

SPIRITRUNNER

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Smashwords Edition

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Spiritrinner

This is a tale of multiple dimensions, secret government psychic agencies, off-planet humans and space-creatures. Our heroes are two psychic, disabled teenagers who can shift between this world and other dimensions. Long ago the world was consumed by the deadly space creature, the Elif. The government is in league with the Elif and everyone is determined to gain the ruro – the most powerful psychic substance in the universe. Unfortunately for Danny, everyone needs him in order to get it...

Words – 73,004

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Chapter One – The Psychic Agency

Quietly scratching away, the gold-nibbed fountain pen gracefully swept across the expensive cream-coloured, hand-made paper. There was a muffled roar and then a short high-pitched squeal of tyres as an RAF fighter jet landed anonymously, somewhere nearby. The tall, bird-like man looked up from his desk. He surveyed the moonlit airbase from his comfortable antique-furnished office. He was three storeys high in an immaculate, white-corniced Victorian building on the edge of a military compound somewhere in the south of England. The ex-military man loved the dark mahogany tones of his office, his rounded wood-framed chair, the expensive oak floor. He especially enjoyed looking down on things from high up here in his ‘perch’. But now, he steepled his fingers, closed his small and suspicious looking eyes and went deep down within his own mind.

‘Sigil? Snake!’ cried the man telepathically.

‘I am here - *master*. Why do you trouble me so Alistair?’ came the hissed reply.

‘That disabled boy is nearly ready, you know the one, your favourite neurode. Get him to send this message to the global mind, straight away – if you can,’ Alistair, who still had his eyes shut tapped the paper on his desk, his prim Oxford accent ringing out across the ether. It annoyed the snake entity, the green slits of its eyes flashed. He disliked humans and had no favourites as Alistair knew. ‘And prime his mind ready for occupation Sigil. You can call me, *Master Civil* by the way. Mind who you’re talking to snake.’

‘Your kind don’t frighten me,’ it whispered slowly, emphasising each word.

‘You wouldn’t want me to have a little chat with the Elif again, would you old chap?’ Alistair breezed. The snake entity suddenly felt itself chilled to the core. Even the agency was said to fear that thing.

Alistair smiled slyly and slowly levered his long slender middle finger against the antique, black, bakelite phone that sat to the right of his desk. For a moment, Alistair briefly admired his perfectly manicured nails. The phone was a working 1920’s model. He picked up the cup-like receiver from the candle-stick cradle with a cold, thin left hand and began to enter a number with his right. The moving dial at the base clicked through the digits with a satisfying grace. Instantly, the snake entity felt itself dissolving, transported, controlled...

On the other side of the country, an owl called out hauntingly as it glided past Danny’s bedroom window. There was a loud crack of breaking wood from a tree outside and a fox ran for cover, startled. Danny strained to see over the blue padded cotsides of his bed. He could smell a faint tang of urine and sweat. The full moon shone against one side of the big old ash tree tree that stood outside his sash window. The light against the branches created a beautiful silver silhouette. Faintly, he could hear the midnight chimes of a church-bell in the distance, evocative of things lost but half-remembered.

Something felt amiss. There was a menacing, cold feel in his room, as if someone was sucking the heat from the grimy, stagnant air. Danny felt a chilly sliver of fear slowly crawl up his spine and then run back down again into his bladder. There was something evil, a cold presence gathering in the room. Bit by bit, a swirling circle of grey energy formed near the ceiling until it looked like the ouroboros trying to swallow its own tail.

‘Sso, you’re the one they call Danny?’ hissed the sly, snake-like voice that suddenly appeared inside his head, ‘think you’re going mad do you?’ it added with a slight sneer.

‘Why would I think that? I’m used to this kind of thing - as you well know,’ Danny replied telepathically in a defensive tone. Internally he tried to ratchet down his level of fear. He knew the entity, he sensed it was a snake, could smell the stuff. In fact they lived on it, eat it - salty, bloody, fear. Danny shook his box-like head, his scruffy dark hair sticking to his pale skin with toxin-loaded sweat.

‘I know you are quite the gifted one, disabled boy that is true. And don’t think I don’t know you’re trying to control your emotions too. Let it *all* out. We wouldn’t be,’ it paused, ‘working with you if you didn’t have the right “qualities”. My master has a job for you boy.’

‘Can’t you just leave me alone? There must be thousands of psychics out there in this world. I am just a disabled lad trying his best to get by. Why don’t you go and pick on someone else? Someone with your talents doesn’t need a loser like me, a mere human.’

Danny could begin to see the snake now. It had dark red eyes with a luminous, dangerous, thin slit of green. Its body was just swathes of grey, out of focus. It was not a large creature.

‘It is not up to me. But in any case my kind, *we* made you. *We* helped you become what you are. There is power beyond your wildest dreams, Danny. There are rewards you would find it hard to even imagine.’

‘I’m not interested – Sigil,’ he had picked up the entity’s name from the ether. ‘I just want to call my life my own again.’ Danny continued.

‘That’sss not possible. When your mind delved into our realms we picked you up. Yes, I know, that was years ago, you were but a child,’ it paused. ‘We nurtured your skillss. We took you under our wing. Now it’s time to repay your debtss. After which, I have been told you may go free.’

‘I’ll believe that when it happens,’ Danny’s mental voice was tinged with anger.

‘Do as you will human-child – it is none of my concern. But know this, you have already chosen. This life - it is just a play. You could turn away, yes. But then you would forfeit my masters. And believe me, you don’t want to do *that*,’ said the telepathic snake viciously.

‘I’m not afraid of dying,’ snapped Danny.

‘Who said anything about dying? You’d pay me to die a horrible, painful death in return for nullifying the forfeit.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Need I remind you that I can read your intentions?’

‘I’ll do whatever it is that you want – this time. But *I* want out,’ Danny replied.

‘Everything has its time human-boy, no need to rush. Have you not read any of our teachingsss?’

‘You’ve had your snake-like fingers in every ancient teaching under the sun. Even I know that. I’m not stupid,’ said Danny bravely.

‘We are watching, listening, tasting your every move - your every thought,’ Danny could feel the creatures forked tongue sensing the ether. ‘There is nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide,’ the snake continued, ‘the plan is inevitable. But use your talents right and you could find the view from the top of the mountain quite to your liking. Think about it. Here is the message for the mass mind.’

Danny held his hands to his head as his brain vibrated strongly with an unpleasant throbbing low-pitched hum. The message downloaded itself straight into his cortex. He could feel his brain physically shake with the aftershocks. The first time he experienced a download he thought he was having a cerebral stroke. He had got used to it now.

Danny shifted his mind sideways and entered a slightly altered state of consciousness. He was relaxed but aware, drowsy but conscious. He was using the universal ether, the unseen force that surrounds everything. Part of himself was still attached to his unwashed physical body, clothed in yesterday's striped pyjamas, but the deeper part of him had shifted entirely into the Thought Realm. The Thought Realm is made of thought-substance. It is a web of imagination hidden just below the surface of our everyday world.

Danny still had his disabled body in the Thought Realm. In fact, he was still in his bedroom but his point of view had changed entirely. He was now looking out from above his body. He was a subtle yellow light streaming like a ballerina's ribbon. He was a spiral of electric yellow that moved up and down and around his sleeping physical form, prone on the bed.

Telepathically, Danny called the mass-consciousness. Once he was sure he had been heard he asked it to broadcast the message he had just been given. Some people think the mass-consciousness is just a concept, but Danny knew better than that. The mass consciousness is a thing – a living, breathing child-like thing and it always responded to Danny. The message streamed out all over the Earth, like an immense electric spider, reaching every man, woman and child in seconds. Danny quietly shifted his mind back to the everyday realm.

Danny wished he knew what that broadcast really meant. The real meaning was hidden within a dream-like code, a code that could twist and change, translate and transmute itself. It was part communication and partly an infectious mass-dream. He disliked using the mass consciousness, he felt he was deceiving it, delving deep into its dreaming mind and harnessing the hidden energy there. The actual message had consisted of two granite mountains side by side. They exploded dramatically one after the other and then crumbled into a blood-red stormy north sea. The music was classical piano with a feeling of complete calm. The soundtrack could not have been more opposite to the pictures. A short written message accompanied. It said simply, in every language, 'We will protect you'. It was not Danny's place to wonder why.

The coldness in the room began to dissipate and the grey dirty swirls flickered away into the nothingness from which they came. A sense of peace, and of warmth returned. The fear that Danny felt was not so quick to leave.

As Danny knew only too well, that message had come courtesy of an organisation that was almost too secret to exist. It laughed at the rule of law. It scoffed at the ups and downs of finance. It was a world-wide psychic agency and it was older than civilisation itself. It had no name but those who knew of it preferred to pretend that they didn't.

As far as the agency were concerned, every thought, every mind on the planet was an asset that belonged to them personally. Its one fault, it could be said, was that it was almost entirely evil, although Alistair B. Civil certainly did not like to think of it that way. Their's was just a superior perspective that was all. A view that was free of all the usual trivialities.

Danny heard footsteps. He could tell by the sound and speed both the identity and the mood of the carer. It was good old Michael – and he was not feeling too tired tonight judging by the upbeat patter of his footfalls. The bedroom door, covered in teenage stickers, creaked open and Michael's large and prematurely bald head poked itself round the corner. This corner was created by the false wall that hid the ensuite toilet.

'Can't you sleep Danny mate?' enquired Michael kindly.

'B-Been having those d-dreams again, Mike. And then I couldn't settle. Just lying here thinking,' replied Danny, his tired voice crusty with sleep.

'Put the TV on would you Mike? Music or landscape c-channel,' said Danny casually, trying to delay Michael as long as possible.

‘You can leave the light on too, if you wouldn’t m-mind,’ spluttered Danny as Michael left the room - he wished his vocal cords worked half as well as his telepathy.

‘Okay, but try and settle down now, eh? Or you’ll be knackered tomorrow. You’ll end up like me, old before your time.’ Michael smiled then shuffled off, his shoulders hunched within his light-brown, unkempt cardigan.

For some reason, Danny began to think of all the tears he had failed to shed over the long years of his short life. The tears he should have cried when his Mum died. Then there were the tears that should have fallen when his Dad cancelled another of his sporadic visits. So many unshed tears.

Danny could hear the distant call of the local owl. Danny’s house was in a leafy, ancient suburb of south Liverpool and horse fields adjoined the rambling but ornately styled garden. Foxes would steal past the crumbling grey stone entrance pillars and survey the leafy curving drive up to the house. It was a large, square, ivy-covered limestone cottage graced by a lovingly tended Victorian-era front garden, full of red roses. It had once been owned by the son of a local lord.

Gazing at the soft movement of the moonlit branches outside his window, Danny was reminded of Sarah’s long hair. She had beautiful, sweeping locks of natural blonde hair that fell lightly across her shoulders and bounced every time he saw her. She was kind but in her own cheeky way, ‘Hey Danny! Hows my scruffy old teddy bear keeping?’ she might say in passing, giving him a cuff around the head for good measure.

Danny shared his supported housing with two other teenagers. There was his best friend, Bendhu, Ben for short, a boy not known for his words. His longest sentence in a day might be a withering glance. And of course, there was the gorgeous Sarah. Danny was the youngest, at fourteen. What Danny lacked in years he made up for in other ways. He had a certain sadness that lay hidden in the depths of his character. A melancholy that might have been more at home in someone many times his age.

Sarah had moderate learning disabilities and was locked into experiencing the life and anxieties of a much younger girl. Her mind had never been able to get past some outpost of childhood. On top of that, she obviously had the feelings of a young woman. Danny and Sarah got on well. Anything more than friendship was unlikely Danny reminded himself. He had a body that barely worked and she was forever a child - albeit a child trapped in a young adult’s body. Besides which, he was not exactly a great catch and she was – there was no other words for it, simply beautiful.

He, on the other hand, had a head that was slightly too large, untidy short black hair, greasy pale skin and blue-green piercing eyes. These were eyes that seemed to look right into the depths of your very soul. He had overheard some of his carers talking about that once, ‘You ever notice how Danny looks at you? Those are seriously weird eyes he’s got.’

‘Yeah, you’re telling me. I wouldn’t like to get too deep inside *his* mind that’s for sure. It’s like he looks right inside you, if you know what I mean.’

It was just another throwaway conversation, one that he shouldn’t have overheard, but for some reason it had got stuck inside his mind. His brain seemed to have a masochistic need to replay it every now and again when his confidence ebbed. Sometimes though, if he caught himself a sideways glance in the mirror, he thought he might even be a little handsome. He was also slightly overweight, or so the nurse had kindly told him. He had been born with cerebral palsy. It meant he could move his head with full control, his upper body with limited degrees of success and his lower half, stupidly, did not respond to requests at all.

Chapter Two – A Golden Calling Card

‘What a beautiful morning,’ sighed Danny out-loud.

‘Wonderful isn’t it. Shame I’ll be snoring for most of the day,’ replied Michael who was looking forward to crawling into his rumpled bed when he got home. He felt slightly annoyed, at no-one in particular, that his current nocturnal shifts meant he would be missing out on most of the morning sunshine.

The whole world looked as though it was brand new. It was a feel good summer morning and everything dew-sparkled with the life-giving rays of the early morning sun. Michael opened the curtains and paused for a moment as he watched the night’s dampness steaming up from the long grass at the end of the garden. It could have been the garden of a stately home. It had in fact once been a lord’s present to celebrate his eldest son’s marriage. It had one of the last remaining ha-ha’s - a raised lawn surrounded by an ornamental ditch. This would have been there to keep father’s flock of sheep from over-running the expensive, hand-scythed lawn.

Danny had been washed in bed, an expert job that Michael had down to a fine art. Wash and roll, dry and roll, Michael’s strong but hairless arm as lever between Danny’s knees, onto side, wash back, roll back, roll and dress, job done. Michael pulled the blue sling underneath Danny and across the creased bedsheets. He lifted him up with the mobile hoist. As Michael swung him out over the bed they both paused again, looking out the window to watch the last of the night’s foxes slink back into the horse field beyond the garden. Danny rocked ever so slightly back and forth. He quite liked being in the sling, it felt almost womb-like. Eventually, he was ready to face the world, ‘Well, that’s you done Danny mate, nearly time for me to hit the sack,’ and with that Michael clapped his hands together eagerly and left the room.

Once downstairs, Danny waited patiently in the dining room. An hour passed whilst Danny sipped his sweet milky coffee through a thick plastic straw. The sun rose splendidly in the morning sky. The night carers departed. Michael waved goodbye, ever-cheerful, although Danny knew it was often a show. Michael did not love his job but sometimes it seemed to Danny that he was reluctant to leave the shift. Perhaps there was more chaos at his home than Michael admitted. The day carers arrived, fresh-faced and smelling of morning showers and brand-name toiletries.

Danny put mouth to joystick, a globule of spittle falling onto the armrest. His electric chair stuttered into life whilst the yellow lights of the charging panel lit up indicating a full battery. Danny used his mouth on the small black joystick on the right-hand armrest of his wheelchair to control his movement. Soon, he was gliding across the light wood floor of the dining room with a quiet electric hum. He moved over from the grand patio bay windows overlooking the garden to one of the two large wooden tables in the middle of the dining room. These were dark polished blood-red wood with a single Rubinesque carved leg in the middle. They were good for wheelchair access and suited the Victorian corniced, high-ceiling feel of the room.

Before long, his best friend Ben wheeled himself in amidst great effort, his light brown skinny arms slipping off the steel wheel rims. He took his place at the table alongside Danny. Whilst the carers were gone fetching breakfast they had a quick chat.

‘So, D-Danny, those c-control freaks have been at it again haven’t they?’ squeaked Ben, his boy-like frame almost flopping over in his manual wheelchair with the effort of talking. His coordination was too poor to let him loose in an electric wheelchair, besides which, Nathalie, the head carer, wanted to keep his arms strong.

‘You m-mean the agency? How did you know?’ replied Danny.

‘I don’t know anyone else who f-fits that description. And you know me, always tuning into the m-mindwaves,’ sighed Ben, his Indian accent rising in tone at the end of each sentence. Whilst he talked his legs kicked out involuntarily. His words had an odd squeaking quality due to the nerve degenerative disease he suffered from – freidrich’s ataxia. It was not easy understanding him but it was second nature to Danny.

‘Yes they contacted me, had to send out some stupid m-message for them, to the mass consciousness. I wish they would leave me alone,’ said Danny grumpily. He slurped up some cool coffee from the thick yellow straw.

‘The mass consciousness won’t talk to them f-freaks so they have to use you. Maybe one day we’ll both escape them. Leave this world behind too.’

‘If only it were that easy Bendhu my friend. You would gladly swap this life for another world I know. But some of us are,’ Danny hesitated, ‘m-more attached, if you know what I mean. I’m not ready to leave this world just yet,’ Danny replied quietly. Ben gave him a meaningful look. His time was more limited, his physical disabilities greater. Just then, Sarah sauntered into the dining room throwing back her long blond locks which were still wet from the shower.

‘What are you two weirdos planning?’ she laughed in a kindly tone. ‘When you two are whispering, something crazy’s being planned for sure.’ Hands on hips, she eyed both of them in a kind of mocking matronly fashion that Danny found irresistibly attractive.

‘We’re just talking about n-normal things, like going shopping,’ laughed Danny, who was cheered by the sight of Sarah. How could she always be in such a good mood? He wondered.

‘You two never talk about normal things,’ she jibed.

Just then Nathalie, the morning carer swept into the dining room. Her long flower-printed blue dress swirled behind her highlighting her naturally red hair. She had a tray of breakfasts, porridge and toast. The friend’s attention turned itself to food.

‘You coming to school today then Dan? Go on, you know you love the chaos really!’ Sarah said gently. Danny tried to weigh it up in his mind. Was it worth the stress of trying to fit in for a whole day at that hectic place just to spend twenty minutes chatting with Sarah at lunchtime?

‘Dan’s had enough of school by the l-looks of him,’ stuttered Ben.

‘I am a bit knackered,’ agreed Danny.

‘That’s because he’s probably been fighting ghosties all night knowing that looney,’ Sarah chimed.

‘Probably,’ Danny sighed in reply.

After breakfast the three chatted for a while longer until Nathalie announced that the bus to take them to school had arrived early.

‘I think I’ll give it a m-miss today Nat,’ explained Danny. ‘Didn’t get too much sleep last night.’

Judging by Nathalie’s all-seeing, but kindly expression Danny wasn’t sure whether she believed him or thought he was isolating himself unnecessarily. After the others had gone to school, Danny sauntered electrically, gliding in his wheelchair over to the grey metal lift doors opposite the office. From here he could glance at the grand Victorian front door, which was nearly as wide as a man is tall - ideal for wheelchairs. It had stained glass panels, in triangular patterns and was painted a deep green colour. Nathalie followed and pressed the lift call button for him. Danny made his way upstairs and into his bedroom.

As soon as he entered the room the flat screen TV switched itself on. This was not a good sign. Danny felt a little frightened. He tried not to think about his involvement with that sinister

agency. But as hard as he tried he could not help worrying. In the middle of the huge flat-screen there sat a Golden Frog.

‘Brrrrrup,’ it said.

With a twist of his body Danny slammed the bedroom door shut using the back end of his wheelchair. He was not going to show them any signs of fear he had decided. The frog lazily scratched its oversized glistening head with a smooth golden hind limb as though it knew exactly what Danny was thinking.

A logo in the top left hand corner of the TV screen flipped into mirror image and back again. It did this whenever you looked at it, but otherwise remained perfectly still. The logo was a white triangle shining like the sun.

‘You have done ver-ry well,’ remarked Golden Frog suddenly. Frog’s mix of gruff working class Tokyo and broad East London accents gave the frog a loud and unsettling tone.

‘You have helped us prepare and big boss is pleased. We have special task for you in future also,’ squeaked the Frog, who was now hopping excitedly from side to side.

‘Would you care to tell me what this is all about?’ enquired Danny. He thought he’d better get his questions in whilst they were in a good mood.

‘No we wouldn’t care to,’ said Frog. ‘But listen up, this much I can say,’ he continued. ‘We have some shopping to do. Very special shopping. Our snake colleague has - what to say? Been redeployed - permanently I hope. Anyhow, no need for any more mind-messages to mass consciousness. Now is time for *action*. We shall be in touch.’ Frog winked maliciously.

The logo on the screen did a double flip. The whole image then swirled away as if a plug had been pulled. Once the images had gone the screen returned to its usual lazy haze.

Danny chewed it over, trying to make sense of it all. He wondered what effect he could possibly have? What task could that misbegotten agency need him for now? He knew he could do things with his mind that some may find wonderful but to Danny it was nothing spectacular. In fact Danny did not really think of himself as special at all. He was just some silly disabled kid who got harassed by weird stuff. The psychic powers were a poor compensation for the endless frustration of his daily life. He yearned for a body that actually worked and did what it was told. How he wished for the comfort of a girlfriend. But for now he would settle for just being left alone.

Chapter Three – Close Encounters of the Amphibious Kind

Some two hundred and fifty seven miles away from Danny, across the green and cultivated Midlands, beyond the second city of Birmingham and the university town of Cambridge, in the middle of that flat and for some, prosperous county known as Suffolk, sat Alistair B. Civil. He was thin and tall and had sharp angular features. He looked a little mismatched in his expensive but slightly ill-fitting grey suit. He perched in his thick green leather and dark wood chair and pecked hungrily at the small sushi lunch sat sadly on his desk.

‘Now where did I put it?’ Alistair sighed softly. He reached down below the antique, green leather-topped desk and retrieved a small brown-wrapped, twine-fastened parcel. Alistair Civil had received a strange package that day. He’d assumed it was the new mind-ware device he had ordered from the Nature-technics department and he was right.

Alistair had been in authority at the world’s most secret psychic agency for some time now. Even before he had been appointed to his present, all-powerful job he had been firmly at the helm. Alistair and power were just two things that went together - like chips and fish. Alistair had the aura of a boss. He was the man with the plan, a smiling assassin, a cat with a half-dead mouse.

Alistair gave people a creepy feeling. Conversation with him was like attending a high-class dinner party, one in which they themselves were to be the ingredients. In short, he was dangerous and everyone knew it. Luckily, people rarely attended dinner parties with Alistair, and if they did it was certainly not for pleasure.

Secret agencies, especially this one, tended to work in a cellular manner. Each cell worked on a strictly ‘need-to-know’ basis. The cells themselves were organised into levels. Each lower level was kept in the dark by the one above. Centuries of British secrecy had made this process smoother than the best Cornish ice-cream. This all helped to avoid the attentions of the official UK government – not that they would want to interfere. Today’s top politicians might be rascals but they knew their place. One did not interfere with the agency. Otherwise skeletons from the past would be dug out and deposited in the front pages of the newspapers for everyone to see. Or if the agency was suitably upset, one’s own skeleton might find itself deposited somewhere considerably less comfortable than the First Class compartment to which it was accustomed.

Alistair certainly didn’t worry about the government. Such things come and go. He loved his job. Not knowing what his job was really about was not a problem. This was partly why he was so good at it. Certainly it could be said that the devil of bureaucracy smiled happily down upon Alistair’s humble, obedient soul.

He grinned like a little boy as he carefully felt the weight of the parcel, moving it from hand to hand and cautiously giving it a sniff with his long chiselled nose. Everything felt right. A dark, hungry fire glowed in his almond-shaped beady eyes.

Alistair had been waiting for this special package for some time and if the man had any weaknesses at all it could be a dislike for being kept waiting. It would contain the most advanced entity the agency had ever possessed. It was a device that could be used to look directly into a person’s mind. It could change thoughts and twist desires - it spelt Power with a capital P. Sure, they could do all that psychic stuff before with a person here and a politician there. But he wanted more, much more, and they were right on the verge of getting it. This package was not, ‘It,’ exactly but it was a key step toward that ultimate prize.

If the agency wanted to see inside a mind, transplant a thought, twist a desire, it could all be done. This had a great deal to do with extra-terrestrial software, though mind-ware would be more exact. In fact, this new device contained a living entity. An entity shaped like a golden-coloured frog.

Alistair reached into the desk's top drawer and took out a silver rectangular device. It had no visible markings. He scanned the parcel by passing the device over it. Satisfied, Alistair opened the parcel. He found a blue crystal glass container and a short note from Monty, the head of Nature-technics at the agency.

For the attention of Mr Alistair B. Civil,

Please find enclosed the Mind-Ware-Six device as requested. It has the appearance of a faint yellow frog-shaped haze. It is contained within a diamond nano-glass box. The Mind-Ware-6 can locate and penetrate any mind or group of minds in the Earth's mass consciousness. Sometimes it will do so before you are aware of wanting it to be located (the time-streaming capabilities are still experimental). Any operative's thoughts whilst running the Mind-Ware-Six can of course be monitored or altered.

You may need the help of UK Special Operative Four, or similar level neurode, to use the device. The following will instruct you in the method of its activation.

*Regards,
Monty.*

Alistair looked around his dark wood-panelled office, at the original stone fireplace, the beautiful Arabian rug and the rows of leather-bound expensive books. He gazed out the white-framed Victorian window at the airbase beyond and coldly contemplated Monty's future. As he chewed the top of an expensive black fountain pen, he wondered, absent-mindedly, if Monty already knew the real reason why he needed the Mind-Ware-Six. UK Operative Four meant a whole lot more than merely being the hardware for running the device. But he figured it couldn't do any harm even if Monty did know the wider picture. Where he was going people tended to keep their thoughts strictly to themselves - permanently in most cases.

Special Operative UK-Four just happened to be Danny Sola. The Mind-Ware-Six on the other hand, as a Virtual Device, was an entity made entirely from thought. It was also the most complex Virtual Device that the agency had ever possessed (or more accurately, stolen). It needed the use of about forty two per-cent, an 'Adams' worth to use agency lingo, of the running capacity of a suitable human brain when it was operative. When the Mind-Ware-Six was resting it was happy to exist as a golden frog-like haze.

Alistair played with the immensely beautiful, diamond-crystal, rectangular nano-glass box that contained the Mind-Ware device. It was about six inches tall, flat at one end with a pyramid-shaped roof at the other. It looked ancient but beautifully crafted. It was seamless, not a joint in sight. He twirled it this way and that, toying with it with his slender, manipulative fingers. Distractedly, he enjoyed the cool sensations emanating from the box whilst he intently watched the golden, swirling cloud trapped inside it.

Alistair prepared to download the device straight into the unsuspecting mind of Danny Sola. Alistair picked up the black, bakelite phone with his long cold fingers and entered a number

using the round movable dial that a phone of this age possessed. It clicked repeatedly then rang a few times before being picked up.

‘Hi, Michael speaking.’

‘Hello. This is Alistair, Danny Sola’s Uncle,’ he lied in an insincere, officious tone. Alistair twirled the ancient cloth cabling with his free hand.

‘Oh right yes, I’ll just get him. Hang on a minute.’

Michael went to fetch Danny. The lad took his mouth off the wheelchair joystick whilst Michael held the phone to Danny’s head.

‘Yup,’ sighed Danny reluctantly. Why couldn’t he get a nice telephone call occasionally?

‘It’s your Uncle. I am sure you are very pleased to hear from me.’ Alistair intoned sarcastically in his dry, upper class accent.

‘N-Not at all.’

‘Just a small favour Daniel, I’m sure you will be glad to oblige.’

‘I won’t.’

‘Well actually my friend, let’s be honest here. I do not feel you have a whole lot of choice in this particular matter. Would you like to know why? Let me explain, the problem’s like this...’ Alistair paused, sounding as though he was in deep thought about a perturbing matter.

But instead, Alistair quickly turned the blue glass box containing the mind-ware device upside-down. He pressed the flat bottom to the phone’s old-fashioned black mouthpiece and held his thumb to the invisible release catch at the tip of the pyramid at the other end of the device.

The next thing Danny heard was a strange hallucination of a sound as if a sheet of metal had been pulled apart within a musical storm. It was like being assaulted by an evil sound wave. The sound repeated itself over and over again like a flash of light caught forever in a diamond, shifting through space. Danny tried to jab at his ears. He felt like a lump of slime was trying to crawl down his auditory canal. Danny spat phlegm at the phone, which was now on the floor minus its casing. Michael groaned internally.

‘What *are* you doing Danny!?’ shouted Michael. Danny was still gibbering and was now trying to bang his head against the arm of his wheelchair.

‘MMMMrrraHH Gerroffff!’ moaned Danny.

‘Are you Okay?’ Michael was worried now. ‘YOU OKAY Danny?’

‘Yesss, I fer-fer-think so. Strange noise, it hurts. Fish in me ear. FISH IN ME EAR!’

‘Okay, calm down mate. C'mon, let’s get you to your room.’

Michael took Danny off and he calmed down. He needed his wits about him for this one. He did not have a fish in his ear at all. No, it was definitely a frog, a golden one at that.

‘Who would think we be sharing same brain!’ said Golden Frog triumphantly in his curious Japanese-English accent as soon as they got back to Danny’s room. ‘But I no ask to be here, any more than you wanted me. I have assist you carry out task. Then say I can return home - if I am lucky.’

‘And where is home?’ said Danny.

‘Nowhere you know. Just beam of light in suburbs. A little place I like call my own. Only prob-rem, it long way from here. I castaway.’

‘Who’s paying you? What’s the big interest in my head? And what do you get out of it?’

‘For now, I get to exist. Maybe sum day, they help me get back home,’ said the Frog. ‘Though, they none too clever. They think I just engineered mind-entity.’

‘Yeah, but there must be more to your business than that, surely?’

‘Mmhm, you are right. If carry out stupid agency mission - feel pleasure. If don’t - feel pain. It ve-ry strange.’

Danny was beginning to like Golden Frog just a tiny little bit. It took his mind away from the loneliness he felt. When there are gaps in your heart as empty as the ones in Danny’s, having an alien life-form living in one's head isn't entirely a bad thing.

That night Danny slept better than he had for a long time. He forgot to worry about his Dad, or when the next begrudged paternal visit would be. He couldn’t help missing the old git, but he was always such a busy man. He even clean forgot to feel bad about his Mum or to yearn for the touch of a feminine hand, preferably Sarah’s. Instead, he dreamt of ponds and lily pads and the sound of water gently dripping into a lake from a mountain-fed stream. It was all so calm and relaxing. He would awake with a feeling of pure bright blue coolness. A coolness which would make him feel pleasantly disposed toward mankind in general and to Golden Frogs in particular.

Chapter Four –The Sapient Realm

The next morning Golden Frog remained asleep. It may turn out to be a good day thought Danny. Michael had some time off so Nathalie had come along to get him up and dressed a bit later than usual. She was a cheerful, motherly soul and her happiness was infectious. She smelt of an old-fashioned perfume that reminded Danny of country meadows. The sun shone brightly through the bedroom windows making a comforting pattern. Nathalie hoisted him from the bed to his wheelchair. As he rocked in the blue cradle Danny watched the light shining through the large gap in the curtains, picking out motes of dust speckling through the air.

A little while later, Danny put mouth to joystick and glided forward in his double-battery, black, electric wheelchair. He entered Ben's room, which was just along the corridor from his own.

Unusually for this time of day Ben was already up and dressed and sat quietly on his bed. His thin, child-like legs hung over the bed-side in his tight black jeans which he insisted on wearing (much to the consternation of his carers).

'I-I know,' said Ben.

'Y-you know what?'

'I know about the f-frog. They just want top control, right?' Ben's Indian accent rose in tone at the end of his sentences.

'I guess,' spluttered Danny who was himself in mid-stutter.

Ben seemed to go inward briefly. He looked as though he was meditating. However, what he had done was switch to telepathy. Ben continued, the words bouncing clearly, but quietly around Danny's mind, 'We've got to get round that frog of yours. I'll meet you in the Sapient Realm later.'

'I think Frog is asleep. Why don't we just talk now?'

'Sorry. It's got to be the Sapient Realm. That frog might just be pretending to be asleep. We'll be safer in the Sapient Realm.'

'What if next time I can't get back?' Danny queried anxiously. He loved visiting the Sapient Realm but there was always an outside chance that you would not return.

'We're seasoned travellers, its second nature to you.' Ben counselled wisely.

'Sapient Realm it is then.'

Switching realms was a bit like birth and death - there was always a risk. Ben knew Danny was not a great fan of risk but would be good to his word.

Frog was very quiet that day. He needed to rest for a while after his travels. Danny in turn, needed all his wits about him for the social interaction and buzz that was their school. To him, it was like a great sea of people. Sometimes he felt like he just was not cut out to be a human being - everyone talking all day long and rushing about in circles. He preferred the non-verbal quietness of nature. That night, after what felt like a very long day, Danny went on his way to the Sapient Realm.

Everyone entered the Sapient Realm in a different way. Ben entered through a slipstream of sensual feelings as his mind released its grip upon the material world. Danny entered through a world of sound. A heartbeat at first, then broken half-chords flew from above, below, every direction. Each unpredictable snapshot of music seemed to follow its own pattern - yet it all fused together in harmony.

‘It is perfect,’ said Danny out-loud to no one in particular. The musical ecstasy caressed his mind sending all memory, all thoughts, back to their home in oblivion. Danny watched, as his body became the music. His hands, arms and then his legs disappeared into pure movement. He watched the last of his little self vanish. For a split second the most dreadful flash of pure fear spread throughout his body. And then it was gone. The real fear was the sheer pleasure of it all.

‘Maybe I’ll just leave my material body back there in the ordinary world,’ Danny thought to himself. But he knew in life there was never such an easy escape.

‘So you have brought your friend little one,’ said Thinking Stone, the Sapient Tree, in his rich chocolate tones. ‘Perhaps Danny, you would like to climb this old tree, which, as monkeys, you are particularly well-suited I must say.’

Thinking Stone was his favourite tree. He was an old oak tree with a weather-worn trunk, gnarled and open in places with a broad canopy. It was like a father to him. In the Sapient nature realm, no humans can abide. It is the realm of the Sapient trees and their near-eternal intelligence. Danny and Ben had been transformed into small grey and brown spider-monkeys by their journey here. Each time they were born into this realm it was as a different creature.

Both Danny and Ben had full use of their limbs in this higher energy Sapient Realm. Their bodies, having been transformed into small spider monkeys were wondrously strong. Danny was fascinated by his small supple fingers. The two of them started to look for handholds as they pulled their way effortlessly to the first crook of the tree. Soon Danny and Ben had both made it to the safety of the tree’s highest nook. They were sitting comfortably, backs against a branch, each in their own little hollow.

The trees in the valley seemed to be dancing to a slow beautiful harmony. Danny felt the cool air flowing through him, refreshing his spirit. He felt that each wind-swept hair on his body was alive as he looked out across the shimmering valley. The two friends and the tree sat quietly. Each was thinking the same thoughts in a myriad of different ways as silently as a graceful bird in flight.

‘Now there is something we really need to discuss,’ said Thinking Stone eventually. ‘Why such trauma should have happened to the humans, I shouldn’t like to guess. Only thing I know is that the Great Trauma did indeed occur. It is just as it says in the old books of man. A long time ago a most terrible thing happened. Before this time there was great happiness throughout the land. Humans were as wise as the trees and as happy as the animals. We called that time the ‘Eternal Dance of Energy’ or EDEN for short. Everything happened back then just as it should. And that was the way it had been for as long as even I can remember. However, we all knew a short, but traumatic time was coming. The Earth and its celestial friends were to travel through the hostile space plains of Armageddon for some six thousand of your Earth years.

‘In time, the planet grew sick, animals died of thirst and the crops withered. The people thought that Mother Nature had abandoned them. They cast away their gods and cried salty tears into the newborn deserts. Their children crumpled before their very eyes. Little did they know that the Earth cried with them, that she mourned as much as they did. The humans became traumatised. The great cities of the ancients decayed and were plundered. Much of the human race simply died. Those that survived forgot their roots and succumbed to the power of anger. Bitter anger, hatred and fear, people scrambled for food and water. War became the norm.

‘The Earth is about to enter the space plains of Aquaria. It can heal itself now. However, the evil lords of the Armageddon era must step down! The Council of Sapient Ones and I as their representative want you, our precious human friends to do something for us...’

‘Who are we though? Nobody listens to us,’ Ben said breathlessly.

‘And I've got a frog in my brain,’ said Danny half seriously.

Thinking Stone laughed. He indicated to look at the sky. The sun came out from behind a perfect cloud and warmed their very bones.

‘Now you two really should not worry. Everything is just as it should be. All you need to know will come to you when the time is right.’

Danny and Ben didn't feel scared anymore. All afternoon and into the evening they wandered the nearby hills, they climbed trees with their muscular monkey arms, they played with sticks in the mud. The sun shone, the ants worked, and Danny and Ben explored. All was right with their world.

Chapter Five - An Offer You Can't Refuse

The next morning, back in the every-day world, Ben made his way along the upper corridor. As he guided his wheelchair his slight fingers would slip off the wheel-rims time and again. Still he would transport himself slowly but surely. A few minutes later Ben had finally succeeded in reaching Danny's room.

Danny was watching his television, which as usual was a close up of a sandstorm seen from the inside. To Danny however it was a beautiful multitude of mind-enhancing colours.

'What's that you're watching Danny,' enquired Ben. He felt sure that something important was going on. His mind wasn't able to decode the sandstorm into a coherent picture and he felt a little jealous.

'*Oi!*' a peculiar Tokyo and East London accent rocked itself into Danny and Ben's brains. 'You no for-get Golden Frog?'

'How could I forget *you*, Master Frog,' whispered Danny out loud. He had lost track of the visitor in his head.

'You can call me Golf. It's short for Golden Frog by the way.'

'And here's me thinking it was short for...'

'Danny! Let's not upset Golf,' advised Ben.

'Wise man. You do well to listen to your friend.'

The frog had been sleeping the last day in order to recover from the long journey into Danny's head. Being digitally encoded and transmitted electronically has its drawbacks.

'Better not speak out loud to Golf,' reminded Ben breathlessly.

'Yes. He is right. We all go telepathic-visual now. Prepare for enhanced communication,' said Golf.

Danny and Ben suddenly found themselves sitting in an all-white vaguely circular room. It was quietly humming. The sounds were both soothing and peaceful. The whole room pulsed gently as if it were alive. Danny tried to guess the size of the cabin but measurements didn't seem to quite fit what he was looking at.

'Telepathy with virtual reality - that's some gadgetry Mr Frog. I'm impressed,' Danny commented absent-mindedly.

'Mhmm, yes. My employers like to think they well equipped. You have been projected aboard deep space alpha-energy ship, or the likeness of one,' continued Frog.

'We really are impressed now,' thought Ben quietly.

'You have both been chosen as, what to say, agents - I guess,' Golf continued.

In a secret, hopefully non-frog-accessible location within the Danny-Ben mind-set, the pair exchanged exclamation marks. They had set up this mind-arena, in what is called the Thought Realm, years previously as a place for secret exchange (should anyone be eavesdropping telepathically). Most communication here was visual or even via smells - never verbal. Words were just too easy to track. Danny and Ben exchanged images. They were on a desert island at night surrounded by blank-faced people muttering unknown words. Everyone wanted their attention and there were rough seas in the background.

Danny and Ben felt worried. Firstly, the Sapient Trees wanted their abilities in some unknown way in order to help the Earth humans. A frog-like mind-entity from a secret and highly sinister psychic agency also wanted their services. 'Whatever next?' thought Danny in visual mode to Ben.

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