyebrows. Jet could tell he disapproved of Bud's radio technique. She thought he looked relieved as well.

"This is One, Skylon," Benedict Perkins said, "receiving you. Are you reporting success of the launch phase, Skylon?"

"Like I said, Gramps. I'm up."

Bud's chuckle rippled across two thousand miles of empty sky. Jet giggled wildly, and hugged her grandfather around his neck. He grabbed a handful of her black hair and tugged her head from side to side, the way he always did when he was proud of her or Bud.

Then he stood, walked three or four steps around the parapet to the other side of the spire, lifted a pair of binoculars to his round spectacles, and studied the lake. It was sunless now, deep in night, but the lights of the cities around its shores glittered and shimmered.

As a young man, Benedict Perkins had lived all over the USA, including Chicago, beside the vast stretches of water known as the Great Lakes. Compared to the Sun Lake, they were puddles. The Sun Lake was more than 700 miles across, a raggedly circular sea that seemed, from where they stood, to extend far up the side of the Marble's interior landscape.

Bud's voice, beamed across the spherical emptiness of the planet's core, made the speakers crackle again. "I'm free from gravity now. Losing the launch engines in three, two, one... gone. OK, disengaged. Velocity of 1,837mph. Doesn't feel like I'm moving at all."

Dr Perkins moved back to the radio-television cabinet and pressed a cream toggle-switch. The lever was spring-loaded — when he lifted his thumb, the switch would flick back up.

"Bud, please confirm: are you reporting success at stage two?"

"Looks that way, Gramps."

Dr Perkins stabbed down on the toggle-switch again. "Bud, I'm 150 years older than this technology," he drawled, in his southern American accent. "Make it easy for me, spell it out."

"S, U, C, K, S, E, S... er... S."

The old man stared into the sky. "It's your spelling that suckses, Buddy Boy."

"If I had any brains, Grampa, you know I wouldn't be doing this. Any sign He's seen us yet?"

"He's seen you. The whole world could've seen you. Question is, what does He make of you? If there's alarms going off, we can't hear them in Lake City. And the eclipse shield ain't moving any so I guess He's figuring you for a missile assault on the Ribbon.

Figuring you don't have a prayer. When you go sailing past, He'll think again."

"Know what He'll wish?" Bud laughed. "He'll wish it was Him in this rocket. What I'm doing, not even the Creator Himself has done this. Flying free, straight across the planet." His American accent was an echo of his grandfather's.

Jet leant over the microphone grille in the top of the cabinet. "What's it feel like, Bud?"

"Hey, sis! You hold on tight there. Don't want you falling off that roof. Listen, it feels strange. Can't see nothing but the dark, can't feel nothing but my bruises. Got shook up pretty good when the engines kicked in. Now they're gone, just feels like I'm floating. Like being strapped into water or something. Hey, I can see a light, real far off. That's a city, someplace. Don't ask me where, you know I never could tell the night sky. I need you up here with me, pointing out the sights."

"Wish I was, Bud," she murmured.

"Mind you come collect me, now, if that shield shuts in. Don't want to be walking home across the lake. Can't see that city no more, wherever it was. Left it behind. Reckon eighteen hundred miles an hour is pretty fast after all."

Dr Perkins pushed the toggle-switch again. "Bud, the battery in this thing is half juiced out already. Going to shut the link down, conserve some power, in case we've got something more important to say later on."

"On my way, Gramps. And sis, you leave the aerobatics to me, OK? Hang on to those railings."

"With both hands," she promised, but Bud couldn't hear her. Dr Perkins had turned the power dial to zero, switching off the waveband display on top of the cabinet. The frozen image on the television screen shrank to a bright spot that fizzled out.

ii.

A gust of wind, stronger than most that had been buffeting them for two hours, made the parapet tremble under her feet, and the transmitter's 200ft aerial vibrated and groaned above them. The tower was the highest building in the Marble, a structure like an upended champagne flute that was circled by eighty stone rings from its base to its roof. The topmost, where Jet stood, was just six feet across. She thought her grip on the railing could not get any tighter, until she risked a look at the parapets below. Even the tallest buildings around them didn't reach as high as the ring at the tower's midpoint.

From the ground, Jet had thought the rings looked like radio waves, rising faster and faster up the narrowing tower before they discharged from its tip and expanded throughout the world. From above, they looked more like the brinks of eighty waterfalls, waiting for the wind to wash her off the roof.

Jet tore her eyes away from the drop, and looked across at the tethered rollriders which had brought them up here. The rollriders bobbed, never quite capsizing in the currents, like hats floating upside-down in a stream. The brim of each was a metal disc which acted as a circular wing, running around the hanging hemisphere that Bud called 'the cockpit' or 'the bucket'. It was more the shape of half a tennis ball, but Bud told Jet only mannequins could sit in tennis balls.

Lifting the radio cabinet into place had been the hardest piece of flying she'd ever done. She and Gramps had practised the manoeuvre again and again, on a wooden tower at the Skylon base — but doing it for real, a thousand feet up, in the eddying winds around the transmitter building, had scared her speechless. And her grandfather's praise had left her lost for words too: "Your brother himself couldn't have done that much better."

Rollriders weren't meant for lifting equipment. They weren't meant for anything, except fun. Grampa Perkins had made the first one, the prototype, six or seven years earlier, for Bud. The boy had been about 12, the age Jet was now, and he had broken his arm after bragging he could pilot it right over the elm tree beside the grain barn. Bud always insisted he could have won his bet if he hadn't lifted his head and hollered as the rollrider cleared the top branches. That had been enough to tip and flip it.

The rollriders that followed — and there were many, most of them spinning to disaster in the fields after the pilot had fallen out — gained a degree of stability. Bud said sitting in the first ones was, "like balancing on a beachball, halfway up a hill". Now he could take one up high enough to clear the houses, lean it into a looping, rolling orbit, pick up speed until he was bowling along faster than a motorbike, and then stand up.

With his hands palm-down between his knees, Bud had perfected the trick of shuffling his feet up the sides of the bucket onto the brim, until he was straddling the seat. He'd straighten up slowly and turn the rollrider so his right leg led slightly — "got to get one foot in front of the other, sis," he explained, "cos if you lean forward when you're four-square, there ain't a fancy dance in the book that can keep you from launching right onto your face."

With his arms outstretched, he could nudge his weight onto his front foot and cut through the air like a stone skimming across water. He could sway, and make the rollrider waltz, as if it was spinning along the ground. And he could thrust his back foot down, and make the machine skid to a shuddering halt, so hard that Jet would imagine she could see the air spray up in sheets.

And it was all done without an engine, just gravity pushing against gravity.

Jet felt a movement in a pocket beneath her protective clothing, and reached to her throat to check the zip had not slipped down. Her grandfather's overalls were unzipped to the waist, revealing his white suit and spotted bow-tie. He had the glasses to his face again, studying the lake.

"Surely He knows by now," the old man muttered. The binoculars were trained on the furthest shore. The lake extended so far up the curving horizon, its distant edge was high above eye level.

Dr Perkins turned his inspection leftwards, scrutinising the straggling inlets on the least inhabited stretch of shore. He stood and scanned for a long time, with the wind whipping his long white hair. At last he half turned and reached towards Jet, offering her the binoculars.

"Look over to Cossack Grad, child," he instructed. "Tell me what you see right at the centre."

The distance across the lake, hundreds of miles, vanished, as Jet lifted the binoculars with their mannequin-made lenses to her face. She could make out the whole city, like a wheel of light built around a dark hub. "There's nothing," she said. "It's just a black-out. That must be where the Chase Stadium is, Gramps."

"Where your father took you and Bud to the chases, must be three years back," he agreed.

"Four years."

"Maybe it was. Can you recall what the day was?"

"A Franksday," she said. "The Cossack Chases always start at midnight on Presleydays and Franksdays. And today is Franksday." As she said it, Jet understood why her

grandfather was watching the stadium. "The lake went dark hours ago, it should be getting busy up there. Why does it look closed?"

"I'm thinking about what's inside the chase track."

"The Blood Pool," she replied. All the stadium's events were staged around a crater in the Marble's crust, where the glass was a murderous red. During the day, the brilliance of the Sun Lake refracted through it. When the lake was dark, as it was now, the Blood Pool was dark too — but at midnight, immense lamps were fired up beneath it, and sluice gates opened to flood the crater. As the pool filled, writhing, gnashing machines were hurled in, with fins like knives, and tails of chain with spiked balls in clusters at their tip.

And as the chasers raced and jostled round the track, the machines grew in the roasting red light, until they were big enough to tear apart anything, however finely armoured, that stumbled into the Blood Pool — big enough even to thrash their way out of the pool and onto the track.

One of the machines, grotesquely distended, had done just that, to Jet's horror, during the last chase of the night when she and Bud were there. It had blown apart before it could seize anything, but the monster's razor wreckage had claimed two victims before the race ended.

"The eclipse shields," Dr Perkins said, breaking into her thoughts. "They're designed to shut off all the light. All of it, even the speck that leaks out in the day through the Blood Pool. We know the shields have never been used at night. But when they are, they'll close over the Chase Stadium too. I think we're looking at the only visible sign of an eclipse

shield alert. All around the lake shores, the machinery is running. There's covers sliding and doors opening, along maybe two-and-a-half thousand miles of coast, but that ain't anything we can see from here. The only clue we have is, the Chase Stadium's staying closed. Because the alert's gone out."

He let the words hang in the wind, and then grinned. "Either that, or because there just ain't no chases running tonight. You still got the General in there?"

Jet patted her pocket. "He won't like to come out."

"He's told me so often what he likes and doesn't like, I stopped listening a long while back."

Jet tugged the zipper at her throat and reached into her overalls, pulling out a black pouch tied with cord. She loosened the knot and peered in. "I'm going to lift you out, General," she said.

"Are we on the ground?" replied a voice from inside the bag.

"Even better than that. We're on solid stone with railings around us."

"Then I shall emerge, but first I will deactivate my vision/*deliberate state of calm*," announced the voice. It had a forced, mechanical tone that robbed the words of most of their meaning, and gabbled some so badly that Jet, who knew the General well, could barely translate the sounds.

The General knew humans found his speech hard to interpret. His voice synthesiser gave each metallic word a single beat, without inflection or nuance, all on a single note, so that they dripped steadily to the end of the sentence: "Are, We, On, The, Ground."

The General didn't linger on a word such as 'emerge' or 'vision' any longer than he took to say 'then' or 'but' — he just generated the syllables at double speed. A word like 'deactivate' came out in a blur.

Most mannequins did not talk this way, but they usually understood the General easily enough. With humans, however, communication was so muddled and fraught that the General often tried to clarify his meaning by describing his emotions. Many of his statements came with a subtext, a decoder: "deliberate state of calm" was the General's attempt to convey his refusal to be afraid and, at the same time, his terror.

"General, you're going to be just dandy," said Dr Perkins. "Do you think, just cos you got your eyes open, young Georgette is going to let go of you ?"

"I do not have my eyes open/*repeat for emphasis.*"

"But you will have, cos we need you to look at something. Hold him up, child."

Jet closed her hand around the mannequin's gleaming body. The General's chrome plate, which had been flaking away dangerously when she and Bud first found him, was now lustrous. His head was shaped like an ancient Greek warrior's helmet, with a faceplate that tapered to a point over his chestplate. The ridge that ran from his forehead to his neck could stand up and bristle when his spirits were high, but it lay flat now.

"General," she whispered, "I wouldn't have brought you up here if I didn't know we'd need you so much. Gramps and I have been trying to see in the dark, but you know we can't. Bud's depending on you. He could die if you don't open your eyes."

It was flattery and an appeal to the General's devotion to her brother. Jet knew that mixture worked every time. This time, it also happened to be genuine.

A pair of lights flickered on the General's faceplate, tiny red coals blazing against the chrome. "An imbalance in my legs is detected/*may be illusory, little cause for alarm,*" he announced.

"You don't need your legs," Jet said. "I'm holding you."

The mannequin gripped her thumb and little finger with his silvered hands. His own fingers were fused, with only the thumb free to move, like a crab's pincer.

"The imbalance affects my head also/*fighting desire to cease visual input.*"

"That's just dizziness," she told him.

"General," Dr Perkins said, "the whole future of the Marble could rest at this moment in my granddaughter's right hand."

The mannequin considered this for a moment, and his crest ruffled.

"You may see in the next few minutes things that I cannot see. You'll make decisions on the evidence of what you see, decisions I can't make on my own, decisions that will

change the course of history. And if your decisions are wrong, there's a rocket somewhere up there with my grandson aboard, and that rocket could smash into a wall of metal at nearly two thousand miles an hour. Your call, general."

iii.

Flattery, and an appeal. Just the formula that Jet had used, and no less genuine. But Dr Perkins's speech was so intense, so dramatic, that the mannequin thrummed with emotion, which set Jet's arm buzzing right up to the elbow.

Letting go of her fingers, with the plume of his helmet bristling, the General stood and snapped a salute at Dr Perkins. Then he raised a tiny foot onto Jet's fingertips, rested one forearm against his knee, and shaded his eyes with his other hand.

"I'll stare straight through the crust to the outerness, if that is required/*exaggeration for effect*," he declared.

Dr Perkins tucked one hand inside his jacket, a pose Jet had learned to recognise as a sign that her grandfather was thinking hard. "I hope no heroics are required," he said, "and I hope we're wasting our time up here. The Skylon took off without a hitch: by now it should be the best part of halfway across space. We cut radio contact after lift-off, and it may be that Bud can splash down, dead centre of that lake, with no assistance from us. But if he does need our help, I want to give it early and get out fast. Up here, we're visible. That cuts two ways: being visible means being vulnerable, but this television

transmitter is the only place on the planet where we can be sure of sending a clear radio signal to any point on the Skylon's flightpath. From the Shadowfree Forests to the Sun Lake, we can track him. If I'm right and the Eclipse Shields are about to start closing, we have to identify their pattern and get the rocket locked on to the last open patch of water."

His eyes were fixed on the reflection of Lake City's lights on the near shore. "Bud jettisoned Skylon's boosters," Dr Perkins reminded Jet and the General. "We couldn't risk leaving a light trail across the void. But without engines, there's no way for Bud to change his trajectory until he hits atmosphere on this side of the Marble, and even then he's got nothing more than fins to steer with. He won't be flying, just trying to fall smart.

"With no light trail, at eighteen hundred miles an hour, Bud's making it mighty hard for the Creator to take a shot at him. But there's an easier way to destroy the Skylon, and that's to knock out its navigation. Meaning us. If the shields are shutting in, Bud needs us to tell him where to aim."

The General studied the lake while Dr Perkins spoke, and then stared into the sky. "I cannot discern the launchpad," he commented. "Smoke obscures it."

"You can see smoke in the darkness?" asked Jet.

"Certainly/*justifiable pride*."

"The smoke ain't important. We cleared firebreaks, the launch zone will burn itself out," Dr Perkins said. "Have you tracked Bud yet?"

The mannequin saluted again and reeled off data: the rocket's velocity, its co-ordinates, something called 'residual gravitational drag'. Jet understood only one of the numbers, the time till splashdown — 39 minutes and 24 seconds.

"Splashdown where?" asked Dr Perkins. "How close to the lake's true centre?"

"Exactly central."

"What's the fastest we've ever seen those shields shut down, Georgette?"

He already knew the answer, and Jet understood this, knew that her grandfather wanted her to work out the situation for herself. "Just once, Grampa, it took 42 minutes and ten seconds."

There had been eight eclipses in her lifetime. All of them had occurred in daylight, blotting out the brilliance of the Sun Lake and plunging the whole of the Marble into darkness. Every eclipse had been different. Some started from all sides, filling in towards the centre piece by piece, like a jigsaw completed by an invisible hand. Some closed across the water like a pair of curtains, or fell in a single sweep like an eyelid.

The fastest eclipse had seemed to swirl, with fingers of darkness twisting in from every shore to meet in a spiral. "Bud called it the Twister," Jet said. "I was about four years old. It scared me. But the last stretch of water to disappear was right in the middle of the lake. That would be ideal now."

"And if what we get is not ideal?"

"A side-to-side shutdown, starting now, would cover the centre in thirty minutes. But Bud would still have almost half the lake to aim at." She looked up at her grandfather's face. "Bud's going to make it. Isn't he?"

"He's got you to help him," said Dr Perkins, and Jet glowed. "General, can you tell me what the Ribbon's defences are doing?"

Jet could see nothing but faint reflections as the Creator's stronghold slowly turned through the void at the middle of the Marble. The mannequin in her hand, she knew, could discern every detail: the ships issuing from the Ribbon's ports, the mesh of electricity that billowed around it, the disintegrator cannons along its seams.

"The Creator is being cautious/*understatement*."

"Is He?" Dr Perkins asked. "Yet He must know the Skylon isn't aimed at Him. It's plainly shooting at the works on the bottom of the lake. The Creator sees that, but He guards the fortress and not the lake. The shields are on standby, when an instant response, whatever pattern He chose, would have kept us out. Why didn't He react?"

The doctor was talking to himself now. "Is He so afraid of a direct attack that He can think of nothing else? Is He too cautious? Or am I too confident?"

"Are you confident?" asked Jet, hopefully.

"General, scan all the shore. Assess any movement for its hostile intent, if it's only one cog turning."

Hundreds of feet below, an air disc patrolled the rooftops. It was signalling to another disc, somewhere unseen over the city, and its lights caught Jet's eye — gold and green, switching back and forth along its rim. She pointed it out to her grandfather.

"Maybe that's it," Dr Perkins said. "Maybe He is anticipating a missile assault on Lake City's factories. I wonder how He thinks air discs can prevent —"

His words were interrupted by a flash of green-white light that burst from the centre of space like a bubble and faded with a phosphorescent glow over all the inner landscape of the Marble. Jet gazed up. The whole planet seemed to be lit in reverse, like the negative of a photograph. She had never experienced such a powerful sense of enclosure — she suddenly saw that the Marble held everything within itself, the way a bead of water could contain the reflection of a world. And she was inside that bead.

All the familiar sights were strange now, as though they had been painted onto the sky in the wrong colours. The forests two thousand miles above her head were glaring white, the intersecting mountain ranges running down the sides of the Marble were red like veins beneath the skin, and the cities were spatters of blue and black, like ink spots.

Jet thought how odd the Marble would seem to any child who hadn't been born there, as she had been — how impossible it would appear that wherever you went here, you were always at the bottom of the world, looking up at the rest of creation... and gravity always held you down.

The light faded to black, but Jet kept staring up, until sirens erupted. Their howl, even a thousand feet above the city, was shattering. Jet yelled as the General's pincers gripped her hand, and she couldn't hear her own voice.

Deep in the lake, a million lights glittered, like a galaxy trapped under glass. As Jet stared, the lights burned brighter, and she could see they were uniformly spaced, in a grid.

The doctor grabbed her wrist, forcing her to hold the General higher, but even if the mannequin could have told them what the lights meant, there was no hope of hearing his voice above the sirens' scream.

Jet knew what the alarms signalled. The shields were closing. In the dead of night, an eclipse had begun.

Skylon: Part Two

Jack Lennox was hungry. He'd been hungry all his life, and the feeling was so familiar that he wouldn't have noticed it... if there hadn't been, this morning, a fine chance to do something about it.

He sat on the Embankment wall in London, kicking his heels over the River Thames, and grinned at the terrier beside him. The dog was biscuit brown, with a white blaze on his

chest and under his chin, and a torn ear. The boy was dark-skinned, dressed in short trousers and a sleeveless pullover. Both of them looked like strays.

Jack could feel the animal's ribs as he patted it, but he could also feel sinew, and the tail was beating on the stone wall with a decisive rhythm.

"Good dog, Woz!" said Jack.

The tail thumped harder.

The dog trusted him. They had only known each other a few hours, but Jack could tell he was trusted — the animal was looking at him in a way no living creature had really done before. They were twenty feet above the swirling gunge of the river, and the dog was as relaxed as Jack was.

The first link of their bond had been forged the moment Jack given the dog a name. He had been hiding under a railway wagon in the repair yard at St Pancras station, bracing himself along a rusting axle so that anyone who ducked down to look behind the wide wheels would have less chance of spotting him.

Jack was eating the workshop foreman's sandwiches, and he didn't want to be spotted.

He ate quickly, because even if he was seen the foreman couldn't make him give back what was already gone. And they were smashing sandwiches — ham and piccalilli, in rough slices of white bread, with crusts that turned to crumbs between his teeth when he tore at them, and thick margarine. Not surprising, thought Jack as he stuffed the remains

of the first round into his mouth and started to unwrap the second, without letting the greaseproof paper rustle — not surprising the foreman was such a porker.

A cup of sweet tea would have washed it down beautifully, and Jack had seen a candy-striped vacuum flask in the foreman's office, but while the workmen's boots were stamping back and forth across the yard, and the air was blue with people yelling terrible things about Jack's morals and his manners and his parents, he didn't think it would be too clever to show himself.

And suddenly he was aware of a pair of eyes on him, and he knew he'd been found.

A dog was watching him — a biscuit-brown dog, with a white chest and a torn ear. It had to belong either to the yard or to one of the men, and when it started barking they would find him... but the dog looked as if it might share Jack's moral failings. It seemed more interested in the sandwiches than the crime or the criminal.

Jack lowered the bread from his mouth and tore off a sliver of ham. "Wozyourname?" he whispered.

The dog's tail flickered doubtfully. It had no reason at all to expect food from the human, but it did have a streak of optimism and it was willing to hope.

Jack threw the morsel. The dog caught it, swallowed it quick as a breath, licked its lips at the memory, and then sat. Sitting was clearly something it did only when life was going very well indeed. Jack knew the feeling, but he urgently gestured at the dog to stand up, because its tail was swishing noisily on the earth.

The dog stood. Jack was impressed.

"Wozyourname?" he whispered again.

The dog wagged harder, but he didn't sit.

"Wozyourname — is that your name? Woz? Good dog, Woz!"

On an impulse, he pulled all the filling from one half of the sandwich. "Wait, Woz," he murmured. "Wait." He held the meat in front of the dog's face.

Woz didn't move.

"OK, have it!"

Woz nipped the ham out of his fingers, swallowed it in two gulps and then nuzzled Jack's hand shyly, licking the piccalilli off his fingertips.

They shared the rest of the sandwich, and Jack scratched the dog between his ears as he watched the workmen's boots through the spokes of a wheel. The men had stopped shouting, and probably they'd started to forget about him — all except the foreman, at any rate — but they'd remember him soon enough if he tried to leave.

He would probably have to escape the way he'd come, by waiting for dark when the yard was locked up and climbing over the wall. The sandwiches had been magnificent, best in class, but he wasn't sure he'd bother with the repair yard at St Pancras again if it meant eight hours hiding under a wagon.

Not that Jack visited many places twice. He was too easily recognised, with his brown skin and his tightly curling hair. And if anyone got a chance to look into his face for a moment, they'd see his eyes were different colours. It was an awkward combination, for a boy who was trying not to be noticed.

The dog showed no sign of leaving his side. Jack smiled as he considered the idea that he'd found a friend for ever with a slice of stolen ham, and then he wished it could be true: he'd like to take Woz with him. He thought of the tricks he could teach him — the posh people in Hyde Park could make their dogs fetch, and lie down, and walk to heel, and Woz had to be loads cleverer than any posh dog.

He'd learn brilliant tricks. For instance...

Jack could bandage up one of Woz's paws with a stick for a splint, and watch the houses where the posh people came out with their dogs every day. He'd lie in wait, and run up to them, crying, and showing them poor Woz's poor old paw.

And this would be the clever bit — Woz would whine. Or even howl. Jack was certain he could teach the little dog to do that on cue.

Jack would say his pet had been run over. Or kicked by a bad man — a fat man, with a cigar. That was the touch of detail which would seal it. Anyone with a dog of their own would want to help. "He's so hungry," Jack would sniffle. "He ain't ate nothing for two days."

No — two days sounded cruel. It was too long, though Jack had often gone without a bite for two days. "I ain't had nothing to give him to eat all day." That was better. It wasn't downright begging, which would get you nowhere with posh people, but it let them know the boy was as hungry as the dog. Result: dinner.

Or, more realistically, a clip round the ear nine times out of ten, and dinner the tenth.

Which was more than good enough.

And that was just one idea. Jack could hide under the wagon and dream up more all day.

Daydreaming was a particular talent of his. So was climbing walls in the dark.

But he couldn't climb a wall with a dog under his arm.

Jack rested his head on his arm and looked into Woz's face. He was sure he could teach that dog anything — even climbing, given a week or two.

The dog looked back. His eyes seemed to say, "Try me. You tell me, and I'll do it."

Someone was whistling. It was 'I Got Rhythm', that song from the American In Paris movie. Everyone was singing it in London that summer. Jack craned his neck and saw the back of a pair of boots, about four paces away.

He lifted his hand from the dog's neck, and pointed. "Woz," he hissed, "bad man. Look, there."

The dog bared his teeth. The fur along his backbone rose in a ridge. Somewhere in his gut a low growl began to curdle.

"Woz — get him!"

The order was barely more than a whisper, but the boots suddenly started to turn. Woz darted out and skirted sideways. Jack saw this was an animal which was used to getting kicks and avoiding them, and he felt the bond between them tighten.

And then Woz lunged up. He didn't bark or yap: he just bit.

The workman bellowed. Jack rolled off the axle and squirmed the length of the wagon, to emerge as far away as he could.

Just as he'd hoped, the man's mates were all running towards the commotion, and the fat foreman was standing in his office doorway, gawking.

Woz was attached to the seat of the workman's pants, and his four legs were flung out as the man whirled, trying to grab hold of whatever had attacked him at his most vulnerable.

"There's the boy!" yelled the foreman. "Get hold of him!"

But not one of the men was even close to him, and they would have to have been within touching distance to stand a chance. As he reached the gate, Jack turned and shouted, "Woz! Good dog! Come on!" And then he kept running.

ii.

He didn't dare look round until he heard the bark. He'd been sure the dog belonged to someone in the yard and couldn't really go on the run with him. But they were pals now. Their friendship had been sealed with a ham sandwich. And Woz trusted Jack — it was in his face and the way he sat, and in the way he'd curled up to Jack's sleeping body on the sheets of newspaper, under the bushes in the gardens behind the Savoy hotel.

Jack knew it had to be trust. He'd never encountered anything like it.

Now they sat beside the river, and Jack watched the barges and daydreamed. He'd climb aboard one of the ships, and stow away with Woz, and voyage to Jamaica, and find his father, and never be hungry again. Or they'd sail into a storm, and the captain would be washed overboard but Jack would dive into the sea and save his life, and the captain would be so grateful that he'd adopt Jack as his son and take him exploring all round the world.

A police boat buzzed up the river, jinking between the bigger craft. It sent a wake slapping against the embankment. That sound, and the sight of the police, reminded Jack where he was.

Across the river, the funfair was starting up. It was part of the 1951 Festival of Britain, and the music of the carousel was already drifting over the water. There weren't too many people there yet, but the sun was well up and the last of the smog had cleared on the breeze. Before long the South Bank would be thronged.

Jack could see the galloping horses, bobbing as the carousel turned. He could see the silver Skylon, a sculpture like a comic-book rocket, suspended by a cradle of cables.

More spaceships whirled on the end of an arm like a crane, and for 3d children could sit in one, zooming into the sky and diving at the crowds and screaming in wild terror. Jack would have loved to ride, but it was a long while since he'd had 3d, and the fairground attendants wouldn't let him on for nothing, even when they had empty seats.

The hot sausage sellers wouldn't give him so much as a slice of fried onion either.

The Festival was colourful and fun, and everyone seemed to think it proved the Fifties would be the most exciting decade in England's history, and the papers said the rides were so thrilling that even the princesses would dress up as ordinary people and slip out of Buckingham Palace to come to the fair. On the other hand, Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret wouldn't be trying to half-inch a sausage in a bun.

Some of the older lads, the ones who had been caught a time or three, swore the Festival was a dipper's paradise, the best place to pick a pocket since the war and the Blitz, when half of London had been crowded into bomb shelters. Jack didn't remember anything about the Blitz, and he hadn't come to London until he ran away from his aunts in Liverpool, after the war was ended.

"I won't go dipping," he told Woz. "Mug's game. It's way too easy to get caught. And anyhow, most of them at the Festival are going to be on their guard against lads like me."

Jack preferred to take things when when their owners were being careless. If a greengrocer put his freshest fruit in boxes outside his window, to make customers think everything inside the dingy shop would be as juicy — well, he was asking for trouble, wasn't he? If a baker put a tray of loaves in his van, and went back into the bakery for

another lot — served him right for being too lazy to lock the van doors. The office girls who took their lunches of sardines and crackers and homemade fruitbread into the park, and sat on the grass with their sleeves rolled up and their eyes closed — well, they were just plain silly. Where did they think they were, Clacton-on-Sea?

He wouldn't take the girls' handbags, though, or try and stick his hand in the shop tills. You could catch a lot worse than a thump round the head for that. He'd seen an older boy arrested, that summer, caught as he tried to pinch a purse. Before the copper had turned up, half a dozen adults had lain into the lad. He was black and blue by the time the handcuffs went on.

"Hope they hang him," one man had shouted. "Save us all a lot of trouble later."

And if he had stolen money, Jack wouldn't have been safe. The one muggins any thief could safely rob was a smaller thief. Jack made sure everyone knew he never had a ha'penny. He slept in the parks and gardens when the weather was dry, and when it rained took shelter anywhere he could: sheds, cellars, depots, railway stations. That was how he'd been at St Pancras, where he'd discovered the foreman of the repairs yard had a booth with a desk to hide his ham sarnies in.

"Watcha think, Woz?" Jack said. "Trouble is, we're spoiled now. Bit of bread and an old apple won't be good enough for us any more. We're used to ham and piccalilli, the finer things. It ought to be roast beef today, or do you fancy a bit of salmon? I never had salmon. Had tuna once."

Jack burst out laughing, and the dog looked at him, puzzled. "I swiped this lady's sandwiches. She was nice-looking, really. It was outside the zoo, up in Regent's Park. She had gloves on, and a hat, but it wasn't cold — she was just dressed up. Like she was meeting a feller. She must have been early, because she gets her book out, and straight away she's lost to the world. You know the look. Like she's having a dream, and it's all written down on the pages."

Jack paused. The dog shuffled patiently, and put his head on his paws. "Must be good, reading a book. I could tell she wasn't going to eat her dinner. I could've walked up and blown a trumpet, and she wouldn't have noticed. I strolled by, round behind the bench, lifted the bag, strolled off. Went and sat under a tree, facing her, and I tell you what — them sandwiches was something special. It was meat, but crumbly. And it stuck to your teeth. In soft bread. I finished them before her boyfriend turned up, and that's when she noticed her dinner was gone. They did look comic, searching all round the bench. And then he gived her a kiss on the hand, like he was promising to buy her dinner in a cafe. So I yelled out, 'Miss! Thanks for the sandwiches!' Her boyfriend shook his fist, and he would've run after me, but the lady, she burst out laughing. Like I said, she was nice. So I shouted, 'What was in them? I'll have that again!' And she shouted back, 'Tuna!'"

Woz wagged his tail. No one had ever spoke so many words to the dog without aiming a kick. He could have sat on the wall for hours with his young master.

Jack, though, was scrambling down. Memories of tuna sarnies wouldn't make him fat.

Maybe Smithfield would be their best bet. The market would be at its busiest, with dozens of porters hurrying between the carts and the stalls, slabs of meat stacked on their shoulders. Every one of them was carrying enough prime beef or pork to feed Woz for a lifetime. But it would be tricky for an eleven-year-old boy and his terrier to slope off with half a pig.

There were plenty of butchers' and grocers' shops between Smithfield and St Pauls — but no one would let Jack through the door with a dog, and he wanted Woz to create a diversion. They could try the street markets up the East End, but the barrow boys all knew Jack's face. It was the same round Covent Garden.

Jack's gaze kept straying back to the funfair across the river. Without thinking, he'd started to walk west, past Cleopatra's Needle, heading towards the temporary Bailey bridge that the army had thrown across the Thames beside Hungerford Bridge. It was there for the Festival crowds.

"Come on," Jack told Woz. "Let's go to the fair."

Chapter Two — TEDS

Points of light burst through the surface of the Sun Lake. Beneath them, as if dragged out of the water by the blazing lamps, black walls of metal towered up. It seemed as though the lake was an open mouth that had sprouted metal ramps, protruding like teeth from jaw to jaw. And every tooth was growing fresh teeth, and the fangs were reaching out to each other across the water.

These were the shields, clamping shut, in an eclipse far faster than anything Jet had seen before. The pattern of lights was a blur on the far shore, around Cossack Grad — Jet could see, along the nearest bays, that there were still countless gaps, stretches of water at least a hundred yards across, but at least a quarter of the lake had been blotted out in a matter of seconds. At this rate, the eclipse would be complete in perhaps five minutes.

"Tell Bud," she screamed at Dr Perkins, "he has to pull out. Tell him!" But her words were lost in the insane noise of the sirens, and she pointed desperately at the radio and then at the sky.

The gnashing of the metal teeth made the ground shake, and the parapet at the tower's top was swaying and trembling. Jet clung to the railing as Dr Perkins pushed past her, lurching to the receiver cabinet. Its small screen was almost oval, set in a frame of wooden slats, with bakelite dials to adjust the picture. It flashed as he switched it on. The image began to expand slowly, from a dot, and when it was no bigger than a pocketwatch Jet saw that it still showed the Skylon in its launch cradle.

All these details registered in her mind. The vibration under her feet was continuous, but she felt each movement as something individual, almost countable. The pounding noise in her ears had thirty different notes, and she could separate them.

Time had not slowed down. It was more that Jet's senses had speeded up.

When the silence came, it hit her so hard that she was almost knocked off the parapet. It was so total, and her ears were ringing so badly, that for a few seconds it seemed worse than the sirens themselves.

Then a metallic crash echoed across the city. It sounded like a door slamming. Another followed, and another — but louder, like ten doors. The reports boomed faster and faster, and a thunderous background rumbling began, rolling in from the lake. Jet turned towards it, in time to see the last reflections of Lake City's lights disappear, as a metal sheet closed over the bay.

All across the Sun Lake, the gaps were disappearing. The towering rings of teeth that stabbed through its surface were being linked by tongues of black steel. Every time a gap vanished, the guidelights winked out. Hundreds were eliminated every second — but hundreds of thousands remained. The eclipse had slowed. As the gaps snapped shut, Jet realised the blackout might take much longer than five minutes. There might even be time for her brother to complete his mission.

"General," she said, steadying the mannequin in both hands, "can you see any pattern?"

"Skylon," yelled her grandfather behind her, "this is One, do you receive?"

The General, with his legs held securely, rested his hands on Jet's knuckles. "More observation required," he said. The mannequin's red eyes pulsed as they registered multiple, individual eclipses every moment across the breadth of the Lake.

"Skylon, please copy me," Dr Perkins shouted into the microphone. "Wake up, Buddy, speak to me!"

"Gramps, relax." The voice squelched through the speakers. "I'm floating through space with all the lights out, gives a guy a shock to hear you shouting all of a sudden."

"Buddy, we have to make a decision. The Eclipse Shields are deploying."

"That's a nice surprise."

"It's a new configuration. We don't know yet if there's going to be open water, or where, when you reach the atmosphere on this side."

"So wait till I arrive," suggested Bud, "tell me then."

"No way of saying whether we'll still be here." Dr Perkins straightened up, glanced at Jet, then hunched over the radio-TV again. "You have to abort. Go for the slowest re-entry you can. Use the chutes, then eject."

"I've come a long way, Gramps, I ain't ready to give up."

"Get ready. That's an order."

"Seems to me it ain't your choice."

"Bud, this is the wrong time to get wise."

"Ain't your choice," Bud Perkins repeated. "I'll decide whether I'm taking any risks."

"You'll do as I say. I ain't asking you, boy, I'm ordering."

"And what?" Bud's voice drawled more slowly than ever, from a place in the sky where gravity had no meaning. "Seems to me, I go ahead and get it right, you'll have to thank me. I get it wrong, you got no one to yell at anyhow."

Dr Perkins paused, his eyes scanning around the tower. "You're the big hero, ain't scared to die," he said. "Your little sister's next to me, remember. Care to tell it to her?"

"Listen to him, Bud, please," Jet said. "Most of the lake is already gone. If we thought you had a chance, we'd say."

"Stay cool, sis. You got the General there? What does he say?"

"There is a pattern/*tentative*," the mannequin reported.

"Ten what?"

"He means he knows there's some kind of logic to this eclipse," Dr Perkins snapped, "but none of us can see what it is."

"Pattern established," the mannequin contradicted him. "Time to completion unknown, requires further observation/*distractions resented*."

"What pattern?" asked Jet.

"Consider the lake as forty-four sectors," began the General.

"OK," she said quickly, "I believe you."

A woman's voice snapped from the speakers, haughty and authoritative: "All of the Marble will give full attention to the Creator."

ii.

The television screen had begun to glow white, with a magnesium intensity. Somewhere in the centre was the ghost of an outline, a masked figure.

"My people," the speakers boomed. "Do not be afraid. There has tonight been an attempt on my life. It has failed."

Jet glanced at her grandfather. His face was contorted, as if in pain, as he watched an image that was almost too brilliant to bear.

"Until the pathetic, misguided creatures who plotted my assassination are dead, a state of emergency will prevail everywhere in the Marble. Every denizen will remain indoors. Every television will remain on. All will attend to my broadcasts. Any suspected sighting of the criminals will be instantly reported. Any denizen providing assistance, of any kind, to the criminals will be disintegrated without trial."

One side of the screen shattered in a milky web, as if it had been hit with a hammer. A wisp of smoke curled up. The figure, indistinct as a pencil-line on a lightbulb, kept talking: "In seeking to kill me, these murderers threaten all your lives. I am your Creator. Betray me, and you betray everything you are and everything you love. Never forget —"

The smoke darkened, and the screen cracked from top to bottom. A gout of blue flame flashed through the slats. Dr Perkins squeezed his hand over his eyes and, blinking at the burned-out television, said: "That was broadcast on every wavelength in the spectrum. However your set was tuned, you'd pick that up. Seems it's not good for the circuits to be so close to the transmitter."

"If we'd been further away," Jet asked, "would the picture have been clearer?"

"Maybe some. Not a whole deal. He's the Creator — He's supposed to dazzle you. And that voice... I didn't reckon our speakers could produce so much depth. Must've been something in the signal to enhance the hardware."

"Is that possible?"

"Like I say, He's the Creator. Anything's possible."

"And He believes we were trying to kill Him."

"He believes nothing of the kind," said her grandfather. He lifted the microphone.

"Skylon, this is One, are you still receiving?"

The speakers buzzed faintly.

"OK Bud, our system here is pretty badly blown up, but I'm guessing maybe we can still send a signal. We can't hear you, kinda hoping you can hear us. Maybe you just heard, the Creator has vowed to the Marble that He'll never breathe easy till He sees you and me dead. Let's not make it easy for Him, Buddy-boy. You're going to parachute out — unless you hear otherwise from me."

As fast as a breath, an air disc spun past them. It was fifty feet across, with a stuttering array of coloured lights along its rim, and during the instant that it was alongside the parapet, Jet knew, it had photographed them from every angle. It probably lacked the intelligence to interpret what it saw, but the disc would certainly be relaying everything to a controller on the ground.

"Get gone," ordered Dr Perkins, grabbing Jet's elbow and pushing her towards the tethered rollriders. And then, as the air disc banked and came skimming back towards the tower, he yelled, "Get down!" and forced Jet to the floor. Her right leg dropped into empty air, and she clutched at the railing above to stop herself from falling over the side.

The disc was silent. It revolved slowly as it scythed towards them, turning not for flight but for balance — like the rollriders, it floated by repelling gravity. The rollriders were clumsy and comical, all bucket and brim; the discs were perfectly graceful, and lethal. Inside their rim was an elongated bubble, and Jet saw the base of this bubble slide open as it bore down on her. Thousands of brown dots, like spores, spilled out. They swirled and eddied, and Dr Perkins was on his feet, swatting them away, as the air disc skimmed past.

"Get the General inside," he shouted, and pulling the black pouch from her pocket Jet stuffed the mannequin into it headfirst. "Sorry," she told him, and drew the cord tight before tucking the bag into her open overalls. Then she joined her grandfather, batting the spores away from the remains of the television set. They were soft and almost weightless, feathery balls of fluff that seemed to be attracted to her hands and arms. They followed all her movements, never quite touching her, like magnetised dust.

Jet knew they were not magnetic. Each ball trailed long, invisible tendrils of unbreakable thread. The threads wrapped themselves around anything they touched — fingers, wrists, arms, legs. They were scattered all over the parapet and, as Jet tried to clear them away with her feet, every kick attached more of them to her shoes.

The fluffballs couldn't hurt her, but if they became entangled with a machine they would destroy it. A single thread that worked its way into one of the General's joints would tie itself more and more tightly inside him, until a limb had to be amputated, or worse. Jet didn't know if the radio set was vulnerable — she'd seen inside it and there were only wires and bulbs, with no moving parts. And it had exploded, so it was probably safe now from anything as delicate as a fluffball. But as long as hope remained of getting one last message to Bud, to order him to abandon the Skylon, Jet would do all she could to protect the radio.

Dr Perkins was chuckling as he made grabs at the drifting fluffballs, which seemed to dance away from his fingertips and then chase them. "This is how He aims to execute us — bombard us with fairies."

"Fairies?"

"When I was a kid, there were yellow flowers in the meadows round our schoolhouse, and we called them Dandy Lions. And one morning, you'd wake up and the flowers had turned to white fluffballs that flew apart when you blew on them. We used to say they were fairies."

"When the air disc came back," said Jet, "I thought it would disintegrate us."

"This transmitter cost something like three trillion megawatts. Maybe He doesn't want to start blasting dis-rays at it. Guess we're safer up here than we knew."

The thunder of the shields was constant now, as sound rolled in from further and further across the lake. There was a new noise too, like a hammer and a drill.

Inside Jet's pocket the General was struggling, and she could hear the muffled drone of his voice. Once she'd untangled all the fluffballs from her clothing, she tugged open the pouch and peeped in.

"Show me the eclipse/*urgency*," commanded the mannequin.

"Just your head, then," she told him. "I don't want you tangling with Grampa's fairies."

She arranged the opening of the pouch around the General's shoulders. His eyes flickered across the clashing surface of the lake, which grew darker every moment as the towering metal ramps crashed down and the guidelights were extinguished.

"The pattern is clear. There will be time to complete the mission/*grim satisfaction*."

"How certain are you?"

"The last gaps in the shield will be filled ninety-three seconds after Skylon splashes down."

"Cutting it close," commented Dr Perkins.

"Few of the spaces that will remain could be considered suitable/*note of caution*."

"You mean most of the holes will be too far from the centre."

"Others will be partially closed. Even the biggest will be a pinprick in the shield/*confidence wavering*."

"Can you supply precise co-ordinates?"

"Grampa!" Jet clutched at his arm. "If you even hint to Bud that there's a gap, you know he'll aim at it. It isn't worth the risk!"

"Jet." Her grandfather laid both hands on her head, then touched her chin and lifted her face. "This isn't just the best chance we'll get. It's probably the only chance." He reached to take the General, in his pouch, from her hands, but she pulled away.

"You can't be sure. You could be killing him!"

"The young fool is going to try and hit the water — you heard him! He ain't quitting. I'm aiming to tell Bud the safest course, you're fixing to stop me: which of us is doing the most to kill him? Hey?"

Dr Perkins reached out and snatched the General from his pouch by his head. The mannequin's legs kicked in panic.

"Co-ordinates, General."

"To the best of..." the mannequin started to say.

"No fancy words! Just the numbers!"

"Transverse 01 08 53," the General began, his faceplate pinched between Dr Perkins finger and thumb. Jet saw the tiny figure's red eyes were extinguished, replaced by black needleholes of terror.

Dr Perkins repeated each set of numbers, memorising them. Jet did not dare move. She knew that if her grandfather made an error of even one hundredth of a degree in the numbers he relayed to Bud, the Skylon would miss the hole and plunge into a wall of metal.

iii.

The new noise was coming closer — a single hammer-blow which shook the tower, followed by a groaning buzzsaw or drill. And then another hammer-blow.

Jet glanced around, just swivelling her eyes. The skies were empty, apart from the two rollriders that were harnessed to the railings and a scattering of fluffballs drifting towards them. When Dr Perkins turned his back on her and picked up the radio mike, she reached up a hand and snatched the feathery brown tufts out of the air, before they could settle.

"Jet, I told you to get gone," Dr Perkins said without turning round.

"I need the General, Gramps."

"Skylon, this is One," barked Dr Perkins. He thrust the mannequin blindly back towards Jet. "Skylon, are you receiving? Bud, you'd better open your ears and close your mouth and listen good."

The hammer noise was like a wrecking ball now. Jet plucked the General from her grandfather's hand, slipped him back into his pouch and dropped him into her pocket. As she reached for her rollrider's harness, she looked down.

A machine was climbing the tower. It was pink and blue, and decorated with hearts, and it made Jet feel sick with fear.

Each hammer-blow was the sound of an iron spike, gripped in a steel fist, being thrust into the lip of one of the stone rings circling the skyscraper.

The grinding noise was the machine's cogs as it ratcheted up a thick loop of chain that stretched down from the fist. It was hanging by its right arm, and Jet stood, rooted with

horror, as she watched it reach the top of the chain. Its left arm punched upwards and thrust a spike into the next stone ring with a bone-jarring crash.

Jet stared, a thousand feet to the lights on the city floor. This machine had climbed, arm over arm, like an ape, using chain for muscle, until it was only four rings below her parapet. When it reached the top it would split apart and disgorge — something. Jet didn't know what. But she had seen the discarded shell of one of these before, after an Efficiency Squad had wiped out a village, and she remembered what her brother had called them: "Teds! Tin coffins filled with death."

"Grampa!" she shouted. "It's climbing up! It's a Ted-thing. Look, please look."

Her grandfather jerked his arm away from her, still shouting the grid references into the radio mike.

"Look," she begged, pulling at his sleeve and hands, "Grampa, we have to go, look!"

The old man swung round, thrusting his face into hers, and yelled, "Get gone!"

He shoved her away. As Jet staggered back, another hammer-blow shook the sky around her. The machine was less than thirty feet below.

It looked human — like three humans, in a playful embrace. There were two males, with a female slung between them. The males climbed, both with an arm stretched above their heads, while they linked their other arms for the girl to sit on, like a swing. She had an arm thrown round each boy's neck. The girl — the part of the machine that looked like a

girl — wore her tin hair in curls and a sleeveless, powder-blue dress garnished with lace hearts. The boys wore pink overcoats with blue collar and cuffs, and their tin hair looked slick.

Teds. Tin coffins. Even if Jet could launch her rollrider before that thing reached the top, whatever was behind the blue dress and the pink overcoats would swipe her grandfather aside as easily as a fluffball.

She looked at the fluffballs clenched in her hand, and made a decision. Dropping onto her stomach to peer over the edge, she could see the machine had dragged itself almost to the second ledge from the top. She saw the cogs under its arm, winding it up the chain. The mechanism was not hidden.

One fluffball would take weeks to cut through the inch-thick chain. But the tendrils could snarl it in seconds and stop it from turning fully. If Jet could only keep the Teds off her parapet for a few minutes, she might be able to drag her grandfather away from the radio.

Taking careful aim, she flicked a fluffball as hard as she could at the chain links.

The feathery missile fell an arm's length, and flicked sideways in an air current.

Jet opened her mouth and popped a fluffball in. She sucked it like a gobstopper, hoping to make it wet and heavier. It tasted of nothing, and when she pulled it out the fibres were as dry and weightless as ever.

With her heart thumping, she scrambled as far over the edge as she dared, so that her head, shoulders and chest were hanging in the air, and reached down. Another fluffball drifted harmlessly over the Teds.

But she saw suddenly how she could reach them — before they reached her.

Teds: Part Two

A ladder ran from her parapet to the next stone ring, where there was a hatch. Jet guessed there must be a hatch on her level too, but the TV cabinet covered it. Reaching under the ledge, she took hold of a D-shaped rung and eased her body headfirst, over the edge.

The pouch in her pocket slipped out and fell. Jet let go of her grip on the iron bar with one hand and grabbed at the General in his bag, but she flailed and missed, and as she flailed she fell into the somersault. A moment later she was hanging by her right hand, her legs kicking, and the black pouch was lying on the edge of the parapet below.

The tin monster had hauled itself up to the stone ring below that, and was steadying itself to fling up a spiked fist and drive it into the parapet where the General lay.

Jet was facing away from the tower, away from the ladder. Even if she had been able to stretch a foot onto it, she couldn't have climbed down fast enough to save the mannequin. So she let go of the rung.

The drop to the parapet was about six feet, and it jarred her. Crouching as she landed, she scooped up the General in one hand and reached out the other to catch her balance. There was no railing around this ring. With a scream, she managed to squirm back as the Ted drove a piton into the stone beside her. The impact threw Jet's whole body into the air.

Her shoulder hit the parapet's rim, and then the side of her face. Red-hot pain stabbed through her jaw. Trying to get up onto her knees, Jet pitched headlong off the side of the tower.

Half a second later she crashed onto the middle section of the Teds, and her feet slid down onto its lap. The blow knocked the air from her lungs and made the Teds sway, but the cogs in its left arm kept biting the chain, dragging it upwards. Jet was staring into the girl Ted's face. Its lips were pursed, shiny and scarlet, but its blue eyes were lifeless.

Down the centre, from the curl in the middle of its forehead, through its upturned nose, cleaving its chin and cutting its throat, a thin line split the metal. For a moment Jet thought she had damaged it, but then she remembered the abandoned Ted that she and Bud had seen, its tin shell cracked wide open. Behind that narrow slit, there was something sent to kill her and her grandfather — not just kill, but disintegrate, rip them molecule from molecule.

In one hand Jet clutched the General in his bag. In the other she held three fluffballs. The Teds had hauled themselves, shaking and clanking, halfway to the ledge which Jet had fallen from. She thought of cramming the fluffballs through the slit, and instantly dismissed the idea. There could be dozens of devices inside the casing, or hundreds, and

she had three fluffballs. Her only hope was to sabotage the climbing mechanism... but which part?

She wiped blood from her lip.

The obvious choice was its left arm, the one dragging the Teds up. But three fluffballs wouldn't snarl the cogs immediately. The machine would haul itself to within a few inches of its goal, and its right arm might easily have the reach to punch upwards and hammer in the final spike, on the top level.

Holding her breath, in terror that the chain would turn and snap off her fingers, Jet fed the fluffballs into the mechanism under the right arm.

She pressed herself to the girl Ted's tin dress, afraid of being crushed under the ledge. As soon as she could reach its lip, Jet scrambled up and clung to the ladder on the tower's face, stowing the General in his pouch inside her overalls.

The girl Ted's face inched into view. For a sickening second, Jet imagined the painted Cupid's bow of the Ted's lips was going to blow a dis-ray at her like a kiss.

The left chain stopped turning. The right arm pistoned up, reaching for the parapet where Dr Perkins stood. Invisible tendrils from the fluffballs wound into its cogs, slicing in like whips.

The arm strained. The threads cut deeper. The punch fell short.

The righthand Ted's fist stabbed down, dragging its spike into the side of the parapet. Its tip bit into the stone, though Jet could not see how deeply.

In front of her, the left fist wrenched the other piton out. Now the machine was hanging by the uncertain grip of its right arm. Jet thought the Teds would embed the second piton in the top of the tower, for safety, but clearly the machine couldn't think for itself. Its circuits were as blank as its eyes.

The cogs under the right arm began to grind up the chain. The fluffballs did nothing to slow them: as the wheels' teeth bit, the tendrils unwound. Inch by inch, Jet watched the lace hearts rising. The girl Ted's knees were level with her own, and she could see the machine had no feet — the bottom of the dress and the coats formed its base.

The grinding of the gears stopped only once, as the cogs slipped. The Teds dropped a few inches, and for a split-second Jet was sure the spike had worked loose, but the cogs bit and the climb restarted.

She walked to the brink, planted one foot well ahead of the other, held her breath and gave the Teds a shove with both hands. The machine pivoted a few inches away from her, swinging on the spike, and banged back into the stone shelf. Jet pushed harder, keeping all her weight on her forward foot, so that she wouldn't stumble forward into nothingness; the Teds performed half a pirouette and slammed towards her, hard enough to scrape their base and stick on the rim of the stone ring.

Jet shoved again, but the Teds didn't move. The tin dress had buckled inwards and the central join had split apart, though the cavernous insides were dark and Jet didn't dare put

her eye to the crack. The cogs turned one link higher and the machine was lifted off the ledge.

The boy Teds' quiffs were almost up to the underside of the top parapet. In a minute or less, the machine would drag itself onto the roof and unload its cargo of destruction. In fear and frustration, Jet kicked at the pink metal, her foot lashing out again and again. The tin boomed and swayed. She shouted out to her grandfather, but her voice was buried under the din of the machine.

She had only seconds left. Pulling at the ladder on the wall, she tried to tear away anything she could use as a club, to batter the creature. Nothing shifted. She had to do something, but nothing she could think of had worked. The base of the Teds was waist-high to her now and, because to keep doing the same things was as bad as giving up, Jet grasped it and pulled with all her strength.

If she could drag the machine back far enough, she might prise the right arm away from the spike. But it was too heavy, and it swung away from her.

As it swung, it twisted. The spike was no longer supporting a dead weight, but a pendulum, and it started to give. The Teds jerked down an inch, and then another.

The piton pulled free and as the dangling machine swung back towards Jet, it crashed down to the stone ring. For a slow moment, the Teds stood on the edge, leaning backwards, as though they were desperately trying to remember how to reach out for handholds. Then they fell.

ii.

Jet heard the impact, as the tin machine hit stone and tore apart, long before it could have tumbled all the way to the city floor. She heard her grandfather too, yelling for her, and she shuffled on all fours to the rim of the stone ledge. It was cracked and gouged, and fragments crumbled under her hands as she knelt to peer over the side.

The Teds had burst open against a stone ring 100 feet below, where they lay like an open book, one half hanging off the side. Clustered on the shiny tin insides were black tripods with winking amber eyes at their tips.

The shelf beside Jet's face exploded. Dust and grit stung her eyes, and the fear that gripped her was so overwhelming that she could have scrambled off the side as she tried to retreat from the dis-rays.

And that shot, she knew, must have been as feeble as it could be. All it had done was blast a 12-inch hole in solid stone. Her grandfather had been right: the Creator really was reluctant to unleash disintegration devices on His transmitter tower.

But He was prepared to use them, all the same.

Jet could hear Dr Perkins shouting for her again. Wiping blood and dust from her mouth, she looked at the ladder on the wall. "Gramps," she yelled. "I'm down here, but stay away from the edge. If they see you, they'll shoot."

"I hear you, Georgette. Where are you?"

"One level down. I can climb up if you move the radio round. It's covering the hatch."

"I don't hear you clear, girl. Yell harder."

She took a deep breath, and the universe came to pieces around her.

It was more than bone-shaking noise, more than blinding light. Jet felt as though her head had been split open like the Teds' shell, and pulverising forcewaves were turning her to liquid. Even more than that, it was as if the thousand-foot tower had been reduced to rubble and was crashing towards ground that was no longer there.

Reality was being annihilated around her, and there was no way to know how long it went on — even time had been destroyed.

When it was over, Jet believed she was dead.

And her first memory was her brother's voice: "I heard, you get too close to a dis-ray, you're going to think it killed you. And you'll think that for the rest of your life."

She opened an eye. Half the ledge had been blown away. She looked up, and the parapet above had been split in two. One side drooped down, like a fighter's bruised and swollen lip. That was the side where the radio had been... where her grandfather had stood.

Jet tried to shout, but the swirling air was thick with dust that choked her voice.

She heard the sound of metal shredding against concrete. It seemed to come from all around her. Jet wanted to look over the edge but she was terrified that the tripods would spot her. She didn't know how many disintegrator rays had been carried up the tower by the Teds, or how much energy was left in the one that had opened fire. The devastation had felt so vast, she thought it could have blown half the side of the building away. But she did not dare look. The amber lights on the tripods were photocells, she was sure, like the General's red eyes. They would see her, and being seen now was suicide.

The groaning, screeching sounds of metal filled the air on every side. Jet was trembling, her back pressed against the ladder, afraid to stir in case the stone dissolved beneath her. She felt a movement in her overalls pocket and patted it, grateful to know the General was safe.

Under her hand, the mannequin wriggled harder. She felt a pain in her ribs which must have been a deliberate kick or elbow jab, and she could hear his voice, faintly, insistently, like a buzzer.

Jet reached into her pocket. "I request status report," the mannequin said.

"Alive," she told him, "but ask again in two minutes."

"Allow me to be of assistance/*reluctant chivalry*."

"Thanks, but you stay where you are. You won't like it out here."

"Agreed/*fervently*. I wish to assess escape strategies and cannot do that from the confines of this bag/*stating the obvious*."

"Come on then. You'd better latch on to something — don't trust me to hold on to you."

"I don't."

"I only dropped you once. Hold my collar, you can perch on my shoulder. Do you know what this noise is?"

"Two sources. Both bad."

"It's making my skin crawl."

"My chrome is blistering/*metaphor*."

"So are we going to escape?"

"Climb the ladder," the General instructed.

Jet stared up. The stone above her was split, but she could see no way to climb through it or around the lip.

"Go up," the mannequin insisted. "Before those blocks fall on us."

Jet saw what he meant. She hauled herself up the rungs, climbing as high as she could, although the metal was vibrating so hard now that she could feel her teeth rattle. At the

top, to keep herself from being shaken off, Jet hooked her knees over one rung, tucking her toes under the next, and clung to the ladder, curled up like a fluffball.

The vibration and the groaning sound of metal abruptly stopped. From below, Jet heard a hammer blow and a whine. And from above, she heard her grandfather scream.

Teds: Part Three

Dr Perkins screamed three times, and the third cry might have been Jet's name. The tin creatures clinging to the side of the tower must have registered it too, because before Jet could shout out to her grandfather, the rock detonated above her.

This time the ray's impact wasn't so close and she did not lose consciousness, as the ladder was torn away from the roof and the wall, and slowly buckled outward. It toppled in an arc: Jet's weight at the top helped to pull it down, and all her pent-up terror came howling out. When the ladder jerked and quivered to a stop, it seemed to be stuck in the side of the ruined tower like a dart, and Jet was hanging upside-down by her knees, staring at the shell of the tin Teds below her head.

The Teds had started to climb again. The one good arm, the left arm, was punching into the pitted surface of the tower, winding itself up a foot or two, tearing itself free and punching higher before it could slide down. And it was making progress, because what had been a graceful spire, minutes earlier, was now a pillar of rubble, with the stone rings

reduced to scars. The climb was sheer, but it was not smooth, and the tin husk crawled up, scraping, banging and crashing.

The tripods came with it.

They were fixed, probably by suction pads, to the battered interior, and their amber eyes were winking at Jet. Below them, she could see one of the rollriders, pitching in the air currents like a lost hat in a gale. It must have broken from its moorings; more likely, she thought, the rail where it was tied had evaporated in a dis-ray.

One of the amber lights fizzed white. A bolt of energy passed through the rungs in front of Jet's face. Stone shavings rattled against the ladder, and she pulled herself up to see the dis-ray had licked the edge of the wreckage above her and crossed the world in an instant, to smash into the far side of the planet. A bloom of blue light was spreading, on one of the distant ice plains. Jet remembered something about the effect of dis-rays on water, but this wasn't the time to ask the General for a lecture on creative forces.

She reached both arms between the rungs and started to squeeze her body through, to the top side of the ladder.

Another bolt of disintegration sizzled past her shoulder. She knew the rays didn't have to be accurate enough to hit her — the first time one brushed the ladder, Jet would fall a thousand feet to her death.

The tower shook again, and as the air echoed with the noise of groaning metal, Jet saw the transmission aerial topple from the roof. It slashed down, the way an axe falls, and Jet shrieked as she saw the figure of her grandfather, spreadeagled against its base.

The aerial crushed the radio cabinet and swiped the remnants over the edge. They bounced once against the side of the tower in a shower of sparks, and then again, smashing into the Teds and sweeping them, and the tripods, off the wall. The tin shell cartwheeled over the brink of the stone ring below, and sailed out; the ragged leaves of tin were blown like paper, circling and tumbling, all the way to the ground.

Jet's grandfather hung headfirst on the toppled aerial, held by a harness around his waist. As the dust blew aside, she could see he had taken the tether from a rollrider, and she realised he must have lashed himself to the mast, giving up any chance of escape rather than leave Bud alone in the skies too soon.

"Is he conscious?" Jet shouted at the General.

"Alive, conscious, clinging on, terrified/*likewise*."

"He's not afraid," Jet growled at the mannequin. "He's just angry with us for fooling round down here." She pulled her legs through to the ladder's top side and started to climb. "Gramps, hold on," she shouted — "we're coming."

The old man twisted his head round. He had lost his spectacles. "Georgette, you can't do nothing. Hear me? Get yourself safe."

Dr Perkins' hands were clamped above his head, trying to stop his body from sliding down as the mast tipped towards the vertical.

"Coming to get you!" Jet yelled.

She stopped climbing. "Think of something," she hissed at the mannequin. "How do we reach him?"

The harness round Dr Perkins' waist slipped up to his shoulders and he doubled over, kicking wildly to wrap his legs round the mast before his hands lost their grip. His face was pressed against the metal by the straps that were now under his arms, and his voice was muffled as he roared, "Bud needs you, girl. I don't. You can't help me. Help him!"

Crouched around the mast, it was clear he couldn't halt his slow slide. The further he slipped, the more his weight dragged the aerial down. Already he had slithered nearly half its length, and for the last fifty feet, Jet saw, he would have almost nothing to hold on to: the metal spire tapered to the thickness of a rope.

He was hanging in empty air, further from the tower than Jet herself was. And even if she could somehow climb back up the ladder, scale the wall to the base of the snapped aerial and shin down, there was no way she could drag her grandfather back to safety... or save herself.

She saw all that, but she kept climbing.

A voice at her ear said, "Throw me to the rollrider."

The ladder turned under her, and Jet twisted her weight, fighting the urge to look up at what had given way, keeping her eyes fixed on the rungs immediately ahead.

"I can fetch the rollrider," insisted the General.

Jet swallowed and looked down. The rollrider was almost directly below, but at least a hundred feet lower, whirling and bobbing.

"You want to jump down there?"

"I cannot jump. I have no knees."

"But if I throw you..."

"I evaluate this as our slender—best—rapidly receding hope of survival."

"What if you miss?"

"I'll be waiting on the ground to catch you/*gallows humour*."

The ladder dipped. Jet had to lock one elbow over a strut so she could reach a hand up to her collar. She clutched the General.

"You're very brave," she said.

"Of course."

"Try to keep your eyes open."

"So I can see how bad your aim is/*some sort of joke.*"

"The sort of joke Bud makes," she said, and threw the mannequin.

ii.

From that distance, the rollrider looked smaller than a button. Trusting her instinct rather than her eye, Jet aimed beyond it. Her heart was thudding as the General dived towards the brilliant lights of the city, his chrome body glittering as he fell. She lost sight of him when the ladder lurched and twisted again, forcing her to cling to it sideways.

There was no way to see whether the General had landed on the rollrider. Jet thought, as she squinted down at the lights, that it was no longer spinning so fast, but the ladder was swaying and shuddering, and she could not be sure. She felt as though her heart was pounding hard enough to shake the frame out of the wall. When she looked up, she saw one of its feet had sheered away. She heard her grandfather shouting at her: "Climb up! You can do it, Georgette, get up the ladder!"

Jet looked between the rungs and saw him, trying and failing to halt his slide towards the aerial's whip-like tip.

"Think, girl," he yelled, "clear your head! Climb!"

So she cleared her head. Looked down, took a deep breath. And let go of the ladder.

Jet rolled onto her front as she started to fall, stretching out her arms and legs as though they would help her to fly. The wind stung her eyes, and it filled her open overalls but she dropped like a stone, for much longer than she had ever thought she could fall. The rollrider seemed to be directly below her body, the size of a coin at first, then as big as a plate, and suddenly as wide as she was. Her hands and feet hit it simultaneously, with her back arched, and there was scarcely any impact as the flying disc sank under her. Jet was shivering as she fought to stop the machine from flipping over. The stone rings around the tower seemed to be flying up, alongside her, as the rollrider dropped, but now she could feel it pushing back against her, and the descent began to slow.

In the rollrider's bucket she saw the General was standing on the lift trigger, forcing the gravity unit to generate all the feeble thrust it could.

Jet's elbows and knees buckled. The rollrider was within twenty feet of the tower, and the nearest ring now seemed to be floating with her. Then it began to drop away, and Jet knew she was gaining height. The rings slid past, like marks on a barometer, as the rollrider drifted up. Pushing herself upright, she edged first one foot and then the other into the bucket, scooping up the General and stamping on the lift trigger in one movement.

She kissed the mannequin's faceplate and perched him on her shoulder. "Thank-you," she said.

Silently, the ladder plunged past, missing the rollrider by inches. For an instant, Jet imagined herself falling with it, still clutching its rungs, and then she drove the image out of her mind and reached to grip the disc's rim.

She started to sway, sending the rollrider into a spiralling climb, the way Bud had taught her. When she had her rhythm, she tipped back her head, careful not to disturb her balance, and saw her grandfather: he had slipped the length of the aerial and was hanging from the ball at its tip by both hands.

Leaning forward, Jet tried to steer the rollrider around the tower so she could be below him as she ascended. At the same moment, her grandfather lost his grip.

He fell with his legs kicking, as if he was trying to run from gravity. Jet stood, sending the rollrider diving forwards, into his path — a half-second before he crashed into them, she ducked into the bucket and threw her arms over her head.

There was no hope of keeping the rollrider upright. Jet didn't care. All that mattered was holding on. She managed to shoot one hand out as the disc flew over and over like a coin. Her grandfather's legs were sprawled over her back as they tumbled and suddenly Jet's greatest fear, as they plummeted towards the ground, was that his feet would scrape the General off her collar.

Because she was falling as fast as the rollrider, keeping her grip was not too difficult. But when the crash balloons exploded from the base, Jet's arms were almost pulled out of her sockets.

Eight fat globes, inflated with hydrogen, burst out of the rollrider's underside. They were Bud's invention, designed to deploy when the machine capsized. He called them 'paraloons' — parachute balloons. Jet knew they would have saved her if the rollrider had flipped when she fell onto it, but she had also known that then, she could not have saved her grandfather.

Once the crash balloons had inflated, the only way was down.

That was fine by Jet now. Down was the only place she wanted to go now.

Her fingertips were burning and aching. They were descending fast — the anti-gravity generator shut out when the balloons deployed — but glancing down Jet was not sure she could hang on to the rollrider's rim till they landed. Pulling herself up, she got one elbow onto the base and managed to seize the stay of a balloon with her other hand.

Bony fingers grasped hers. Peering at her under the blue globes was the white, angular face of her grandfather. The expression on his face was less relief than disbelief, she thought.

He didn't speak until they were almost on the ground. Then he said, "I'm obliged for your disobedience, Georgette," and let go of her hand.

Chapter Three — CAPTURE

Jack could have found the hot dog van with a blindfold on. The smell of burnt grease and onions pulled him across the fairground like a dog on a lead. Woz looked like he had never had so much as a bit of string around his neck, never mind a collar and leash, but he was trotting at Jack's side, obedient to the smell of food.

The queue for the exhibition hall already stretched from its doors to the base of the Skylon sculpture. Hundreds of people were waiting to pay several shillings for a ticket to see the show. But almost no one wanted a hot dog at that time of the morning: they'd be saving their money for the exhibition and the rides, with Marmite sandwiches and bottles of lemonade in their picnic bags.

The Festival flag, a four-pointed star that flapped from scores of flagpoles, was red, white and blue. So was the Union Jack bunting, strung between the lampposts and the stalls. The hot dog van was red, white and blue too, but it was decorated with the American stars and stripes. Sausages in long buns had been made popular in Britain during the Second World War, by American GIs. Sometimes people dabbed mustard on them, to make them taste more like the old-fashioned bacon sarnie, but Jack thought they went best with tomato ketchup.

He'd been treated to a few, by hanging round the van in Leicester Square on a Saturday night. Young men would buy them for their girlfriends — "Go on, Glad, live a little, try something new!"

Sometimes the girls would take a little bite and spit it out — "Oh no, Sid, I can't eat that, it tastes all funny!"

And Jack would be at their elbows — "Here mister, I'll have it if she don't want it..."

Leicester Square on a Saturday night could be a dodgy place, though. The bobbies patrolled in pairs at every junction, in their capes and domed helmets. And gangs of lads leant in rows with their backs to the walls, one leg up, ready to kick off and walk away when the police came too near.

Jack strolled towards the fairground van, scanning the ground for dropped coins. He had about as much chance of finding half a crown as he did that the hot dog vendor would stand him a free breakfast, but looking cost nothing.

Four sausages, so pale they were nearly orange, were cooking on a griddle that rolled back and forward, turning them over a hot plate. A frying pan of onions was sizzling beside it.

"Hi mister," said Jack. "Need any jobs done?"

"Hoppit."

"Garn, I can sweep the rubbish up. All day."

"I'm not telling you again," the man growled.

Woz, who'd been standing with his paws against the van, took a step back and sprang into the air. He looked like a puppet whose strings had been given a jerk, and his nose almost came up to the counter. At the top of his leap he wagged his tail, desperately trying to swim into the smell.

He jumped again, and barked in mid-air. Jumped again, and barked again. Jack hugged himself, laughing. People in the exhibition queue pointed and laughed too.

"My dog's the best jumper in the world," Jack shouted to the families. "Go on, buy him a sausage and he'll jump right over your head. Honest he will."

"You can't give him hot dogs," one wise-aleck called back. "What is he, a cannibal?"

That wrecked Jack's chances. No one would give him a penny when there was a clever dick in the crowd, ready to make a smart remark.

The hot dog vendor sensed it too. "I told you, clear off. And take your bag of fleas with you."

"Can't make me," said Jack. "It's a free country."

The vendor's face flushed dark red. "I didn't fight Hitler to keep England free for thieving little bleeders like you!"

"Don't be miserable," shouted the wise-aleck. "What's a free country without free hot dogs?"

"Get out of it before I come and thump you," the vendor warned Jack.

Woz kept jumping and barking. People were starting to cheer him.

"You couldn't thump a cushion," Jack taunted.

"Little perisher," the man said, and tugging open the door at the side of his van he took three quick strides towards Jack. The boy leapt back laughing as the man swung a fist at him.

"You couldn't punch a ticket," he shouted.

The man lunged again, missed, and a roar of cheers and laughter went up from the crowd. Jack pointed and whooped so hard that he almost forgot to duck when the vendor swiped another fist at him — Woz had darted into the open van and scooted out with a string of raw sausages between his jaws.

"Dirty thieving little mutt," the man roared, and dived at Woz. It was the only chance Jack needed. Grabbing a round-ended knife off the counter he scattered onions across two open buns, flicked a sausage into each of them and ran, a hot dog in each hand and a bottle of ketchup under his arm.

ii.

A cry went up from the crowd: "Oi! Thief! Stop, thief!" They'd cheer to see a dog outwit the sausage vendor, but a boy who stole food deserved a good hiding.

Jack wasn't worried. He was small, he was nimble, and he was used to being chased. The trick of a good getaway wasn't speed — it was to take a route the adults couldn't follow, and get out of sight as quickly as possible. He ran straight for the carousel, dodging between the horses, skidding close to the gears of the steam engine, and launched himself off the far side of the platform. Then he sprinted between two stalls, skipping over the tent-pegs and guy ropes. Woz galloped past him. A pair of sausages was trailing from his mouth.

The boy and his dog dodged behind another stall. Jack lifted the heavy, striped canvas and crawled inside, to sit cross-legged in semi-darkness under a trestle table. He stuck one hot dog in a pocket of his grey shorts, and poured a trail of ketchup over the other. Most of the onions had fallen out, but it was still the best breakfast a boy could eat.

Jack tore off a piece of bread and meat, and offered it to Woz. The dog sniffed it politely, and went back to chewing his raw sausage. Jack patted his friend's ears.

"Don't you like ketchup? You're a good lad. You're a great dog." He stuffed the rest of the bun into his mouth.

Somebody sniffed loudly. A man's voice said, "Here, Pete. You smell onions?"

"So what?" said another man.

"Nah, it smells like it's coming from... what the devil?"

A bearded face glared at Jack, and a tattooed hand reached for him, but Jack was already sliding under the canvas and out into the open. He ran up the path and risked a look over his shoulder as he rounded a stall.

Jack didn't see the family who were standing and blocking the path until a fraction too late. He swerved, but the mother was a broad woman and the father was even fatter. Jack bounced off his stomach.

Everyone yelled at him — the bloke, his wife, their children. The father's hand shot out as Jack tried to push past, and grabbed him by the hair, almost lifting him off the ground.

"Look where you're going, you little—"

"Leggo of me mister," Jack yelled, but the man had a firm grip. All his three children were bigger than Jack. Their father clearly wasn't shy about discipline. Jack was expecting a boot applied to his backside, but instead the man's other hand gripped his shoulder, forcing him to look up into the fat face.

He knew that face. And the man knew him. Jack had run straight into the foreman from the railway yard.

"Look who this is!" the man roared. His family pressed round.

"Is it him? Is it him, Dad?"

Woz ran around Jack's legs, barking. One of the foreman's children hefted a foot at him but the terrier followed fearlessly and noisily as the family dragged Jack along the path.

Jack struggled till he thought his hair would be torn out at the roots. "I never stole your dog! He just followed me!"

The foreman shook him by the arm. "Who asked you about the dog? The dog's a stray! It ought to be drowned because that's what thieving little strays deserve. And what are you? Eh? The thieving little stray that nicked my dinner. Where's a policeman? You're going to get what you deserve."

The three youngsters set up a chant: "We caught a thief! We caught a thief!"

Jack twisted, bellowed, dragged his feet and stumbled, but the grip on his tightly curling hair was ruthless. He lashed a fist out at the fat arm that held him, and was repaid with a slap across the ear.

By the time they reached the main fairground, his luck was getting worse. The hot dog vendor was talking to a policeman by the van, and both of them looked up when they heard the children's shouts. People in the exhibition queue stood on tiptoe to see.

The foreman's wife strode ahead. Jack could see she was going to enjoy this. The woman was in her Sunday finery, a blue skirt and jacket that strained over her broad behind, and a pair of high heels that punched holes in the dusty ground at every step. She was with her husband and their brawny trio of children, all in their best clothes, and there were scores of families to see her deliver a criminal to justice. This would be a day she'd remember for the rest of her life.

And Jack would give her something extra to talk about, if he could.

iii.

At the very least, he'd be asking for a thumping. But he was heading for a police cell, if he didn't try something desperate. And he had to do it before the copper put away his notebook and reached for his handcuffs.

Jack doubled his struggling, as if he was terrified of arrest. The foreman thrust him forward, closer to the policeman. Closer to the foreman's wife.

Jack kicked her. Not just a poke with the toe, but a driving sideways boot to the buttocks, heel first. She shouted, and tottered on her high shoes. One of them snapped.

The foreman's wife collapsed onto the earth and, as one of her sons ran forward to drag her onto her knees, her skirt ripped. Her backside was pointing squarely at the crowd. They roared. The foreman's wife shrieked. And the foreman gave Jack a clout across the back of the head that made him dizzy.

He would have tumbled to the ground too, but the grip on his hair was relentless. Jack took another blow to the head and then one to the ribs, as two of the children waded in to him, punishing him for daring to boot their mother in the backside.

Even as he flung up his arms to protect his face, Jack was thinking, "Bet you've wanted to kick her like that for years!"

He couldn't fight back. If he tried to flail out, he'd just be exposing more of his body to the beating. He drew up one knee to try to shield his stomach, and cupped his fists over his eyes and nose.

"All right now! That's enough. No more of that!"

Jack felt the policeman push in front of him and shove the children away.

"Let go of him now, sir."

"You can have him, officer, when he's had the thrashing of his life." The foreman still held Jack by the hair, but with his free hand he was tugging at his trousers belt. "Stealing food is one thing. He's going to learn that kicking a woman earns him a proper punishment."

The foreman pulled his belt free and cracked it in the air. His children flinched.

"Out of the way, officer."

The policeman, with his back facing Jack, seemed to grow an inch or two.

"Put the belt down, sir."

"For the love of Nora! Are you just going to take him to the station and give him a hot meal? What do you think the little brat wants?"

"I understand that you're angry, sir..."

"Too right I'm angry!"

The foreman stared around. His wife was back on her feet, covered in dust, with a broken shoe in one hand and the other clamped across her bloomers.

The crowd was gawping. Half of them were still laughing.

"Give 'im a good hiding!" someone yelled.

The foreman lashed the belt, backhanded, across Jack's hips, yanking him forwards as the blow landed. He drew up his arm for a second stroke, but the policeman's hand flashed out and seized the leather strip. With a jerk he tore it from the foreman's fingers.

Letting go of Jack's hair, the man cried out and clutched his sore hand.

Jack was sprinting away before the copper could even turn.

This time he was running for his life. The foreman's children launched themselves after him as the policeman blew his whistle. If they caught him first, Jack would be torn limb from limb. And everyone in the fairground would know the meaning of that whistle: a thief was on the loose.

Jack ran straight at the nearest booth, a coconut shy. He vaulted the counter, scattering balls behind him, then ducked and slid under the back wall. If any of his pursuers tried that, they'd get stuck — it was a tight gap. But if they chased around the sides, they'd lose ground, and Jack needed every yard he could gain.

He was heading for the nearest buildings, a grimy row of houses on the southern edge of the festival site. A row of sideshow stalls ran past the Skylon sculpture before the path reached a fence and a ticket booth.

A sharp pain stung his shoulder, and as he stumbled something white whizzed past him. Jack didn't turn. He just put his head down, hoping no more of the balls from the coconut shy would find their mark. His skull wasn't as hard as their coconuts.

At least whoever was throwing the balls would be slowing themselves down. No one could sprint and aim.

He glanced ahead. The stallholders were yelling, but they weren't trying to catch him. The ticket collector, though, had stepped out of his booth and was standing with his arms folded. On either side of the gate, a chain-link fence stretched away. It was at least six feet high. As Jack ran closer, he could make out the curl of barbed wire along the top.

Now he risked a look behind him. One of the children was less than ten feet away. The other two had fallen back, but they could be on him in seconds if he was caught.

Jack swerved behind a Punch and Judy stand. The puppeteer dived at him through a slit in the back of the tent. He had a crocodile on one hand and a policeman on the other — the croc got hold of the neck of Jack's pullover, but the wool was tattered and the garment ripped. The Punch and Judy man lost his balance, collided with the quickest of the foreman's children and they both tumbled.

Hurdling the ropes, Jack stayed off the path and behind the stalls. He was heading for the fence, and he didn't want anyone to guess his intention. If they chased him to the fence, he knew he could climb it faster than any of them — but if they ran around to the other side, he might fall straight into their arms.

The chain links were too small for footholds. The fence was designed to be hard to climb.

It wasn't designed to be Jack-proof.

iv.

He leapt against the links with his arms stretched above his head and his fingers bent like grappling hooks. The fence bowed and clattered, and before it stopped shaking Jack had pulled himself up to the top.

He brought up one leg and placed the toe of his shoe on the spiral of barbed wire, pressing it down. With his hands gripping the links beside his heel, he brought his other foot up, trod on the wire, and stood up. Then he bounded into the air.

A fall straight down to the paving stones might have broken his leg. Even a twisted ankle would have finished him. But Jack leapt straight across the pavement and landed on the roof of a black Humber car. The thin steel buckled like card. With another spring Jack was halfway across the road.

The voices behind him crying, "Thief," were angry and frustrated now, as though he'd cheated by scaling the fence. Woz was barking madly. To Jack, it sounded like laughter.

"Woz," he shouted. "Come on!" But he couldn't hang around and wait for the dog to find a way through. He had to trust Woz to follow his scent — the terrier had more brains than most humans, and he'd know that no one else in London would be eager to share ham and sausages.

The police whistle sounded again, and an answering whistle blew from the end of the street. A uniformed bobby came round the corner at a loping run. Jack pulled up and looked back. People were already chasing through the gate. Whichever way he ran, he was caught.

So he didn't run.

A drainpipe reached halfway up the side of the nearest house, turning into the wall at a second floor window. Jack seized it with both hands at chest height and pushed his feet against the wall, straddling the pipe. As he shuffled up the brickwork, he kept his hands clamped behind the pipe and worked them up a few inches at a time. By the time the policeman reached the pipe, Jack was eight feet up the wall.

The bobby tried to shin up behind him, but the pipe was too thin for that. It was also rusty and coated with flaking paint, and Jack's hands burned, but he kept climbing till the windowsill was in reach.

Pulling himself up, Jack tried to twist and sit on the ledge. It was too narrow. He slipped, and a woman below him screamed. A man cheered.

Not everyone wanted to see him fall and break his neck, Jack thought, but they wouldn't be holding a safety blanket for him either. Hanging from the stone sill by both hands, he levered himself up till his chest was at the window's level, and pressed his palms against the frame on each side as he worked his knees onto the ledge, and then his feet. In a few moments he was standing, spreadeagled, on the slender windowsill with his face pressed against the filthy glass.

He heard a commotion from below and without looking knew they were bringing a ladder.

There wasn't any way to keep climbing. The brickwork was slick with fumes, and there were no footholds. Jack tested the top of the sash window frame with the fingertips of one hand.

It slid down.

Rolling over the top of the window, he stepped down into a washbasin and jumped lightly onto a floor of chequered tiles. There were basins all along the wall, and a channel along the floor where water could be sluiced away. The room was cool, much colder than the day outside. Clearly, he had broken into some sort of communal building — Jack had no idea if this was a boarding house or a hotel, because he'd never been in either, but he could see it wasn't a family home.

So long as it wasn't a cop shop, he didn't much care. He wasn't planning to stay. He wanted to be out of the front door before the police had time to run round the block.

A nun walked into the bathroom, said "Oh!" and clapped a hand to her mouth. Then she pointed at Jack.

Jack grinned. This wasn't a police station: it was a convent. The nun was an elderly woman, and by the look of pain on her face she'd taken a vow of silence. Jack didn't think she would scream for help, and he was certain she couldn't hold him, so he simply walked straight past her.

The nun hurried after him, flapping her hands. Jack walked briskly down a flight of wooden stairs, and the nun stopped to rap on a panelled door, summoning her sisters. By the time he reached the first floor landing, Jack was being followed by six or seven women in ankle-length black robes with white-rimmed hoods that were starched into points like cows' horns.

He gave them a cheerful wave. Two waved back.

Jack could see the front door, at the far end of a long hallway. It would be bolted. It might be chained. And the police would be expecting him to emerge through it.

Better go another way, he thought, and turned the doorknob beside him.

The nuns threw up their hands in alarm, and wagged their fingers.

Jack opened the door a crack. The room inside was dark. He ignored the sign on the door, because it meant nothing to him. He slipped inside.

Capture: Part Two

A nun stood with her back to him. She was washing something at a basin, and as he stepped into the room she turned sharply. Jack didn't look at her. His attention was gripped by something else.

There was a bed in the room, and in the gloom Jack could make out a figure on the pillow. At first he thought it was a baby, but as he drew nearer he could see an arm the size of a child's, resting on the blanket.

There was only one arm. The other sleeve of the child's nightshirt was neatly folded and pinned.

Jack stared at the little body under the blankets. It seemed to end in the middle. The covers were tucked in tightly and, where the child's legs should have been, the bedding was flat.

Jack swallowed. "Is he all right?" he asked.

The nun behind him said nothing, and Jack remembered the others had all been silent too.

He took a step closer to the bed. "What happened to you?" he asked.

The child said nothing. He couldn't — if it was a he. The whole head was bandaged, even the eyes, with just slits for the nostrils and a hole for the mouth. The scalp, the neck, the chest beneath the nightshirt... it was all bandaged.

Only one hand was exposed. It had just two fingers and a thumb, and they were clutching something.

Jack leaned over the bed. The child was holding a marble — not like the stone pellets that boys played with in the streets, but a glass globe as big as a duck's egg. Its surface swirled with yellows and greens, and through a circle of clear glass on one side Jack could see the marble's core was a twist of red, white and blue.

He reached across the bed. "Can I see it?"

The hand clenched.

"Nah," said Jack, "don't worry, it's yours. I won't touch it. It's a beautiful marble. I hope you can see it... when the bandages come off."

The nun's voice whispered: "They never will come off."

Jack froze. There was something in her voice that made his blood stop.

He didn't dare turn to face her. "What's his name?" he asked.

"He doesn't have a name. He's just Child L."

Her voice was closer now. It was soft, and not unkind, but Jack had never heard a more frightening sound. It was like hearing a ghost speak.

He swallowed. His eyes were fixed on the glass ball in the child's scarred hand. And then he felt a light touch on his shoulder, and his heart lurched. Vaulting the bed with a shout

of terror, Jack scrambled to the sash window, heaved it up, rolled sideways onto the sill and dropped eight feet to the pavement, landing on all fours.

He saw the policeman at the same instant he was seen. As the whistle sounded, Jack dived behind a parked lorry and into the road.

A car horn blared.

Jack tried to throw himself backward, but in that instant he knew he had made a terrible, fatal mistake.

The panic and confusion of the past few minutes lifted from him. He was no longer terrified of the soft-spoken nun, or anxious to escape a beating from the crowd at the festival. He saw, with simple clarity, that he was about to die.

The radiator grill of the black car thundering at him was as tall as Jack was. Two headlamps like monstrous eyes were mounted at the front of an engine big enough to power an aeroplane. The wheels were hooded by curving mudguards, and the chrome bumper was clamped in place by two uprights, like fangs.

He had time to see every detail. There was a man, wrestling with the wheel, but he seemed unable to turn it. The brakes were screaming, and smoke curled from the rear tyres, though for that second neither the car nor even the smoke seemed to be moving.

Jack saw all that, and yet he had no time to throw himself clear.

ii.

The thought struck him that he might not be killed. He could end up like the child in the convent bed, with half his body gone and the rest blind and bandaged.

Death would be better than that.

And then the car was moving, and the driver was forcing the wheel round, and Jack was falling back, and the nearside wheel guard was slicing a neat line through his sock over his shin.

The vehicle slewed across the road, clipping another car coming from the other direction, and then banged over a parked motorbike and ground to a stop with its front wheels off the ground. The smaller car bounced against the kerb and hammered sidelong into one of the plane trees which lined that side of the road. One front wheel was torn off. The axle gouged a trench along the paving slabs as the car came to rest with its nose down.

Jack stared at the wreckage. Two cars destroyed, and a motorbike — though it looked like no one was badly hurt, and both drivers were climbing out of their seats. He glanced down. A thin cut on his leg trickled blood, where the car had brushed it.

A hand seized his elbow. Jack didn't even try to pull away. He looked up at the constable, who muttered: "That was a narrow squeak, son."

Steam was pouring from the big car's engine, surrounding the driver as he steadied himself with a hand on its roof.

"Are you all right, sir?" the policeman called. He wasn't talking to the second driver — he didn't seem to have even noticed him.

"In one piece, Constable. Unexpectedly." He strode towards them, and Jack realised this was a plain clothes copper. In uniform or not, he thought, they all walk the same... and I've just made him crash his car.

"Let me guess," said the plain clothes man. "This lad's doing a runner, you're in hot pursuit. It better be worth it. What's he done, robbed the Bank of England?"

"Not exactly, sir. He kicked a lady. In the... er, in the Festival, sir."

"He deserves a kick in the Festival himself. I'd take you to the station myself, lad, but my car's needing attention."

Jack nodded. At first he didn't understand that he was free to walk away. The constable's hand released its grip, and the detective turned away to reach into his car for his radio. Both of them ignored the other driver as he marched over.

"What exactly is going on?"

The man was bald, with skin stretched so tightly over his face and scalp that Jack could see the shape of his skull. His black overcoat was flapping around him, like a crow's wings.

The plain clothes man spared him a half-glance. "Give your details to the constable. It'll be sorted out."

"My details? You were driving like a reckless buffoon. I could have been killed."

"But you weren't. And your two young passengers don't appear any the worse either."

"What do you know about—"

The bald man broke off, and spun round. Two boys were easing themselves through the side windows of the car.

"Stay right there!" the bald man commanded, but the boys began to stumble away, with their hands clasped in front of them.

Jack should have been running too, but he couldn't take his eyes off the man's skull-like face. A vein was pulsing in it, all the way from his cheekbone to the crown of his head. It was the only sign he was not made of wax. His eyes were unblinking, his nostrils flared, and his teeth were bared in a snarl.

The rigid face turned to stare at Jack. The man's eyes were pale blue, with wide pupils, and a weird light began to burn in them.

"It's not possible," he hissed. "But where else, if not here? Of course!" He held out a hand like a claw. "You have to come with me, boy."

Jack shrank back.

"Come along, boy. Don't you want a hot meal?"

The offer was made with a leer, revealing the man had no teeth at the sides of his mouth. Whatever the spell that had transfixed Jack, it was broken when he saw the black holes in the man's gums. He ran.

The two boys who had escaped from the man's car were still jogging clumsily up the road, with their hands held out in front of them. Jack glanced over his shoulder to see the bald man standing in the middle of the road and staring after them.

Jack caught up with the boys in a few seconds. He called out as he ran past: "You know where you're going?"

"Haven't the foggiest, actually," the older one replied. At every step he was urging the other boy on. "Any good ideas?"

"Yeah, getting away from Dracula."

"That's Mr Gould. You're right, he is rather vampiric."

Mr Gould was no longer following. His coat was flapping as he waved his arms at the policeman.

"Let's make ourselves scarce," said Jack. He led the boys along an alley between two shops, followed a path behind back yards with a row of wooden gates set in a brick wall, and clambered over a mound of ash and cold cinders to emerge into a dead-end street.

He waited for the bigger boy to help his friend over the ash heap, and set off running towards the wall that closed off the cul-de-sac.

"Hang on," called the older boy. "This way ought to be quicker." He gestured towards the open end of the street.

"Suit yourself," said Jack, dragging a dustbin up to the far wall. "See you."

With one foot on the dustbin lid, he found a chipped brick higher up that gave him a toehold, and pushed himself up, twisting to sit on the top of the wall. He held out a hand.

"Come on."

iii.

The older boy hung back, but the small one flashed a bright grin and ran at the dustbin.

With his hands clamped over his head like a diver, he launched himself up the wall. Jack grabbed the boy's wrists and hauled him up. He looked no more than six or seven years old, and weighed next to nothing.

His companion made hard work of the climb. He couldn't separate his hands, and he kept levering one foot onto the bin before overbalancing. After three attempts, he managed to stand up, and Jack and the other boy pulled him up by the arms.

"Thanks awfully," he said. His accent was aristocratic, like a public schoolboy's, but his clothes were grubby. "I'm Paulie. This is my younger brother."

"Frightfully naice to be 'quainted, Paulie," said Jack. He met Paulie's glare with a blank expression.

At their back was a scrapyard, with metal and bundles of rags stacked around the walls. Jack vaulted to the ground and stood back to watch as the older boy clambered down awkwardly, hanging by his elbows and then landing on his backside.

A dog lunged from a crate, barking furiously, and threw itself to the full length of its chain, a few feet from them. The smaller boy jumped down and clutched his brother.

"It's all right, Sparkler," said Paulie. He looped his arms over the boy's shoulders and started to lead him away, towards the open gates across the yard.

Jack snapped a wooden spoke out of a smashed wheel on the nearest pile of scrap and lobbed it over the dog's head. "Fetch!" he called out.

"I'll bleedin' fetch yer," shouted a man in a string vest, hobbling out of a hut with an iron bar for a walking stick. "I'll fetch yer a crack round the head!"

"Time to go, I think," said Paulie.

"But Paulie! I say!" Jack said, struggling not to laugh. "Where are your manners, old boy?" He dodged as the scrap dealer swung his iron bar. "You haven't left your calling card!"

"Hoppit, Lord Snooty," yelled the man, and Jack ran into the street.

"Pip pip!" he called, and sprinted round a corner before throwing his arms round a lamp-post and giving in to laughter.

"All right," said Paulie, standing over him. "Laugh at the posh boy. I don't actually care."

Jack pulled himself upright. His head barely came up to the knot of Paulie's tie, and the bigger boy's shoulders were twice the width of Jack's.

"Why do you both go around like you're praying?" he asked, pointing to their clasped hands.

Paulie held up his wrists. "They're tied."

"No they're not. What is it, invisible rope?" Jack inspected them, and jerked his head back, suddenly suspecting Paulie might thump him for making fun of his accent.

"Take a look at Sparkler's wrists. They're the same," Paulie said. "Mr Gould did it. It appears to be fine thread, though it has to catch the light or you won't see it. You can feel it, though."

Jack tugged a finger between the other boy's arms, and touched a taut thread he couldn't see. "What you called? Sparkler? I'm Jack."

Sparkler beamed, and nodded, but he said nothing.

Jack turned to Paulie. "You've tried breaking it?"

"Obviously." He showed Jack red grooves on his skin. "It's too strong, it just cuts you."

"So we'll cut it." Jack looked around. Across the road a shop front had been boarded up, and a torn awning hung over it. Above the awning was a window, and on the windowsill stood a milk bottle.

Jack winked at Sparkler. "I'm Tarzan," he said. "Watch me climb."

He ran to the shop, climbed onto the rusty support under the awning, swung through the tattered canvas, slid up to the wall and reached to grab the milk bottle. It was full of scummy rainwater, which Jack poured away before chucking the bottle onto the road. Then he beat his chest and brayed, the way Tarzan did in the movies, and jumped down.

A door opened up the street. A man leaned out. "What the mischief are you boys playing at? Clear off before I get a policeman."

Jack ignored him and picked a shard of glass off the road as he sauntered back to Paulie and Sparkler.

"Hold your hands out," he said to the younger boy, and tried to cut the thread. Jack felt it straining, but it wouldn't snap.

Paulie was sweeping the broken bottle into the gutter with the side of his foot. "We can't just leave it in the road," he said. "What if a car runs over it?"

"Is he always like this?" Jack asked Sparkler.

Sparkler just grinned.

"What, you too shy to talk?"

Sparkler snatched his hands away from Jack, grabbed the back of his own pullover and, hunching his shoulders, dragged it over his head. His eyes blinked out, like a tortoise watching from inside his shell.

"You won't get a word out of Sparkler," Paulie said. "He manages to make himself understood, though."

"Can't he talk at all?"

Paulie opened his mouth, as if he was searching for the right words to explain, when excited barking from the end of the street made him turn. A streak of brown fur rushed at Jack and bounded into him, paws up on his chest, before bouncing round and round the three boys.

iv.

Sparkler clutched his brother's blazer. His face was white.

"Nice dog," said Paulie. "Look, it's friendly. It is friendly, isn't it?" he asked Jack.

"Only to me. He bites everyone else," Jack said, and then he saw Sparkler's face. "Nah, don't worry, he won't hurt you. He's clever, he's followed me all the way. I know what you were after," he exclaimed to the terrier. Digging in his trousers pocket, he pulled out a squashed hot dog.

With his muzzle on one side, Woz took half the sausage out of Jack's open hand.

"See? He's really gentle," Jack told Sparkler. "You give him the other half. He'll like you."

Sparkler reached out to take the hot dog, but he didn't leave his brother's side. Taking a bite of the meat, he chewed it, grinning.

"Nah, that was for the dog! You have the bread if you want, but you got to give him that bit of sausage first."

Woz sat, flicking his tail hopefully. Sparkler stretched his hands out as far as he dared, and the terrier barely opened his mouth as he took the food.

Paulie ruffled his brother's hair. "That was brave, Sparkler. That dog's your friend now. What's he called?" he asked Jack.

"Woz."

"I prefer 'What,' actually."

"Woz."

"Look, forgive me for speaking proper English. What is he called?"

"That's his name — Woz."

"A dog can't be called 'Woz'."

"This one is."

"But it isn't a name."

"'What' ain't a name."

"'Woz' isn't."

"His name is Woz," Jack explained, speaking slowly. "His name ain't 'What' coz 'What' ain't a name."

"I see. Well, 'Woz' is a stupid name."

"Sounds stupid when you say it," agreed Jack. "But that's because you sound stupid."

Paulie bunched his fists, as if he'd like to punch Jack if his hands weren't tied. Sparkler stepped between them. Reaching to Paulie's collar, he undid his tie and pulled it free.

Jack and Paulie both laughed, and the argument was forgotten.

Sparkler deftly twisted the tie into a ball, pushing the rolled-up end into the torn tip. It looked like a snake swallowing its own tail.

With a flick of his wrists, he tossed the ball over Woz's head. The terrier jumped, snatched it from the air and brought it to Jack. Sparkler stamped his feet in delight.

"Fetch, boy," Jack shouted, and hurled the ball as far as he could. Woz flashed after it, Sparkler sprinting behind him with his bound hands held to his chest. The dog seized the

ball, shook it, dropped it and stood over it, head low and tail wagging. When Sparkler stooped to pick it up, Woz held it, and shook it in his teeth.

"I say!" Paulie shouted. "That's my tie."

"Bring it, Woz, bring it," called Jack. When the dog let it go instead, and Sparkler kicked it further up the street, Jack yelled with laughter.

The ball rolled to the corner. As Sparkler bent to grab it, a man stepped forward. He took Sparkler by the back of the neck, bent him over and pushed him head-first into a coal-sack.

Mr Gould, the man with the bald head and the staring eyes, had found them.

"Let him go," Paulie roared, charging at him, but the man raised one hand. The other twisted the neck of the sack into a knot.

"Stay where you are! And you'll do as I say, or this sack goes in the Thames."

Paulie froze. Jack didn't. He walked towards the man, pushing his shirt sleeves up his arms, so angry he could hardly breathe.

"Let go of him, mister."

Mr Gould's face split into its gruesome smile, a short row of yellow teeth flanked by black gums. "You can come here, boy. It's you I want. Come with me and I will let the other child go."

"You're lying," shouted Paulie, but he didn't move.

Woz stood too, and growled, with his fur bristling. The sack thrashed about in Mr Gould's grip, but Sparkler didn't make a sound.

Jack suddenly saw what he needed. If he could get close enough to cut the sack open, Sparkler could wriggle out, and Paulie would throw himself at Mr Gould. A piece of broken glass would do it. He could slash the sack, cut his own way out if he was caught, and even stab at Mr Gould's hands. The three of them together, with Woz too, could overpower the man. Jack just needed a sliver of glass.

He turned and ran, heading for the gutter where Paulie's shoe had swept the shattered bottle.

"You rotten coward!"

Paulie swung his fists at Jack and clubbed him across the back of the head as he ran past. Jack pitched forward.

"You dirty, rotten coward!"

Paulie landed knees-first on Jack's chest, knocking the air from his lungs. Jack tried to gasp out, "Get the glass," but with Paulie's weight crushing his ribs, he couldn't speak.

"Think you can run off? What about Sparkler? You yellow-livered conshee!" The clubbed fists cracked across Jack's jaw, before the bald man loomed above them and

thrust a sack over Paulie's head. Heaving him backwards, Mr Gould jerked the bag up, dropped Paulie on his head and knotted the top.

Jack tried to crawl backwards, but he couldn't even push himself up onto his elbows. He heard Woz hurl himself at Mr Gould, and saw the little dog sent spinning with a savage blow from the man's fist.

Mr Gould seized Jack's chin, and stared into his eyes. "Astonishing," he whispered.

Jack bit him.

With a snarl, Mr Gould pulled another coal-sack from his coat and bundled Jack into it.

The bag was completely lightless, and thick with dust. Jack was already winded and struggling for breath. He felt the sack being dragged down the street, his head and arms bumping against stones. It was getting hotter as he fought for air. When the bag was swung through the air to slam onto the back of a cart, Jack blacked out.

Chapter Four — VERONICA

Veronica saw her reflection.

She was conscious of many things at once — the metal hand that caressed the back of her head, the slivers of coloured light that tumbled around the room, the sensation that she had been unconscious for a long time — but most of all she was aware of the smoky black metal in front of her. It was so deeply lacquered that her reflection seemed to float inside it, like a fly in amber.

She was beautiful.

Veronica had known this before, but it was wonderful to rediscover her beauty in the instant she awakened.

Her hair was ice blonde, and lay flat against the sides of her head and face in a pair of looping curls. Her cheekbones were sharp, her eyes wide, her dimples babyish.

She tipped up her chin to admire her slender neck. And screamed.

Where the hollow of her throat should have been, there were cogs. Broad wheels and tiny pinheads, flickering shafts and whining axles, clicking gears and meshing teeth. Her neck ended in a whirr of machinery.

Veronica's head was beautiful, but it was only a head.

Her scream was clear and shrill enough. Its first note was surprise and its second terror, and the terror overwhelmed Veronica so quickly that for one moment she was certain she would die from it. She tried to recoil from the reflection, and the sheer physical absence of her body drove away the terror as quickly as the terror had driven her out of her mind.

In the space of a scream she travelled from calm to insanity and back to sanity.

Her instincts were to leap back, to clutch her face and gasp for air — but she had no legs or hands or lungs, and no memory of how it felt to possess them. She knew her body should be there and she knew what it should be doing, but at the same time it was unthinkable, like forming a sentence in a language she'd never learned.

Veronica closed her mouth and blinked. The terror had been an illusion, she decided, something she had experienced because she expected to feel it — just as she had expected her neck to be attached to a body and not a plinth.

She glanced up. The black metal mirror was part of a bigger object: it was the square chestplate of a creature that seemed at first to be all body and no head. The monster loomed over her, square shoulders protruding from its box-like torso, and Veronica realised it had a flat dome, ringed with red and green studs, where its neck ought to be. Its arms ended in three-fingered hands that turned on swivels, and its knees were round hinges set above flared, triangular feet.

Blazed in fiery decals across its biceps was its name: Ultrobot.

It looked like a child's toy, but the children Veronica suddenly remembered would not have come up to Ultron's elbow.

Those children, a boy and a girl, were a memory that did not belong here. She had seen this room before, and marvelled at the curving expanses of coloured glass and how the air rippled with Technicolor fragments as the walls twisted through space. But the children were from long before, a brother and sister, and their names... Veronica was sure she knew the children far too well to forget their names.

"You're awake. I've woken you up," a voice said.

Veronica looked again at the dome on the torso, but its bulbs were glowing impassively. A movement in her reflection caught her eye — her own image was gone from the lacquered metal. There was another face there, and instead of floating inside the mirror it seemed to well out from its surface.

It was a man's head, with the profile of a film idol. His sculpted chin and fine nose gave him a beauty to match Veronica's.

But he spoke with the voice of a child: "Do you know where you are?"

"I'm not sure," Veronica lied.

"What's your name?"

"I... don't recall. Who are you?"

The holographic head tilted and gazed at her severely. Veronica thought again of the movies — this was the sort of look a leading man gave the heroine before he scolded her. But she could not remember when she had ever seen a film.

"I won't give you any answers if you lie to me." The man's lips moved in perfect synchrony with the child's voice. "Tell me your name."

"Why don't you sound as grown up as you look?" she replied.

The movie idol arched his eyebrows. One of the Ultrabot's arms moved in jerks to its chest, and its hand swivelled to offer the tip of a cigarette holder to the lips of the face. A flame flared from one fingertip: Veronica could see the fiery reflection in the black metal, shining straight through the head. The lips seemed to suck on the cigarette, a trickle of smoke escaping from the nose, and then the head exhaled. The jet of smoke had become unreal — holographic, a reverse reflection, like the head itself — and its lips kept breathing it out, until the face was hidden.

What emerged from the smoke was hideous, the head of a cannibal god or a mad scientist's attempt to create life. It had the snout of a crocodile and the eyes of a wolf, scales across its scalp and flesh dripping from its teeth. It stretched out of the black metal, its nostrils twitching, sniffing at Veronica's face, before dissolving into strands of smoke.

The Ultrabot's hand swivelled again, and the tip of the cigarette glowed. Slowly the movie idol's head reappeared, filling up with smoke the way a bucket fills with water.

"How would you like me to look?" it asked, in its high voice. "Oh, nothing to say? Need winding again, do you?"

A broad key, like a butterfly with bullet-holes in its wings, had appeared between the Ultrobot's fingers.

"No, thank-you," Veronica gasped.

"Quite right. Wouldn't want your spring to snap."

Veronica thought she knew now why the head spoke with a child's voice. Nothing in the world is more pitiless than a cruel child.

"No more lies now. What's your name?"

Veronica told him.

"That's good. I know when you're lying. Benny built a little giveaway into your face. I shan't tell what it is. Go on then, it's a twitch, a what's-it-called, a tic." He flashed a movie idol smile. "Benny also told me that, as your clockwork ticks through all its routines, your name is one of the first things you'll recall. In a few minutes, all the little wheels will have spun into place, and you'll remember everything."

The head watched her. An eyelid winked. "Have you remembered how you got here? And where you came from? What about Benny — can you picture his face yet?"

"No."

"Liar, liar, your hair's on fire. I bet you haven't forgotten how you pleaded with Benny — 'Don't switch me off, don't switch me off!' But he did, didn't he? And can you remember how he made me promise I'd always let you run for an hour or two every day, just to keep your insides tinkerty-tonk? Tickety-boo? Guess what — that was two years ago, and I haven't given your key a single turn, until today. I was hoping you'd fall to bits. The hours I've stood and watched you, waiting to see your face drop off."

"Sorry to be a disappointment," Veronica said.

"You weren't, not at all," the child's voice insisted. "And if I'd really wanted to see your cogs spill out, I could have let my Ultrabots play football with you. They love games."

The Ultrabot flexed its fingers, making the joints crack.

"I used to wonder — did Benny make you so pretty to please me? Or to mock me? Or just to show me the best he could do? You are pretty, aren't you? Pretty useless."

Veronica focused on all the memories that were falling into place. And she wondered if it could be true that her maker had deliberately built a flaw into her face, a tic to reveal when she was lying. He had told her, again and again, that she was perfectly beautiful. It was impossible to believe he had spoiled that on purpose.

It wasn't so hard to believe that this chattering head hadn't dared switch her on for two years.

"Let's see if you can be useful now," he was saying.

"Who are you?" Veronica asked again. But she was starting to think that she knew the answer to that question. Whoever controlled this robot, and spoke with that voice, also owned her.

She narrowed her eyes. "I remember when Benedict brought me here," she said. "Has he never been back? Do you ever speak to him? Do you speak to anyone at all?"

The idol paused to take another drag on the cigarette, and Veronica was afraid for a moment that another monster would appear. The head seemed to grow, as if she was zooming in for a close-up.

"I talked to the whole world, only today. But you've remembered who I am and where you are, haven't you?"

She had. This was the Ribbon, and He was the Creator.

"You're even prettier when you're thinking," He told her. "When your brain isn't running, you look a bit like a death-mask — especially with the dust on you. I thought the dust might have clogged your wheels. Any minor memories still missing? Cogs seized up? I might have to oil you if you're truly useless. The Ultrobot has a can of engine grease for its knees... I could squirt a drop of that in your ears. Let's see what you remember."

There were so many gaps in her mind. Veronica pictured them as wheels that wouldn't spin, cogs with their teeth sheared away. She felt the mechanisms fluttering in her throat.

The Ultrabot held up a photograph, obscuring part of the picture with its fingers. The colours were vivid shades of plastic, too coarse to be real, but Veronica knew who this figure was in white overalls.

"Maker!" she said. And remembered, a fraction too late, that he had warned her never to refer to him that way in front of the Creator.

The movie star head gave a childish giggle. "That's how he likes to be called, is it? And I thought he was getting jumped-up airs when he started calling himself Doctor Perkins! That's him, you're quite right, but guess where? On top of the tallest building in the whole Marble. Guess what happened next? He fell off! Yes, really and truly. I've never lied to you, and that's more than you can say to me. Over he went. A one-thousand-foot drop."

The child's voice was gleeful, but the film-star head wore an expression of concern. "You can't cry. You want to, but you can't. The plumbing isn't there. Was your 'Maker' afraid your mascara would run? So how does the emotion come out? Just like Benny, to forget to think of that. I suppose, when too much sadness has collected, your spring might break loose. Twang! Or perhaps your whole brain will explode and blow your wig off. Oh gosh, I was joking! Where's your sense of humour?"

"Even you can't find that funny," Veronica said. "My Maker was your oldest friend."

"And he still is. I didn't say Benny was dead, did I? I said he fell, but somebody caught him. Look who it was..."

The Ultrabot held the photograph by the edges of its white cardboard frame. There was another figure with Veronica's Maker, dressed in yellow overalls, shorter and slighter.

"This next picture is better," the child's voice said, and the Ultrabot shuffled a second photo into its hand. It was black-and-white, taken against a dark sky, and it showed a figure hanging from bars or a pole — the same small figure from the first photograph.

And now Veronica did know who it was.

ii.

She looked older — two years older, of course. Her face was fuller. Her hair was shorter. And in this photograph she was clearly staring at something that horrified her, and Veronica had never seen the girl look that way. But without any doubt, she was Jet Perkins.

"You see, you know her," prompted the voice.

"No. No I don't. I've never seen her."

"You're lying! It's such an obvious twitch — can't you control it? Don't you even know you're doing it? Shall I tell you what it is? I will, if you tell me who the child is."

"I can't."

"Of course you can. Let me give you some clues. She's not Benny's grandson, is she? I met the boy when he was pint-sized — Bud, he was called, and I hear he's grown into a

big, strong, brave, young man. So why isn't Bud with his grandfather? Here's Benny, never a reckless man, and he's taking terrible risks. Why's that? And who's the girl?"

"I don't know."

"Twitch, twitch. Shall I tell you my theory? It's the only one that makes sense. She's Bud's baby sister."

"No, she isn't!"

"How would you know? I mean, if you didn't know? Tell me more."

"I can't! I won't! I don't know anything."

The Ultrabot's hand swivelled towards Veronica's face. It clipped two fingers along her nose, from the tip to the bridge.

"I won't break your nose," the Creator promised her. "I'll just snap it off."

Veronica whimpered, and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Who is she?"

"Please, really, I don't know."

"Who is she?"

"Don't! Don't! I don't know."

"You'll be so ugly without a nose."

Veronica screamed as the pressure increased.

"Tell me."

She couldn't speak now, even if she had wanted to — and she would die before she betrayed Jet. She wished she was dead. She wished she had never been made.

"Last chance. Is that Georgette Perkins?"

Veronica did not dare pull away from the fingers that pinched like pliers. "Do what you like," she hissed. "I'll never tell you."

"You just have," said the child's voice.

Veronica sobbed, and she felt the fingers slide away from her nose and stroke her cheek.

"Of course I know the girl. Georgette, little Jet," the Creator said. "A million of my cameras have watched her grow up. I saw her looking at you when Benny first began to build you. I always thought, from the expressions on her face, that the girl was in awe of you."

Veronica couldn't help herself: "You saw me being made?" she asked.

"I see lots of things. But I can't see thoughts. I can't see feelings. I can't see loyalty, or betrayal. And I couldn't see, until you told me, how faithful Benny's creatures will be to

him. You were willing to be smashed to scrap, just now, before you'd even tell me the girl's name. That's all I needed to know."

She felt the Ultrabot reaching behind her head, for the switch. This time, she would not plead to stay conscious. The shutdown would be a numb mercy.

"Shall I tell you," the child's voice asked, "about your twitch? It's fear. You look so pleased with yourself, except when you're lying, and then you look frightened."

The fingers found Veronica's switch, hidden in her hair, and paused. "I don't suppose," said the idol's head, "I'll ever switch you on again."

"That's fine," she said.

"I believe you. You don't look frightened." The hand drew back. "But don't you want to know why the people you love have put themselves in such danger? Jet saved her grandfather, but neither of them will be able to help Bud."

"Bud can look after himself."

"Bud will be dead in half an hour. He's about to fly a rocket straight into the heart of the Sun Lake. If he doesn't smash into the shields, he'll be trapped beneath them, and my creatures will trap him and rip him to shreds."

"That won't happen."

"Do you imagine Benedict loves his grandson too much to condemn him to certain death? I believe you're right. But Benedict doesn't understand what's in that Lake. He knows the Sun shines through, and that it's the source of all the light in my world. He knows he has been harvesting children from the outer world, to be my slaves at the bottom of the Lake. He knows, and he has tried every trick he can play to make me tell him why. But he really hasn't got a clue what's going on."

"You want all the light for yourself," Veronica accused Him.

The head giggled. "That's what he suspects. He thinks I'm planning some terrible new Creation. He couldn't be more wrong. And to make sure that he stays wrong, I have protected the Lake with much more than steel shields. Veronica, what is the worst thing you can imagine?"

"I've never tried."

"I have. And the water is teeming with my darkest thoughts. I am so sick and tired of all I have created. I desire it all to die. Benedict will lose his grandson, and he will never understand what I am doing until the last instant of his existence... and mine, and yours. The last instant of everything, when I blow the Marble to atoms and obliterate the outer world too."

The head took a final drag on the cigarette before the Ultrobot stubbed it out on Veronica's plinth. The smoke boiled in a column that thrust up through the holographic head and mushroomed out of its skull. It was as if the movie idol had blown out his own

brains. His face faded, leaving only the ghastly cloud, a nightmare blossom, like the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust.

The child's voice whispered, "I shall become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds."

Veronica stared at the mushroom cloud until it had faded to a drizzle of dust. Through it, she saw her reflection again. Her mouth was open, her eyes stark with revulsion.

The sight of herself gave her courage to speak. "You can't do it," she said.

For many minutes there was no reply. The Ultrabot was motionless, though Veronica did not feel she was alone. She watched her reflection, until at length it seemed to be watching her in return.

Her reflection winked.

Its lips spoke.

"Don't tell me what I cannot do," said the child's voice.

Veronica saw her eyes glow in her reflection. The irises changed colour: one became green, the other brown flecked with gold, and they began to shine so brightly that the rest of her face was invisible.

They had become a pair of coloured balls, suspended in the black lacquer, in a double image that Veronica knew she had seen many times before. These twin globes were displayed everywhere in the Marble. They were the insignia of the Creator.

The globes began to circle each other. Veronica saw they were rolling around a track that spiralled down and then folded back up on itself, in perpetual motion. As they rolled, they changed colour once more. The brown-and-gold ball became a swirl of reds and yellows, with a white blotch like a thumbprint.

Veronica had seen that globe before. Dr Perkins had shown it to her. "This is how the Marble looks to the outer world," he had said.

The green globe became a patchwork of brighter greens against a deep blue background. She knew that pattern too: "This is how the outer world would be if it were as big as our Marble," Dr Perkins had said.

The two worlds rolled around each other, rising and falling.

Veronica watched, and flinched when the Ultron's arms came to life. Its fingers reached into the hologram and, plucking the globes from their track, held them out in front of Veronica's eyes.

"I can do anything I imagine," said the child's voice. "I am the Creator and the Destroyer. I was born into a living death in one world, and I created another world where I am more alive than all its billions of creatures. And now I hold both worlds between the tips of my fingers."

The Ultron's grip tightened. The globes cracked and then splintered. The robotic pincers ground them to fragments. Crushed glass trickled down.

Chapter Five — AVIATOR

Jet Perkins saw her brother's rocket streak into the atmosphere as if it was straight in front of her. The Skylon blazed out of the void 300 miles ahead, and five miles above the centre of the Sun Lake: because the inner surface of the Marble sloped slowly upwards in all directions, Jet was looking forward, instead of up, as she strained to catch the first sign of Bud's arrival.

The General was on her shoulder, guiding her through the utter darkness. Behind them, by twenty minutes of the fastest flying Jet had ever done on a rollrider, the violent blaze of the Lake City lights had retreated to neon specks. They could no longer shed even a shimmer on the surface of the eclipse shields and, without the General's penetrating vision, she would have been flying blind. A faint scatter of guidelights marked places where the shields had not fully closed but, bobbing at this speed only a few yards above the metal plates, Jet couldn't guess her distance from any of them.

The Skylon had been invisible to her in space. As it completed its crossing, the General had counted down to re-entry: Jet expected a flash of silver, but the rocket showed itself as a vivid scarlet slash, like a scar cut by a razor into the sky.

"There!" shouted Jet. "Yes! Bud!! Yes!"

At almost two thousand miles an hour, screaming through air when it had been needling silently across the void moments earlier, the Skylon's surface was glowing with heat.

Bud's cockpit was insulated, Jet knew, but it was also set almost flush into the casing of the rocket, to minimise friction. The worst danger from the heat was that the Skylon would disintegrate before it hit the water — and it would only hit water, and not the shields, if Bud could adjust his trajectory as he plunged feet-first through the sky. Unable to look down, and with nothing but darkness around him, his life depended on the General's calculations and the grid references which Dr Perkins had risked everything to transmit.

"Course is correcting, now adjusted/*sheer relief*," the mannequin reported, and Jet knew now that the last, desperate radio transmissions had reached Bud, even when they couldn't receive his replies. The Skylon had only the thinnest of fins to manoeuvre with, and less than ten seconds to alter its entry path. It must have been like trying to steer a falling dart, she thought.

The red scar bled down the sky for another second, and another. Jet could not see how large the gap was in the shields, but she thought she could make out a lone guidelight — until another second passed, and the guidelight suddenly burned red and bright, and Jet realised she was seeing the Skylon's reflection on the water.

On the water! The shield was open!

"Oversteer," the General said.

A white spark flared up from the water, like a flash of magnesium, and the rocket vanished.

Jet screamed.

"Splashdown," the General said.

Jet had leaned back, instinctively slowing the rollrider. "What happened?" she asked.

"Visual data is conflicting."

"Is he safe? Did he make it?"

"Yes/*hopeful*."

"What do you mean, you're hopeful? Don't you know? Tell me what you saw!"

"The flash may have been contact between your brother's rocket and the shields."

"No. No, I don't believe you. He didn't crash."

"There was oversteer. Overcorrection. Possible guidance system failure/*anxiously re-assessing data*."

"But he didn't crash," Jet insisted.

"It is possible he detected previously unseen danger and sought to avoid it. Please wait/*applying alternative logarithms*. Data conflict is resolved. Following missile assault from below, Skylon lost vertical stability 1.2 seconds before entering water/*horrified*."

"He was shot down?"

"In essence."

"And the flash was..?"

"An object in collision with Skylon."

"And then? What did you see then?"

"Data obscured by intense steam clouds."

"Which was the heat of the rocket hitting the water. The splashdown," Jet said. "But he has survived. Yes?"

"Lacking definite data I must assess his survival chances as 50 per cent/*object guesswork*."

"Well, I've got definite data," Jet told him. "I know. I can feel it. He's alive and he's safe and he's going to need rescuing." She leant forward, urging the rollrider to pick up speed.

"Course correction 23 degrees low-side 18 plus-wise," remarked the mannequin, steering Jet to the right. She had instinctively started to head for the splashdown site instead of the rendezvous.

Reluctantly leaning sideways, Jet banked away from the point where that brilliant white flash had lit the blackness. She did not allow herself to think, for more than half a second, that the fiery splashdown might be the last she would ever see of her big brother. Instead, she watched the pair of glowing orbs, no bigger than eyes, that were suspended in water

inside a glass case in the rollrider's rim. They were her only visual guide: they were light-polarised, so that chrome dots on their surface would always point directly high-side of the heart of the Sun Lake. Jet's grandfather had a scratched steel compass, which he said he'd taken from a soldier's body after a Civil War battle in his home country, in the outer world. Its needle always pointed to the top of the planet, Dr Perkins explained, and the polar-orbs worked in a similar way — "but these are better," he said. "If I was fool enough to go to the North Pole, my compass would just spin like crazy. But you could fly straight across the Sun Lake and those polar-orbs wouldn't twitch."

He'd told her that more than a year before. Surely he couldn't have known, she thought, that one day he'd ask her to do exactly that: fly across the Sun Lake. Or that not only her life but Bud's too would be at stake.

Her grandfather knew a lot about almost everything, but she didn't believe he could have foreseen that.

The polar-orbs glowed in the Creator's colours, one green and one brown flecked with gold, the only points of light in a blackness so complete that Jet couldn't see her own hands. The constant rumble of the eclipse shields as they slammed into place shook the air around her: she knew the sounds had travelled perhaps hundreds of miles, and that disoriented her still more.

A higher note, like the scream of a racing engine, began to cut through the thunder. Jet reached a hand down to the anti-gravity unit, but it was silent. The unit didn't generate velocity, only lift. The rollrider was moving fast, close to 50mph and accelerating as Jet

leaned into each bowling roll, but it was her skill as a pilot, not an engine, that gave it speed.

"Vehicle approaching from counter-wise low-side," said the General on her collar.

"I hear it. Are you certain he's with us?"

"You're going to like this/*promise*."

As if on cue, a cone of light appeared above the shields and over Jet's shoulder, to her right. Spotlit in the beam was a motorcycle and sidecar. A uniformed figure crouched over the bike's screaming engine,

ii.

"Oh yes! That's more like it." Jet swayed sideways, urging the rollrider into a dipping glide that would take it across the motorcycle's path, and realised that she was flying over open water. A guidelight flickered faintly ahead, indicating where this section of the eclipse shield would emerge to cover the surface.

The gap between the motorbike and the rollrider was narrowing quickly. The bike was cherry-red and the rider was an Aviator, a man-sized mannequin with his characteristic jet-pack strapped across his back. As Jet and the General neared the bike, he saluted, just flicking his fingertips at his peaked cap. Jet yelled a greeting but she didn't wave back: at that speed any movement could unbalance the rollrider. Dr Perkins had sheared off its crash balloons with a pocket knife in Lake City — seconds later, he had slipped away,

into the dazzling streets, and left Jet and the General to dodge the patrolling Teds as they refloated the rollrider and navigated to the shores of the lake.

Jet refused to be frightened by flying without crash balloons. Flying this fast, and at this height, balloons would have been useless anyway. But she was very ready to climb onto a real vehicle, one with wheels, one that stayed on the ground.

And this one was gorgeous. The General had been right: she did like it.

"It's a Vincent Red Comet," she told the tiny figure on her collar. "And that's a Blacknell Bullet sidecar. It's 500cc, it'll carry me and Bud and still do 70mph. I thought they might send one of the Porsche 356s — they're faster, but this is better. I can ride this flat out all night, and I'm not really tall enough to put my foot right down in a car."

The Aviator was ahead of her now, tracking the edge of the shield, with the cone of light shining half on the metal surface and half on the shivering water.

He drew a pistol from a shoulder holster and twisted to aim at her from the saddle. Jet twitched the rollrider down and across the waves, out of the cone of light in a blink, skimming so low she could have trailed a hand in the water. Her grandfather had taught her and Bud to react immediately to weapons. Sometimes, without explanation, he would pull out a pencil, aim it at their heads, and shout, "Zap!" — if they were slow to duck, he'd scold them: "React first and think second."

Back in the darkness, Jet had time to think, as the painted grin on the Aviator's face swivelled towards her.

"What's he doing?" she demanded to the General. "I thought he was supposed to be on our side."

"He intends to attach a cable to us, by means of a magnetic missile. *Aviators/heavy sigh.*"

"They always have to be so dramatic," Jet agreed. "So he's not planning to stop?"

The Aviator was pointing at her, then gesturing to the sidecar. He indicated himself with his thumb, and spread his arms out like a plane. All the time, the red motorbike was barrelling along the edge of the shield, only feet from the water.

Jet steered back into the light and climbed until she was speeding directly above the bike. Something hit the base of the rollrider's bucket with a clunk. She leaned back, trying to slow down, but the Aviator was reeling them in. Within moments the cable, winding onto a spool at the mannequin's waist, had almost completely retracted. The rollrider was being towed, less than six feet above and behind the bike.

Jet looked over the rim. The cone of light was fading. The thought that Bud would relish jumping into a sidecar at 70mph didn't make her like the idea one scrap more. And the idea of doing it in near-darkness was worse still.

The Aviator launched a second light-cone. Its phosphorescent crystal would track the bike until it burned out. All but seven of its facets, at its base, were masked, to focus its light downwards and make it harder to spot for any guard units that were roaming the shields. That also made the crystals unstable, and Jet knew they sometimes shattered.

She drew three sharp, steady breaths through her nose. The extra seconds she would save by boarding the bike without a halt were not worth the risk — she could crash, or break her neck, and the rescue mission would be wrecked. But she knew the Aviator would not stop for her, however hard she pleaded. Uniformed mannequins regarded human children as menials. The chances of persuading this one to sacrifice flair for safety were nil.

And the longer Jet delayed, the worse the risk that her rollrider would flip over. The discs were not designed to be towed.

She stood up.

The light-cone exploded.

Jet screamed and ducked, and the movement sent the rollrider lurching sideways in a short arc, dragging the bike almost to the brink of the water. She saw the sizzling fragments of the crystal scatter behind them.

The Aviator steadied the Vincent Red Comet and fired off a third light-cone. Jet's eyes were stinging from the blaze of the explosion, and green and gold spots squirmed before her eyes as she looked down at the sidecar.

She stepped out of the rollrider.

The bike's speed nearly spilled her straight off the back, and the impact jarred her, but she managed to seize the Bullet's chrome rail and haul herself aboard, until she was squatting in the sidecar.

The Aviator's fixed grin was directed at her for a moment, as he let go of the handlebars and pushed a brass button as big as a saucer on his chest. A square parachute, like four vast mushrooms, billowed from his backpack, plucking him off the bike and dragging him away over the water.

The rollrider followed like an obedient pet, attached to the Aviator's waist by the cable. Jet felt a sudden pang for the little disc which had brought her through such a rapid succession of perils, but she could not waste time staring after it. She was a passenger on a riderless motorbike, with its throttle jammed open. Reaching forward, she could just grasp the near handlebar with one hand — the wrong hand, but at least she was able to keep her course steady as she slid chest-first over the saddle and the engine cowling, until she was astride the bike.

Only then did she look back. At the edge of the cone of light, the Aviator had jettisoned the rollrider into the lake. He was drifting down, his own boots nearly in the water as the disc's rim slid below the surface.

The rollrider would sink into the Sun Lake, and be torn apart by the first roasting rays of tomorrow's light. That was better than abandoning it to be captured and examined by the Creator's engineers. The Aviator could not pilot it himself, and wouldn't even if he had the skill — no Aviator would shame himself by using a flying machine.

He flew by other means.

Blue fingers of flame jabbed from the base of his pack. The square parachute settled and folded behind him, collapsing into the water. He hovered, drifting out of the cone of light, and Jet waited to see the Aviator's pack-burner blaze into life, rocketing him into the sky like an flaming meteor.

What she saw, instead, was a flash of chrome that speared out of the lake and snapped out the blue flames. It landed with a sound that was more of a rush than a splash, like an immense sword plunging into water.

Jet forced herself to turn her face from the darkness and look at the path ahead in the fading cone of light. A guidelight hung somewhere ahead of them, perhaps brighter than before, though its distance was impossible to gauge.

"OK," Jet said, as the crystal overhead burned out, "so what was that?"

"Anomalous," the General answered.

"A what?"

"Something which should not exist."

iii.

"A monster in the lake?" Jet asked.

"I estimate it is 31 feet long, with three rows of teeth. The teeth are possibly decorative."

"I only saw it for a flash, but the teeth didn't look like decorations."

"They were not used."

"It leapt out of the water and swallowed the Aviator whole?"

"A suitably dramatic demise for a show-off/*less distressed than I could be.*"

"Bud's in the water with a monster," Jet said. "Be distressed about that."

She leant low over the handlebars to reduce the wind drag, relying on the General to correct her course if she veered. The Comet had a powerful headlamp but she couldn't risk using it. Her only reference points were a pair of light-polarised beads in the speedometer, and the guidelight which was growing steadily brighter over the lake.

The metal under her tyres was thrumming as Jet forced the Comet to its limits. The heavy sidecar was slowing them down, but she was grateful it was there. A long, black cylinder, seamed with chrome, it would be big enough to hold Bud if he was too badly injured to ride the bike. And if, as Jet fervently hoped, he emerged from a hatch in the eclipse shields at a sprint, she would be able to unbolt the Blacknell Bullet and ditch it. Her weight on the back of the saddle would barely affect the bike as Bud raced for home.

Jet's size and her skill on a motorbike were two of the reasons Dr Perkins had chosen his grand-daughter for the rescue. He had not needed to add that she, above all the other humans and mannequins in the Marble Resistance, would be most determined to save her brother.

The shield beneath them was vibrating, so hard the bike was almost bouncing. Jet hung on to the handlebars. "I can't keep this speed up," she shouted to the General, but she did not ease off the throttle. Every minute she gained could be crucial.

The vibration became a roar. The guidelight vanished and, in the darkness over the lake, Jet sensed rather than saw a vast black wall loom up. She felt the bike being pushed across the metal like a pea buzzing over a drumskin. Working down through the gears, she tried to steer away from the water.

A wave slammed into them. The engine cut out as they were engulfed. The sidecar filled with water, the bike overturned, and Jet had barely time to grab a breath before she was pulled under. She felt the bike being swept one way in the surge, and then dragged back as the warm water retreated.

Her shoulder and then her head broke through the surface. She was still clinging to the handlebars, and could only hope the General was gripping her collar as hard. Shaking water off her face, she started to draw another deep breath, and was hit from above by a deluge that felt as heavy as a house.

For a moment, Jet was certain the monster from the lake had thrown itself upon her and swallowed her whole. Later, she realised that the tons of water thrust into the sky when the eclipse shield thundered up had poured off on all sides, and swamped her.

The bike was overturned, twisting like a twig in a stream as millions of gallons ebbed back into the Sun Lake. Jet let it wash over her and did not try to stand, until it was no

longer deep enough to cover the sidecar. The weight of the water inside the Bullet's casing kept them from being dragged over the edge of the metal plate, into the lake.

Jet felt a rush of air behind her as she struggled to her feet. She hunched forward, cringing from the blow she knew would come.

The noise the eclipse shield made, as it toppled down and slammed into place across the open stretch of lake, hit Jet with the force of a wrecking ball. She and the bike were sent ploughing sideways, before the impact ran in a series of tremors through the metal that flicked them up into the air. Jet didn't let go of the Vincent Red Comet until they finally came to rest. Bruised and drenched, she lay sprawled over the wheels. When she was sure they would not move again, she pressed a hand to her shoulder.

The General's hand nipped at her fingertip.

"Still there, then," she said, and her words sounded muffled in her own head, as though the water hadn't drained out of her skull.

She wrestled the bike upside-down, to empty the sidecar, and fought then to get it upright. Her feet slipped on the wet metal.

When she finally climbed onto the saddle and kicked down on the starter, the engine gunned into life first time.

Jet grinned, and revved hard before slipping the clutch into gear, making the Comet's wheels spin on the slick surface.

"I love outer-world engineering," she yelled.

"It is an object," the General retorted. "Barely worthy of the name 'machine'. It has no intelligence, no thoughts, no feelings. No consciousness at all."

The wind rushed past them as they gathered speed.

"I wish," the General added, "that I was outer-world engineering/*truly sorry for myself*."

Aviator: Part Two

They rode for another hour. All the guidelights had winked out, but the crashes of distant thunder still rumbled around them. Jet had a new worry, which she did not voice aloud to the General: now that the eclipse shield was fully closed, how long would it be before the panels started to open? And how fast would that happen? Would she and Bud have time to get off the surface of the lake?

It wasn't her worst fear. There were others, much more sickening. Had Bud survived the splashdown? Had his capsule been damaged when the Skylon was hit in that blinding flash? Would he be able to reach a hatch, to escape through the shield? Would Jet be in the right place when he emerged?

And when all the world knew no machine could survive the intense light at the heart of the Sun Lake, what was that monster in the water?

Jet kept riding, altering her course according to the General's nudges. The wind chilled her wet clothes, and the nearest lights were more than a hundred miles away, in Lake City. She felt as though she was travelling over the widest, emptiest plain that had ever existed — the lightless, icy wastes that stretched away on the far side of the Mercury Mountains were just patches of darkness compared to this endless, rolling night.

To keep her concentration from drifting, she tried to calculate the dimensions of the Sun Lake, from the fragments of arithmetic and geometry that had lodged in her head during school lessons. The Sun Lake was roughly circular, she knew — Jet had seen that for herself, when she'd been living at the Skylon launchpad, on the other side of the world. The Sun Lake had been overhead then, and appeared completely different to how it looked from the cities on its shores: from the perspective of the home Jet's parents had once owned in Los Americanos, the lake had appeared to be an immense, brilliant oval that stretched a quarter of the way up the side of the world, and just as far to either side.

To see it from the jungle, as a circle of light over her head, like a halo on the world, had been one of the strangest experiences of Jet's life.

The lake was 700 miles across, she knew, with a shoreline 2,200 miles long. The eclipse shields covered an area of 770,000 square miles. And somewhere under that immense metal desert, her brother would be fighting his way towards Jet.

The distances were insignificant on their own. Jet would have walked around the Marble, if Bud had asked her. But if the General's co-ordinates were wrong, or if Bud's damaged

capsule brought him to the wrong sector under the shields, she might be miles out of position when he broke through onto the surface.

They had talked all this through, many times. "What's the worst that can happen?" Bud had joked. "We leave late, and we get to swim home."

But that was before he'd known about the creature that could leap up and swallow a man whole.

Jet just hoped he still didn't know about it.

She cut her speed to 20mph, and started to steer the bike through a meandering figure-of-eight, a mile or so long. The General was certain of their location: this was the sector where they'd hoped Bud would be waiting. Jet had never been in a lonelier place.

Each panel of the shield was several hundred yards square, and somewhere on each one was a hatch, a hinged flap that opened upwards. Designed as access points for repair units in case the shields jammed, they had to be big enough for humans: machines and mannequins would be destroyed by the intensity of the lake's sunlight during the day.

Jet yearned to tear across the panels, slamming the hatches open and yelling out to Bud. She knew that wouldn't help him — it would just put his life in more danger. But to wait passively beside one hatch was more than she could stand. It was better, too, that she kept the bike's engine running, in case it was more badly damaged than she realised. So she kept the Vincent Red Comet on a long, twisting circuit between the hatches.

"How much longer?" she asked the General. When he didn't reply, she whistled at him.

She knew he hated that.

"Ten minutes/*insulted and aggravated.*"

"Don't ignore me, then. Ten minutes til rendezvous?"

"No. Ten minutes overdue."

The bike continued its criss-cross laps, returning to the same point every seven minutes or so. To come so far and risk so much, only to find herself alone, cold, and powerless to help Bud, filled her with a sickening sense of anti-climax.

After three circuits, she broke the silence: "So he's half an hour late now?"

"Also the eclipse has been total for one hour eleven minutes six seconds."

"What's the longest eclipse on record?"

"This one."

"Maybe the shield won't open before daylight. How long til dawn — three hours? Or maybe it's staying shut because Bud hasn't been captured."

"High-side plus-wise, 31 degrees, 214 miles distant/*we spoke too soon.*"

Jet twisted the throttle. "You mean you've seen Bud? He's out?"

"No/*the shield panels are beginning to open.*"

It was grim news, almost the worst possible. She couldn't speak for a moment. She couldn't even keep her eyes open. In the blackness, that didn't matter.

"Let them open. I can't stop that. But I'm not going back without my brother."

"He might be dead/*bitter grief and despair.*"

"Yes," she snarled. "And if he's alive, and we leave, we'll be killing him. What about grief and despair then?"

"You might wait for him, and die waiting."

"He risked his life. I risk mine. That's the deal."

"Would he want you to die?*/rhetorical.*"

"He wants us to show some courage! He's coming, he'll be here."

"There are 47 panels now opening... 48, 50... the nearest is seventeen miles low-side. A tentative pattern is emerging/*violent agitation.*"

"Don't look for patterns, look for Bud!"

"Retreat might be impossible within nine minutes/*emphasis on urgency.*"

Jet tried to ignore him, but a shudder ran through her. It felt like fear, only bigger: fear started in her stomach, and this sensation seemed to come from outside her body. It was welling up through the bike.

Two colossal sounds began to compete, one high and one low, a screech and a groan.

"This panel is opening," the general said. His voice, a steady electronic pulse which could not vary in pitch or volume, cut through the noise as clearly as a radio signal.

Jet felt the sudden, lurching pull of gravity. The weight of the sidecar seemed to be pressing her sideways. Angling the bike downwards and across the slope, she shouted:

"Which way to the next panel?"

"Hold tight," warned the General, and the bike gave a jolt as if she'd ridden it over a kerb.

The bottom of the sidecar screeched against metal. At once they were on the flat again.

"That was fortunate," the General said.

"We're owed some luck."

"Let's go while we're in credit/*not a joke.*"

"Bud'll be here. Any moment. I'm not leaving yet."

They were showered with water as the panel next to them lifted clear of the lake's surface.

Jet had been scared, many times that night. This terror was different. She was afraid she would never know what had happened to her brother. Staying to find out, even if it killed her, was easier than running away.

ii.

She clicked the headlight beam on and started to ride in tight circles, wagging the handlebars to make the light dance. She didn't care about guard patrols now, even if they weren't already fleeing to the shores: it was more important that Bud should see his rescuers, the moment he emerged.

The nearest panel was sloping up sharply now, water cascading down its sides. As the headlight crossed the patch of lake beneath, it caught a glitter of silver.

Jet braked, and swept the lamp from side to side across the water.

"I saw the Skylon!"

"You saw nothing/*dismissive of over-eager imagination.*"

"Don't tell me what I saw! You weren't looking. The Skylon's in there."

"I have data to a visual penetration of 61.3 metres. The Skylon is not in the water."

"It is! I saw it! Bud could be trapped in there. Or —"

Jet felt the first taste of real hope in her mouth since the splashdown. If the rocket had reached the surface and then sunk, could that mean Bud had reached the rendezvous?

She jerked her head round, screaming his name into the darkness again and again —

"Bud! Bud! Bud!"

"Sis!"

He said it once, not a shout but a gasp. The metal magnified the sound.

Jet swung the headlight across the panel, and saw Bud's flashlight before her own beam found him.

He was hauling himself through the hatch, blood streaming down his face from a wound on his head, his flightsuit torn away from his body and flapping on one side. As he dragged his legs up, his arms gave way and he collapsed onto his chest.

"Bud! I'm coming!"

Jet kicked down on the gears, making the bike slew as the wheels spun. Bud was scrambling to his feet, staggering towards her, reaching out with the flashlight in his hand. Jet whooped for joy.

The sound was strangled in her throat as she tried to turn it into a warning shout.

Behind her brother, a second head was emerging from the hatch, spotlit in the glare of the headlamp. It had a black quiff and a long, cruel face. Jet had seen it before.

"Ted!" she screamed. "A Ted, behind you!"

Bud waved weakly, not turning his head, not understanding.

Jet urged the bike forward, only fifty yards away now. The Ted was levering itself up. Its body was encased in a blue tin coat, and it stretched an arm forward, pointing its broad, black cuff at Bud.

Clenching the brake, Jet threw the Comet into a sideways skid and slid across the last few yards of wet metal. Bud flung out a hand and gripped the edge of the sidecar.

"Hey sis," he said. "Good of ya —"

The Ted's right arm snaked out. It was like a python, in interlocking bands of armour that extended twenty feet, thirty feet, until its hand struck and locked onto Bud's ankle. With a whiplash jerk, it dragged him back, breaking his grip on the sidecar.

Jet vaulted off the bike and sprinted after him. Bud was face down, clawing at the panel and roaring, and she saw his blood glistening on the wet surface. The Ted was already lowering its body through the hatch. With a wordless yell, Jet dived and wrapped her arms around her brother's shoulders, then jack-knifed and tried to dig her heels into the slick surface. Twisting, she managed to haul Bud onto his back, but she couldn't halt their slide towards the gaping slit in the shield.

Bud screamed as the Ted wrenched his leg sideways. With his free foot he stamped onto the tin hand, and screamed again as the impact drove the tin fingers into his flesh. The arm snaked in a S-bend and then pulled taut, and they were dragged to the brink of the hatch.

Struggling to keep his legs braced, Bud locked both his feet against the underside of the open hatch lid. The Ted had disappeared into the gap, but its whole weight was pulling down on his ankle.

"Get it off me!" he gasped. His voice was so distorted with pain that Jet barely understood him, but she didn't need to be told what to do. Her fingers grappled with the tin fist, tearing at it till she bled. It was like trying to open a can with her bare hands.

The Ted's blank eyes stared up at her. Jet lashed out with a foot, almost stumbling into the gap, but her boot connected and rocked the head back. That gave her an idea.

Cradling Bud's legs with both arms, and straining till she thought her back would burst, she lifted his heels onto the edge of the lid. Bud moaned in agony. She forced herself to ignore it, and leapt over the hatch. Turning as she landed, she hammered a kick against the open cover, and another.

The lid slammed down. The Ted's tin wrist was trapped under it, and Bud scrambled to turn his leg side-on to the opening.

Jet stamped on the lid, again and again, then bent and pulled up for a split-second before slamming it down. The metal bands below the Ted's hand were flattened and torn. Bud was doubled over, scrabbling at its fingers, but the grip was unbreakable.

Jet heard her own voice, howling in fear and rage. She pounded her feet on the hatch, kicking and stamping, feeling the heavy iron crush the Ted's wrist, until the bands gave way and the lid banged shut.

A last thread of metal trailed from the tin hand into the hatch. Bud seized his own leg as though it was no longer part of him and hauled it back, snapping the thread. He tried to roll onto his knees but fell back.

Jet hugged his head, sobbing into his face and feeling his hot blood sticky on her skin.

"You're safe," she gasped. "You're safe. I knew you'd get here."

His arm clutched her weakly.

"Knew you'd be here," he whispered.

"Can you walk?"

He shook his head. "Get the bike."

She ran towards the headlight, and suddenly she was conscious of the colossal engines under the shield, groaning as the panels retracted. They shook the darkness, and the whole of the Marble seemed to be trembling. Jet touched a hand to her collar, where the General was clamped.

"How much longer have we got?"

"Potential routes to safety do exist."

"You know where they are?"

"I can make informed guesses/*marginally better than blind panic*. Our best escape route will cease to exist in a minute and three seconds."

"Easy-peasy," Jet said, scrambling onto the saddle.

"That route will require us to maintain maximum speed throughout."

"It's a Vincent Red Comet." Jet hauled the handlebars round, spilling light across the lake's surface. "Maximum is the only speed it's got."

She saw the glint of silver in the water again. There was the Skylon — that was how she'd known Bud would be here.

But as she lifted a hand to point it out to the General, she saw she'd been wrong. It was not the Skylon.

iii.

The streak of silver lanced out of the water and landed on its belly, 30 yards ahead of Jet, with the bike's light reflected in a jagged flurry along its full length. At its nose, rows of teeth bristled like spears. It seemed to swim across the metal as its tail beat from side to side.

Jet pulled back on the handlebars as though the bike would panic unless she kept a tight grip. She started to steer towards Bud. She had no idea that she was screaming.

The monster swept past her, and seized Bud's arm with the tip of its jaws.

Curling up from its tail and snapping its head back, it tumbled his body into the dark sky with a flick.

Its mouth gaped. For one heartbeat it seemed to be as wide as it was long.

As Bud fell, the jaw snapped shut. Jet's last glimpse of her brother was of his limp figure, spreadeagled as it dropped between the razor-tipped teeth.

She couldn't tell if the teeth had closed on him, or if the monster had swallowed him whole.

Riding straight at the shimmering silver side, Jet ducked away from it at the final moment and dragged the sidecar along its length. She was relying on her instincts, and her instincts told her to rip it open, to gut it.

The impact made the monster ripple, but its carapace did not tear. Whipping its head around as Jet peeled away, it lunged at the bike and clamped its teeth on the sidecar.

Jet had the satisfaction of seeing half a row of the silver needles torn out of its mouth.

They bristled from the sidecar like porcupine quills.

The monster recoiled. Jet accelerated away, hoping to lure it further onto the panel, where she could use the bike's superior speed to keep battering at it without being caught. But the creature lashed its tail around and propelled itself towards the water, with a noise like a chain dragging over corrugated iron. Before Jet could turn back, it had vanished into the lake.

For two or three seconds, she burned with a desire to ride straight into the water and to chase the monster into the depths. But that feeling disappeared, along with all her other emotions.

It wasn't as if she was numb. Even numbness is a feeling. It was more that the power supply which fed her emotions had stopped. All night the intensity of her feelings had been frying her alive. Suddenly there were no feelings, and she no longer felt alive.

"Grief, misery, shock, disbelief/*we must leave now*," the General said.

"He's gone," said Jet. She did not register the mannequin's confusion, and felt none of her own. She felt nothing.

"Our escape route remains viable for sixteen seconds. Will you take it?"

"Tell me where."

"Right, thirteen degrees."

Without speaking, Jet braked, halted and slipped the bike into neutral.

"Ten seconds."

Jet reached down to find the bolts which secured the Bullet sidecar.

"Eight seconds."

Coolly and deftly, and in total darkness, she released the bolts.

"Four seconds."

She sat up, took a deep breath, revved the engine.

"Two seconds."

She kicked the Comet into gear.

"One second."

For a moment Jet remembered how she had watched her brother's rocket blast off from the other side of the world, and then she was travelling too fast to think. Freed from the sidecar, the bike leapt forward and plunged into the blackness. The triangle of light that spread from its headlight seemed meaningless to Jet now. It was nothing more than a scrap of white paper, pasted onto a black curtain that hid the world.

As the Comet climbed past 80mph, then past 90mph, Jet ceased to be aware even of the darkness. All her mind was focused on the bike's sound and movement. There was no pleasure in it. Pleasure was an emotion, and all those had been stripped away. All she had was the bike, and the General's curt instructions: "One degree right. Half a degree right. Brace."

The Vincent Red Comet shuddered and its engine climbed a note. Jet could tell they were on a new panel, and that this one was already opening. She could feel the camber under her wheels.

"Right six degrees," instructed the General. Jet obeyed, and the bike began to follow a steeper path. She could feel the surface jerking and shaking as it lifted clear of the water.

The General told her nothing, described nothing, offered nothing. He could have explained where he planned to steer her, but with Bud gone she didn't want to hear. She only wanted to ride away.

A minute passed, and then another, and the slope became harder to climb. They were crossing it at a diagonal, and Jet had to lean into the incline. The bike was slowing. She found herself wondering if the climb would have been possible with the sidecar, and then dismissed the thought.

"Left ten degrees. And ten more. Levelling off. Hold this course."

Jet fought to keep the bike upright. The panel must have risen almost halfway by now, and twice she had to nudge down the slope as the back wheel started to slip.

"Prepare for downhill. Left 25 degrees."

Jet pointed the headlight diagonally down the incline. She knew now what the General was planning. Whether it was possible, she didn't care. She simply held the course, with the throttle wide open.

Their speed came back at a rush. For the last few seconds it was as though they were falling, at well over 100mph.

"Get ready to jump. Three, two, one, jump."

As they soared off the side of the panel, Jet kicked down with her feet and pulled up on the handlebars, to prevent the bike from landing nose-first and smashing its front forks. She released the throttle and let in the clutch, disengaging the engine, so they'd be freewheeling when they landed.

She had no idea how high they had climbed, how far they were falling or how long their leap was. She only waited for the impact.

When it came, every joint in her body was compressed like a spring snapping shut. The bike bounced, skidded right and then left as she over-corrected, and then Jet let out the clutch and twisted the throttle back. The Comet roared, and she knew instantly that the ride was much rougher than before. The shock absorbers were destroyed. But the tyres hadn't burst, and the steering was solid.

"Right, fourteen degrees," said the General.

Neither of them commented on the jump. This was not the time for congratulations.

But Jet did speak, more than hour later, as they steered a zig-zag course across the disintegrating eclipse shield.

"I'm going back," she said. "Not right now. Not tonight. But soon. There is a way. You know what it is. You can't come with me, but you can't stop me either. And Grampa can't stop me."

The General said nothing. Jet was silent for a long time more, before she spoke again.

"Maybe Bud's dead, I don't know. If he is, I want to know what happened, and I'm going to find out everything he was trying to learn tonight. And if he's alive — I owe him a rescue."

Chapter Six — SMOKE

Jack Lennox woke with a lurch as the sacking over his face was ripped open. The sunlight made him squeeze his eyes tight, and he caught a lungful of cleaner air before the sack was upended and he was tipped into a dark hole.

He landed with his arms stretched out on something soft, which groaned. Then he felt a knee or a fist thump into his bruised ribs, and a voice squeaked, "Watch out, shrimp."

Jack rolled away. He could have stayed to repay that punch to the unseen boy, but he thought a bigger body might be dropping through the hatch at any second.

It did. The square of light above Jack was blocked for a moment, and there was a thud and a squeal.

"Cripes! Sorry," said a voice in the darkness. As Jack's eyes adjusted, he saw Paulie struggle to his feet and hold out his arms, to catch Sparkler as he was thrown down.

The hatch slammed shut.

Jack was in total darkness again.

The floor where he squatted was metal, and it seemed to shift under him, as though it was on rollers. He heard a slapping sound at his back. It was the same noise he'd heard that morning, when he and Woz had sat by the river.

Jack thought he was on the water, perhaps in a ship's storeroom or the hold of a barge. For an instant, when he felt something furry brush against his leg, he thought Woz had been thrown into the hold too. Then he realised it was a rat, and shuddered.

He could hear Paulie talking in a low voice to his brother. Jack wanted to crawl over and ram the posh twit's teeth down his gullet, but he knew he wouldn't need to hurry. The hold felt like a prison, not a waiting-room. Jack didn't expect to see daylight again soon.

Instead, he concentrated on filling his lungs and cleaning coal dust out of his mouth and throat. His ribs and head ached — Jack had taken two beatings that morning, before being tied in a sack and dragged across London. But he couldn't feel any broken bones, and the thick, black dust had helped a cut under his nose to clot.

"Hello," said Paulie loudly. "Who else is in here? Anyone? I landed on some chap — who was that? My name's Paulie McAllister. My brother's here too. Come on, speak up."

"I'm here," a low voice said.

"And me," said another. Murmurs rippled around the hold. It sounded to Jack, who said nothing, as if at least half a dozen other boys were in the darkness.

"Anyone know where we are?" asked Paulie.

"In here," said a voice with a sneer.

"But where's here?" Paulie persisted. "And have you just arrived? Who's been here longest?"

"Dunno how long I been here," said the squeaky voice, "but I been fed three times. If you can call it food. Which you can't."

Jack thought any boy who had been cooped in that darkness for at least a day, and perhaps for three or even longer, should have learned not to sit under the hatch. But he still said nothing.

"My brother and I were brought here from an orphanage. We're not orphans, but that doesn't matter," said Paulie.

"What was the place called?" asked the sneering voice. "The House of Lords?"

"It was called the Luddgate Hospital for Parish Children," Paulie said.

"I come from there!" said a boy who sounded no more than five.

"And me!" said another.

Jack knew Luddgate's, though only from the outside. It was a place the police might take a boy if they caught him sleeping rough. They had to catch him first, though.

"Mr Gould brung me," said the five-year-old.

"What, the bald geezer?"

"Him with the eyes and the coat? He's evil, he is."

"Yeah, did you ever catch him looking at you? He's got snake eyes."

Everyone in the darkness knew about Mr Gould.

"But why has he imprisoned us here? Does anyone know that?" Paulie said.

"He told me," the sneering boy said, "that we'll be sold as slaves. When this boat is full, he'll sail it to China and trade us to the nomads."

A boy at Jack's side burst into tears.

"No more of that talk," Paulie snapped.

"You asked."

"I didn't ask for lies."

"Brave talk, your Lordship, when you're hiding in the dark."

"I wouldn't hide from you!" exclaimed Paulie. "Switch the lights on, and I'll be glad to give you a hiding. I'm sick of cowards. It was a dirty coward who got me thrown in this place — and if he's in here listening, I'll say it again. You're a cowardly runaway!"

"I'm not a coward — you're an idiot," said Jack, climbing to his feet. "And I don't care where I fight you."

The boys hooted and whistled.

"I gave you half a thumping," Paulie shouted. "Come and get the other half — and you're lucky my hands are still tied."

"Oi, Lord Fauntleroy," said the snide voice. "Haven't you worked out how to break that invisible string yet?"

Jack said, "Tell him how. He'll need both hands free when he surrenders."

"Burn it off."

"Right. Who's got a match?" Paulie demanded. A light flared, and Jack could see about ten boys huddled all around the walls. Most were in rags, and none looked bigger or older than Jack himself.

"Quick," said the boy with the match cupped in his palms. "I only got two left."

Paulie held his wrists over the flame. It flared, and a line of blue light sizzled. Paulie sucked air between his teeth and rubbed his wrists with his freed hands.

"Sparkler!" he said. "Look lively!"

As the match flared one more time, Jack took in the rest of the hold. He saw chains hanging in loops from the girders across the ceiling, and folded sheets of cloth standing against the walls. They looked like sails, or tarpaulins for covering cargo. Either way, the cloth would be oiled — Jack had known boys with coats and trousers cut from that same material. The oil made it waterproof; it also made it burn.

The match went out.

"Right, Jack Coward," called Paulie. "Where are you going to run to now?"

"Let's have some light first," said Jack. "Who's got a penknife?"

The boy with the matches also had a knife with a one-inch blade, the sort men used to scrape out the bowls of tobacco pipes. Jack used it to hack a rag of cloth off the furled sail, and to fray one edge. "This'll burn," he promised, wondering whether it would.

It did. As soon as the boy lit his match to the stray threads, they caught. Jack twisted one end into a point and thrust it through a link of the dangling chains. The burning cloth hung there, filling the room with leaping shadows.

Jack pulled on the chain, dragging the light higher. He didn't want anyone to brush against it and set their clothes on fire. In that cramped hold, with no way of escape, they could all burn to death.

"That'll give us about five minutes of light," he predicted.

"Come on then," said Paulie. "I'll be bored of hitting you after five minutes anyway."

"I won't ever get bored of hitting you," said Jack. "So let's have more light."

ii.

Ripping and sawing, he used the tiny knife to tear a twelve-inch strip from the whole length of the sail. Charlie, the boy with the knife and the one remaining match, held one end while Jack twisted it into a rope. Dragging it through another link in the chain, he looped the strip around and knotted the ends, so that it hung in a loose figure of eight

around the metal. The burning rag had almost guttered out as Jack pulled it down and used it to set fire to the rope.

The flames began to wind round it, and Jack raised the chain as high as he could. Now the hold was filled with a rich orange light.

Paulie had stripped off his blazer and rolled his shirt sleeves to his biceps. He had his fists up, the right guarding his face and the left ready to lash out. He was twice Jack's weight and easily six inches taller, as well as a couple of years older.

Jack turned his back, and bent as though he was going to check his lace, tempting Paulie to try and kick his backside. If he did, Jack would grab his foot and dump him on his back. But Paulie ignored the boys who were crowded round in a circle and yelling for the scrap to kick off. Paulie, clearly, was going to fight fair.

So Jack cannoned backwards, with his head down, and drove an elbow into Paulie's stomach.

The bigger boy leaned forward, to absorb the blow, and that was when the back of Jack's head smacked into his chin.

The collision sent a stabbing hot pain across Jack's scalp. If it hurt him, he knew it was hurting his enemy more. As Paulie staggered back, Jack turned and punched him as hard as he could and as low as he could in the stomach.

Paulie's arm caught him a rap between the shoulders, but the blow had nothing in it. Jack stepped back, and held up his fists in a mockery of Paulie's boxing stance. "Ready to start?" he asked.

"That's the sort of dirty coward trick I should have expected," Paulie said. Blood dripped from his lower lip.

"I'm not a coward!" Jack said. He took a pace towards Paulie, dropping his guard, and a punch stung him under the left eye. Another cracked across his jaw, and the third landed on his nose, so hard that his legs folded and he landed on the floor.

The boys laughed and jeered as Jack tried to scramble back. He was expecting Paulie to leap feet-first on him, but the bigger boy just held his fists higher and waited for Jack to rise. Jack realised he couldn't retreat, or he really would look like a coward. He couldn't let the boys see, either, that the punch on his nose was making his eyes water — they'd think he was crying.

Rubbing his bloody face against his shoulder, Jack managed to wipe his eyes as he stood up. "I'm not a coward," he repeated.

He was ready for the punch this time. Jerking his head back and catching Paulie's wrist with both hands, Jack lifted it as he turned a full circle. When he brought Paulie's arm down again, he spun the bigger boy round and twisted his hand halfway up his spine.

Jack kicked the back of Paulie's knees, making his legs buckle. Now he was the taller, and he hooked his left forearm across Paulie's throat, dragging his head up while pulling as hard as he could on the right wrist.

Paulie didn't let a sound escape his lips. Jack knew that most boys in that double lock would be screaming.

"Say I'm not a coward," Jack told him.

"Dirty stinking coward!"

"I'm not! I was getting a bit of glass. To cut your brother out of the sack. I wasn't running away!"

Jack slackened the tension on Paulie's throat. He wanted everyone to hear the bigger boy admit he was wrong.

Paulie's left hand snatched Jack's ankle and yanked it forward, spilling him onto his back. As Jack tried to catch his balance, he heard a shout of agony and thought he must have wrenched Paulie's right arm out of its socket, but then the back of his head connected with the metal deck. The fiery rings blurred above him, and his teeth ached.

This time Paulie didn't wait for him to get up. He aimed a left-handed punch that slid off the side of Jack's face and thumped into the deck. As Paulie's knee pinned him to the floor, Jack braced his jaw for the right-handed blow. It didn't come. Paulie's arm just hung by his side.

"Give up now," shouted Paulie. Jack offered his hand to shake, and Paulie hesitated before taking it... right-handed.

Jack was merciless. He could see how badly that arm must be hurting, so he made it hurt some more. Paulie yelled as his fingers were bent back, and yelled again as Jack, getting to his feet, gripped two fingers in each hand and tried to pull them apart.

"Say it!" Jack snarled. "Say it!"

"You're a coward!"

Jack dragged him in a full circle under the blazing rope. He kept Paulie's arm at full lock, so the bigger boy couldn't swing a left-handed punch.

He didn't expect what happened next. He'd thought Paulie was fighting fair. But in the desperation born of pain, Paulie kicked Jack's thigh, so hard that numbness spread like a stain up and down the muscle. As Jack reached, instinctively, to hold his knee and stop his leg from collapsing, Paulie's other foot thudded into his side. It hit him hard enough to lift him into the air.

Another kick landed in his ribs while he was still down, and then Paulie was hauling him to his feet with his right hand, and aiming short, vicious jabs at his face and neck with his left. Jack was reeling, unable to fend off the blows, his hands tugging weakly at the grip on his shirt collar.

"You say it," Paulie ordered. "Say you're a coward!"

He forced Jack back against the iron wall of the hold. Jack's hands groped sideways, trying to support himself. Another punch made his head rock back.

He wasn't trying to fight now. He just wanted to stay standing long enough for Paulie to knock him unconscious, so that he couldn't be forced to say he was a coward.

He'd let Paulie kill him before he said those words.

"Coward! Coward! Say it! Coward!"

Jack's fist closed on a double length of chain. It swayed as he tried to hold himself upright.

Hardly aware of what he was doing, Jack swung the chain up and in. It wrapped itself around the back of Paulie's head, flying so fast that the last link reached round to sting Jack's own face.

Jack let go of the chain. It flopped over Paulie's shoulder, as the bigger boy dropped to his knees and toppled sideways.

Jack stepped over him. "I'm not a coward," he mumbled through a mouthful of blood.

The circle of boys stared at him, their eyes and jaws gaping in the firelight.

Jack found Sparkler's face. "I wasn't running away," he started to say.

Sparkler kicked him, twice — once between the legs and once on the side of the knee. As Jack rolled onto his back, the last thing he saw was Sparkler falling, elbow-first, towards his face.

Smoke: Part Two

The stench of burning sailcloth brought Jack back to his senses. He struggled to sit up, and opened his eyes, trying to focus on the rings of fire that hung from the ceiling.

Smoke, so thick it was almost liquid, flowed round the chains.

The air in the hold was hotter, too. Jack's breathing felt laboured and his head throbbed, though that could have been the result of his beating. He pressed his fingers to his eyes and then to the side of his head. When he lifted his arms, his sides ached. And it wasn't just his sides — as his head cleared, Jack became aware of pain all over his body. He spat blood into his hands, probing his teeth with his tongue.

A rat ran over his leg, and he pulled it back sharply. Jack had been bitten by rats, in cellars and under bridges where he'd been sleeping, and just the thought of them brought back the sudden pain and fear of those nights.

The light from the flames was less orange now, and it threw thicker shadows. Jack looked around for Paulie, and saw that none of the boys was standing up. Some of them had their faces pressed to the metal deck, trying to breathe where there was no smoke.

It hadn't been the smartest idea, Jack realised, to burn oily cloth in a locked metal room.

A boy crawled to Jack's side and put a hand on his shoulder. Jack looked at the grimy face, scored with lines of sweat. It took him a moment to recognise Sparkler.

"Where'd your smile go?" he asked, groggily.

Sparkler held his wrist and pulled at him. Jack forced himself to his feet, bending over to avoid the worst of the reeking smoke. The bottom of the ring of rope was just embers now, and Jack guessed he'd been unconscious for at least ten minutes.

On the other side of the room, Paulie lay stretched out with his head on his rolled-up blazer. His eyes were open and his hair was matted with blood.

Jack felt sick. He had never been in a fight half as bloody or horrible. His own body was a mass of bruises, but he couldn't tell if he'd inflicted far worse injuries on Paulie. The thought frightened him.

"You all right?" he asked.

Paulie turned his head. The left side of his face was swollen, with a cut from his eyebrow to his ear. "If I offer you my hand," he said, "could you refrain from breaking my fingers?"

Jack grinned with relief. "I really wasn't running off," he said, grasping Paulie's left hand.

"I ain't a coward."

"We've established that," Paulie said. "But if you'd hit Mr Gould half as hard as you hit me, we wouldn't be stuck down here."

"We should have just left Sparkler to sort him out. Who's his dad, Rocky Marciano?"

With a groan, Paulie levered himself into a sitting position. "That's a sore topic," he said.

Jack regarded him sideways. It was difficult to say anything to Paulie which wouldn't be taken seriously.

"How come you're roughing it with us lot, then?" he asked. "I mean, look at these fellows. I don't know them, but I know dozens of boys like them." He gestured round the room at random: "His old man's probably a drunk. His dad never come back from the war, maybe. His mum got left in the lurch by a Yank, him over there ran off from home same as me... We're all the same. There ain't one of us can read, and we're all on our own. But you're different. You've got your brother, and you're wearing a tie. What is that, school uniform?"

Paulie fingered the tattered object round his neck. "Between you and your dog, you haven't left much of my poor tie. Funny thing — Mr Gould must have picked it up and put it in my sack. Why on earth would he do that, I wonder? He must have gone to a good school himself. It's an Eton tie," he added.

"Eaten and sicked up," Jack agreed. "Woz did that."

"Eton. My school," Paulie corrected him. "Well it was, for a couple of terms. Until Mama elected to stop the fees."

"Why'd you still wear it?"

"It's the only halfway-decent outfit I've got. The orphanage took most of my clothes, and Sparkler's."

"When did your mum die?"

"She didn't. But she told everyone who knew Sparkler and me that we were dead."

Jack stared at him. He didn't know what to reply to that. At last he said: "My mum died when I was born."

"I'm very sorry," Paulie said.

"Yeah. I'm used to it. Sounds like you've been stitched right up, though. My dad's probably around, somewhere — what about yours?"

"He's alive. Look, he's in prison. Don't ask why, I don't want to have to lie to you."

"So where'd you learn to fight like that?" said Jack.

"Eton. We all boxed, and most of the games involved bashing each other up."

"Did Sparkler go there?"

"He wasn't old enough. Not for boarding school. An orphanage isn't so much more luxurious, of course."

Jack thought about this. "Do you mean your school was tougher than Luddgate Hospital?"

"Decidedly. On my very first day, I was thrashed by an older boy, a prefect, because I didn't shine his shoes properly, and then I was thrashed again for blubbing. At Luddgate, some of the boys blubbed day and night, and no one took the least notice. And hardly anyone had shoes. They tied sacking round their feet, and you can't put a shine on that."

The last of the cloth rings was burning out, with thick tendrils of smoke coiling up from the guttering flames. All round the room boys were coughing and swearing.

"We've got to get some air in here," said Jack. "Open a window."

"I think we're underwater. There aren't any windows," Paulie replied. "I say, here's what we do. I'll boost you up to the hatch, you see if you can swing it open."

"I'd have to stand on your shoulders. And if your bones feel like mine..."

"I'll just have to grit my teeth."

"Better idea: I'll stand on a loop of chain, you get some boys to haul it up and hold it."

"Clever chap. Right, who's the strongest in here? I need at least four," Paulie shouted, and choked back a fit of coughing.

Jack pulled a length of chain down. It was sizzling hot, so he stripped off his sleeveless pullover and wrapped it round his hand. Then he bent to fill his lungs with air at ankle height, where the smoke was thinnest, and stepped up onto the metal links.

The boys hauled so hard on the chain that Jack almost caught his fingers where it ran over the ceiling hook. "Stop," he yelled, letting out a bubble of breath. He felt around for the hatch. With the flames dead, the darkness was absolute.

By leaning right out, with one hand and one foot on the chain, Jack was able to reach the underside of the hatch. He could feel the cylinder which would twist when the lock turned on the deck above. But he couldn't make it move from this side. His fingers probed, feeling for the tongue of the lock or a screwhead, but there was nothing he could shift.

"No good," he gasped out.

After almost a minute, with his ribs bursting, Jack swung from the loop of chain by his hands and dropped to the floor.

Crouching down, he emptied his lungs and breathed in. The smoke made him gag. His eyes watered and his chest burned as he tried to suck in air — every breath he started to take made him cough harder. Jack pressed his face to the metal deck. Even that was warm now. There was no clean air anywhere in the hold. He fought to breathe, but the only thing filling him up was panic.

He heaved for air, and clawed at the floor. A hand clamped over his mouth and nose.

ii.

Jack tried to pull away, but a second small hand gripped his shoulder. He recognised the touch — these were the same hands that had guided him to Paulie after the fight. They were Sparkler's hands.

Sparkler patted his shoulder, and then laid a hand on his chest, pressing gently. The other hand never left Jack's mouth.

Jack realised the boy was trying to calm him, not kill him. His only chance of getting enough oxygen was to take shallow breaths, and he couldn't do that if he was gasping and coughing.

For as long as he could, Jack let Sparkler cover his mouth. He concentrated on relaxing all his muscles, until he no longer needed to cough. Then he brought his pullover up to his face and sipped a series of breaths through it like a mask.

He could hear Paulie rallying the boys: "We need to call for help. Let's do it together. In rhythm. Thump on the wall, stamp stamp, 'Help!' Thump thump, stamp stamp, 'Help!' Come on, let's make some noise."

Jack joined in by beating on the floor with the flats of his hands. He didn't trust himself to shout, until the stinging pain in his throat had started to ease off. When he did call out, his voice was weak. All the boys, shouting together, made a noise that was probably too feeble to be heard outside the hold.

The banging and stamping carried on and on, even when many of the boys had given up calling for help. Jack could hear sobbing in the darkness, mixed with spluttering gasps and coughs. The air was hot, foul and thick as diesel.

Jack turned his face to the wall, searching for pockets of air. He found one, just half a breath of oxygen, and he used it to yell 'Help!' as hard as he could.

Something about the echo or the acoustic on that stretch of the wall made his shout sound like it had come from a loudspeaker.

He did it again: Thump thump, stamp stamp, 'Help!'

"Keep doing that," Paulie said, hoarsely.

Even though the pocket of air was used up, Jack forced his lungs to generate as much volume as they could. The other boys joined in with new heart.

Thump thump, stamp stamp, 'Help!' Thump thump, stamp stamp, 'Help!'

The hatch in the ceiling suddenly screeched and swung back, and Mr Gould bellowed, "What the blazes do you boys..."

The rest of the shout was lost in a retching cough, as the oily smoke rushed out of the hold.

Jack staggered to his feet. Ever since he'd inspected the hatch, he had known this moment might be the best chance to escape he would get. He'd wanted to tell Paulie his plan, but he hadn't been able to speak.

Hauling himself hand over hand up the hot chain, Jack found the ceiling hook and hung from it one-handed as he groped for the open hatch. His fingertips found the rim. With his eyes squeezed tight against the smoke, Jack couldn't tell where Mr Gould was. He just hoped the choking fumes had forced him back.

Without making a sound, Jack heaved himself through the hatch and rolled onto the deck above. He squinted, but the smoke was as dark as ink. He had no idea where the exit was — there was no breeze, and Jack guessed this was another closed room, instead of the open deck he had expected.

Walking on his toes and the tips of his fingers, to keep his body low and his movements silent, Jack scurried across the room. The air cleared as he moved. When he touched a wall, he reached up and his fingers felt a rusty grill. Pressing his face to it, he could smell the river. The air tasted wonderful.

The grill let little light in. Jack guessed it was mid-afternoon, but the gloom inside the ship was as dark as midnight. That suited him. He crouched against the wall, hoping Mr Gould would open a door to the upper deck, to let the smoke clear. What Jack would do first when he had escaped from the boat, he didn't know. Shout for help? Call for a policeman? Any ordinary copper probably wouldn't listen to him.

Jack wondered where he could find a plain-clothes policeman, like the man who had crashed into Mr Gould's car. A detective like him might believe Jack's story of a boatful of kidnapped street urchins. Whether he'd do anything about it was something else. And just looking for the detective would be a risk — it would mean walking into a police station. The sergeant at the desk would probably drag Jack off to Luddgate Hospital.

The sound of barking drifted through the grill. Jack stiffened. The barks came again. They weren't close by, but Jack suspected the dockside was on the opposite side of the boat.

Woz had found him once that day — Jack was sure the terrier could do it again. If he could just get off the boat and find his dog, Jack knew he would be able to think up a rescue plan.

Mr Gould's hacking cough echoed around the metal room. Jack saw a weak beam of light from an electric torch and steadied himself against the wall, keeping motionless. He didn't think the torch was powerful enough to pick up out, but he was taking no chances.

"You stupid boys," Mr Gould called out. "How many are suffocated down there?"

"We can't tell," Paulie's voice called back.

"Trying to burn your way out, were you? Imbeciles!"

"Look, some of the boys need help. You've got to let us out."

Jack saw, in the eddying smoke, Mr Gould silhouetted by the torchlight, leaning over the open hatch.

He stood up stealthily. One shove and the man would be down in the hold, probably with a broken leg. Jack edged along the wall, trying to get behind the man's back.

"Do you think I care if you all choke to death?" Mr Gould shouted. "You can yell all you like next time, because I won't be opening this hatch again."

"Let us out!" more voices called.

"You sound healthy enough to me! And since you're not asking for food, you'll all go without your meal tonight."

The hatch banged shut. The wheel on its lid creaked as the lock turned, and then the torch beam limped around the room. Jack clenched his fists, ready to rush the man if the light located him, but he knew he'd missed his chance. With Mr Gould trapped in the hold, the boys would have been free within minutes.

The man's shadow disappeared into the smoke, and Jack heard boots climb four metal steps before a door opened, shining a yellow rectangle into the room. Mr Gould turned on the top step, pointed the electric torch around and then slammed the door behind him.

Jack slipped across the room to the steps. After the brief blaze of light, he was as good as blind again. He felt the outline of the door, like a hatch in the wall, with a long handle.

When he pressed his ear to the metal Jack could hear voices, though he wasn't sure if it was the echo of boys down in the hold.

He felt his way round the room, looking for more doors. As he explored, Jack argued with himself: should he open the hatch, to let Paulie and the boys know he was searching for an escape route? What if Mr Gould heard their voices? And the boys would demand to climb out — there was no way all of them could hide next time Mr Gould emerged. Once one of them was spotted, they were all given away.

Jack knelt over the hatch with his hands on the wheel, trying to decide.

He heard barking again. It was closer now — Jack was sure it was Woz, and sure it came from the dockside. As he crept across the deck, he rapped his ankle against metal and had to bite his lips to keep from crying out. He reached down, and felt another hatch. That made sense: the upper deck seemed much longer than the room below. There must be two holds.

Rubbing his ankle, Jack edged to the grill in the dockside wall. It was a metal plate with holes the size of sixpences punched in it, and with his nose against the grill Jack could see the wharf, and people walking on it. There were families with children, and couples, and one or two with dogs. Jack slumped a little. His hopes had been so high that Woz would be out there, tail quivering, ready to dash away and somehow bring rescuers.

He thought about calling for help. Would anyone pay attention to a boy's voice behind a grill on a boat? Most Londoners were wary of sailors and dockers, tough men with worse

reputations. Jack couldn't expect families to come hurrying over if he yelled out — and how could he make himself heard, without alerting Mr Gould?

Something clicked against the grill. Jack pulled his face back.

A pair of red lights shone through one of the peepholes. Jack saw a glint of silver.

Smoke: Part Three

The twin red lights glowed, with a slight pulse, as though they were staring at Jack. They disappeared when a fresh burst of barking erupted and paws scabbled against the side of the boat.

Jack's heart leapt. "Woz!" he whispered, pressing his fingertips to the holes in the grill. He felt Woz's warm tongue touch them, and then the dog was hauled back.

A girl's voice said, "Silly dog! Pipe down! And don't leap about like that — you nearly knocked the General overboard."

Jack, straining to see and hear, thought the girl might be American. She had some kind of accent, at any rate. He caught a glimpse of short, dark hair and fair skin, and a hand on Woz's collar. The dog was wagging his tail wildly.

"Clever dog!" he called softly. "Good boy!"

Another voice, close to Jack's face, replied. Jack couldn't catch the words — something about fur hats — but he knew the accent wasn't American. It wasn't even human. He wondered if the speaker was a war veteran with a mechanical voicebox.

The girl was hugging Woz, to hold him back. Jack could see now that she was about his own age, but taller, and dressed in yellow overalls. She might work at the Festival fun-fair, he guessed, or perhaps at the power station further down the South Bank... except that she looked too young to have a real job.

Jack blinked. The red lights were beaming at him again. He thought they were attached to something, but it was hard to make it out.

"Put your other eye against a hole," said the mechanical voice. Each word creaked, like a dry hinge, all on one note and each pronounced in a single beat. "Look at me with your left eye/*simple instruction.*"

Jack peered out with the other eye. Now he could see the lights were the red eyes of a metal doll. It seemed to be clamped against the outside of the boat, perhaps by magnets.

The doll turned its head away.

"Wo-oo!" said Jack.

He'd heard that there were amazing toys on show at the exhibition — radio-controlled cars and clockwork robots and planes that could fly right across the river, powered by

rubber bands. He hadn't heard about magnetic mountaineers that climbed sheer walls, with radio units to make them speak.

But he'd been right about the accent — only an American kid could own a toy like that.

"One green eye, one brown flecked with gold/*astounding*," said the doll.

The girl put her face to the grill. "My name's Jet Perkins. Who are you?"

"I'm Jack, Jack Lennox — can you get me out of here?"

"I'm going to try. Is this your dog? He's been grabbing hold of people's clothes in his teeth and trying to drag them over here."

Jack grinned with pride. He'd known that dog was smart, as soon as he saw him.

The mountaineering doll had climbed out of view.

"There's lots more boys," Jack hissed to the girl. "They're locked in the bottom of the boat. Can you fetch help?"

"Already have."

"It's got to be someone the police will take seriously. There's a man here, Mr Gould..."

"Don't worry."

The girl seemed calm and confident. Most children, Jack thought, would be hysterical with excitement and panic to discover a gang of boys held prisoner on a boat.

"Who is it?" he wanted to know. "Is it your Dad? Is he a millionaire?"

"He is, but he's not coming. He's not in London."

"So who bought you that amazing toy?"

Something clunked above Jack's head, as though a small fist had punched the metal. The doll's head appeared, upside-down at the top of the grill, and the red eyes bored into Jack.

Jet raised a hand to smooth the bristles on the crest of its helmet. "He's not a toy. He's a mannequin, and he's risking his life to help you."

"It's alive?"

"His name is the General. Don't ask if he belongs to me, don't ask where you buy one, and definitely don't ask where the key goes to wind him up."

Jack tried to think what else there was to say. "How's he risking his life?"

"Ask him."

"Are you truly alive?"

"As long as the sun stays behind the clouds/*grimly anxious*."

"Is sunlight dangerous for you? It's safe, this is London."

Jet whispered, "Do you reckon you can squeeze out through this section, if we can get the grill off?"

"Easy, as long as you can do it before Mr Gould finds me. But how?"

"The General is unscrewing the bolts."

Jack touched one. "They're rusted on, this side, and they must be half an inch across."

The bolt turned under his fingers. At first it shifted just a quarter-turn, and then it was spinning. The nut that held it fell apart in a shower of rust.

"General," Jack whispered, "I didn't mean to be rude."

"Apology accepted/*harbouring vain hope you might teach Georgette better manners.*"

"What about your friends?" the girl asked.

Jack ran his hand around the grill. There were more than twenty bolts, but another one crunched and started to turn as he touched it. At this pace, the General would have the plate off within five minutes.

He had been about to say that he didn't have friends. Jack trusted no one, apart from his dog. And as for the boys trapped in the hold — if it hadn't been for them, he wouldn't be a prisoner. Did they deserve his help? Couldn't he simply run now? He owed least of all to Paulie, who had held him down so Mr Gould could catch him, and then, during their fight, had battered him so hard, in so many places, that every inch of Jack's body ached.

But he didn't want to tell this girl he had no friends. He wanted her to like him. And Jack realised he wanted Paulie and his brother to like him too. It didn't matter that they'd dragged him into this — what mattered now was getting them out.

"I can fetch the others," he whispered.

Grinding the wheel on the hatch through a slow half-circle, Jack opened the lid without noise and hissed Paulie's name.

"I knew it!" Paulie exclaimed. "I said you'd be back. Didn't I, chaps?"

"What kept you?" called out the sneering boy.

"Shh! I've found a way out. But keep the noise down — there's only one door, and Mr Gould's on the other side of it."

"Right," said Paulie, "here's what we do. Jack, you find a ladder and..."

"I haven't got a ladder. Boost Sparkler up to me. Go on, he can stand on your shoulders. Sparkler, find my hand." Jack reached down into the darkness and caught Sparkler's wrist, heaving him up until the younger boy could haul himself onto the deck.

"OK, do it again. Who else is small?"

"I want out!" said the sneering boy. "This place stinks!"

"Not you," Paulie retorted. "If you think you're putting your fat clodhoppers on my head..."

"I said, 'Keep it down,'" Jack hissed. "Ow, Sparkler, leave off!" The smaller boy was reaching out a finger to prod his swollen eyebrow. "Grin all you like," Jack told him. "That's where your elbow landed. Wait till you see your brother's face — I made a worse mess of that. Who's coming up next?"

A grimy boy, even smaller and younger than Sparkler, was trying to balance on Paulie's shoulders. Jack lent through the hatch, clinging to a length of chain, and pulled the boy up. "Next!" he whispered. "I need at least two more littl'uns."

When there were four boys, none older than seven, on the upper deck with him, Jack changed tack. He told Paulie to stand in a loop of chain, then reached into the hold and seized the links on one side. The four smaller boys held Jack round the waist, and they all hauled the chain up as Paulie climbed it. It wasn't much, but it gave the bigger boy the boost he needed to reach the hatch.

With Paulie on deck, they dragged the other boys up quickly. Paulie's face was puffy and scabbed, but if his right arm still ached he showed no sign. When there were only two boys left to be pulled up, Jack heard his name called from the dockside. He turned, and as the grill-plate slid down and hung by one corner, Jet lifted Woz through the gap. His claws skittered on the metal deck, and he threw himself at Jack, who hugged him.

The dog smelled the cuts on his master's face, and his hackles rose. With his teeth bared he surveyed the other boys, and the fur stood on end along his backbone.

"Here, look out," one boy whined. "What's that dog? He's going to bite me!"

"It's all right..." Jack began, but the boy waved an arm, as if he was fending off an attack.

Woz growled, and the boy shrieked: "Don't let him near me!"

Even with Jack's arms around his neck, Woz started to bark, three or four warning yaps at the boy who had shrieked.

The boys pressed around Jack, telling him to 'shut that dog up,' and Woz barked harder, until Jack wrapped his fingers round the terrier's muzzle.

The only door in the room banged open. A man stood, silhouetted in a rectangle of yellow light. The boys froze.

ii.

"What's this?" the man said. "A silent escape? Not very good, was it?" He looked over his shoulder, towards a companion hidden in the room behind him, and added:

"Disappointing, this lot. I'd expected a bit more brains."

Jack whispered to Paulie, "That's the fastest way out. Ten of us, one of him." And then he shouted, "Let's get him!"

The other boys shrank back as Jack and Paulie charged. Jack hadn't expected them to join him— but he did know how hard Paulie could fight, and he gambled that, when Mr Gould was knocked down, the boys would leap in.

A searing pain licked across Jack's face, bowling him off his feet. As he fell, he heard Paulie yell in shock, and saw Woz leap up at Mr Gould in a frenzy.

And Mr Gould cackled. He held some kind of weapon in his right fist, and he thrust it into Woz's jaws and then, with a lunge, seized the dog by the neck.

"Two halfwits and a puppy," he snarled.

Jack saw now that the weapon in his jailer's hand was a whip. He raised a palm to his own face — it felt as if it had been sliced in half, but there was no blood. He glanced at Paulie and saw a thin welt under his eye and across his nose.

Mr Gould started to laugh. It was a skeletal sound, and it echoed round the metal chamber. "I lost you this morning," he told the boys sprawled at the bottom of the steps. "By the time I'd finished with the police, you'd gone. But one boy said this delinquent had kicked a woman — is that right?" He indicated Jack with a flick of his chin. "You look degraded enough to commit any crime. That boy pointed out your cur to me. And the dog led me straight to you. Now... here's your faithful friend again. Once more he's given your game away."

He lifted Woz higher, by the scruff of his neck. "Shall I put him out of your misery?"

"Don't hurt him," Jack said. He tried to make it a command, but it came out like a plea.

"One good reason?"

"Your boat's full of rats. He's a champion ratter."

Mr Gould laughed again. His front teeth, surrounded by black gums, glinted like a rat's incisors.

"I owned a ratter once. A real dog. He'd go into the rat pit at Ketch's — this was a century ago, or more — and he'd kill fifty rats in ten minutes. And he was no champion. The best dogs could kill a hundred in six-and-a-half minutes. They'd bite and shake, bite and shake, every four seconds, like machines." Mr Gould's eyes shone as he stared at Woz.

"How many could your champion puppy kill, before they tore him apart? Three? Four? They're big rats on this boat, dockside rats — would he even kill one?"

Paulie had risen unsteadily to his feet. "You owned your dog a hundred years ago? You expect us to believe that?"

"Yeah," Jack chipped in — "no dog would stay with you."

The taut skin that was stretched across Mr Gould's skull contorted. "Get in the hole," he roared. "Now. All of you."

He lashed the whip over the heads of the boys nearest the hatch, and they ducked. When the tip of the whip cracked around their shoulders, they started to scramble into the hole and drop down.

Jack glanced over his shoulder to the grill where the girl had been. It was closed again — she must have fastened it, hoping to keep the escape route hidden. Then he looked at Paulie and Sparkler, who were standing in front of Mr Gould.

"Would you like to get down that hole, young sir?" the man asked, mocking Paulie.

"I don't think I will."

"Shall I flog your little brother then?"

Paulie brought his fists up. "Try it if you dare."

Jack was ready to throw himself at the man again and risk the whip, but the bony left hand still gripped Woz by the throat.

Mr Gould's eyes were fixed on Paulie's face, as if the force of his stare could make the boys cower. Paulie gazed back, without blinking. The man flicked the whip and strode between them to the second hatch in the deck. Spinning the lock with one hand, he dragged it open, turned to face Jack, dangled Woz above the dark mouth of the hold — and let go.

There was a hollow bang and a yelp as the terrier hit the lower deck.

"Woz!"

Jack leapt forward, and Mr Gould's hand helped him, sending him spinning through the hatch to sprawl onto metal that seemed to tremble with electricity. As he pulled himself up onto his knees, something hard and metallic, like a spanner, struck the back of his head and he slumped forward. Lights flashed behind his eyes, and at the same time the hatch crashed shut, trapping him in complete darkness.

He heard a squeal of pain and fear that was cut short, and as his head cleared he realised that the ringing in his ears was really the constant, shapeless squeaking and chatter of countless rats. The electricity he'd sensed in the metal was the scrabbling of their feet.

Something ran onto his shoe, and stopped. A claw scratched his shin.

Jack screamed...

The End

... of Jack And The Spitfires – Book One: The Rocket

But ... the story continues in

Jack And The Spitfires – Book Two: The Mines

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