

Gathering Clouds...

The Cloud Brothers

Book One

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Cover by David Colon

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CHAPTER 1 Egg Shape

Within the next few seconds Trevor will either experience a titanic swell of satisfaction—or die a gruesome death.

Let this be understood before we go any further: Trevor Cloud is a genius. He is too modest to admit it, and too engrossed in his experiments to even consider the possibility, but at the young age of twenty-three he possesses more intelligence than any other person on planet Earth.

'I'm a coward and a fool,' he muttered. 'Press the key and get it over with.'

His finger hovered one centimetre above his laptop "enter" key, hanging there while he gathered the nerve to jab. One simple jab and his creation would come alive; and nothing or nobody would ever be able to turn it off or stop it—that is, if his calculations were correct.

The trouble is, if he had miscalculated, he would die.

'Come on,' he said, 'do it, you know it will work.' His finger shook and sweat stung his eye. One jab. Life or death. 'Come on, do it.'

He knew it would work because he had made several miniature models.

Admittedly, the first model had remained dead; the next model had glowed white hot and melted; the third model had exploded leaving a huge crater in the ground and felled all trees within a ten-metre radius; and the fourth model had wobbled clumsily in the air until it shot off into the clear blue sky and headed for space, out of control and lost forever.

But the next model had worked better than he ever dared hope for. A simple-looking object the size of an ostrich egg, connected by straightforward radio signal to his laptop, the end result

of passionate university study and hundreds of thousands of pounds from his bank account. It had floated in the air, manoeuvring perfectly; up, down, left, right, in any direction he wanted; silent and effortless, like a soap bubble floating in a gentle breeze.

Not much to feel proud about, you might agree, yet it would only move according to his command and no other influence could budge it, or damage it in any way or form. He had whacked it with his cricket bat and the egg stayed put and the bat snapped in two. He had tied one end of a rope around it, attached the other to his car bumper, and tugged until the rope snapped. He had given it both barrels of his shotgun, only to watch the pellets fall lifeless to the grass as if the egg had sucked all the energy from them.

Finally, he had taped a stick of dynamite to it, lit the fuse and hid behind a massive oak tree. Instead of exploding with a monstrous boom, the dynamite had made a pathetic "fut" sound. When the thick black smoke cleared, his model still floated in exactly the same position, its surface as clean and unmarked as ever.

The egg had still responded to his commands. No damage outside, no damage inside. *Well that's it then*, he had thought. *My theories work, my calculations are correct, now let's get started on the real thing.* With the experiment over, he had broken the connection with his laptop and watched the egg drop from the air and shatter on the ground.

If everything is so fine, he thought, *why do I worry?*

He worried because he now sat inside the full size egg; a structure as large as a barn and totally empty apart from the desk he sat at and a few essential items—like a fridge-freezer, a microwave oven, a sofa to sleep on, and a grandfather clock.

It has to work, he thought. He'd checked his calculations four times. They were exactly the same computations he had used on the models—except on a much grander scale. The only difference now was he could never turn it off again. There was no "plug to pull".

Once he plucked up courage to punch his battered key, his invention would become alive, drawing energy and life from everything around it. A huge indestructible egg he could move in any direction he chose. That is, if it didn't simply refuse to work, or explode, or melt, or shoot off into outer space.

A ball of sweat gathered on Trevor's brow and trickled down to his nose tip. It hung there for a second then dropped to the back of his poised hand where it stung like a needle stab. He closed his eyes and sighed, and with a gentle movement he pressed the enter key.

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Approximately twenty-one kilometres away, something like the distance of a half marathon, Trevor's younger brother Russell, tall, fair and athletic like a Viking, bowed to his martial arts pupils and beamed with pleasure. The five panting lads were the remains of his last beginners' class, the devoted ones who would eventually achieve black belts.

'Well done, boys,' said Russell. 'You did very well today. Three more weeks until your next grading and I'm certain all of you will pass easily. See you all Monday. Have a nice weekend.'

Even the oppressive July heat hadn't put the boys off from coming—each of them dreamed of becoming a hero. They were all fans of Bruce Lee and action-crammed kung-fu movies. Russell chuckled; the late Bruce Lee was one of his own favourites. The exhausted boys thanked Russell, changed without showering, and left.

Alone in his dojo, Russell squatted in the lotus position and sighed. He wondered how he could make them understand the martial arts constituted so much more than a means of self-defence, or beating up a pile of thugs single-handedly.

He sighed again, deeper this time, and closed his eyes to meditate. *Martial arts focuses our spiritual aspects, he thought, it increases our self-confidence, our assertiveness, and our concentration.*

But Russell found it difficult to concentrate. The overwhelming heat and physically hard training session had left him feeling giddy and his thoughts wandered. He bounced to his feet, shook the tension from his limbs, sank back to the floor, and drew one deep breath after the other. He considered chanting, but settled instead on visualisation. He would visualise a downpour with cold water streaming down his face and neck, and his tongue catching huge rain drops...

Russell began to form the image in his mind, but a faint scratching noise by his right knee stole his attention. It sounded like a mouse nibbling a piece of toast, or a dry leaf rocking on a draft. He resisted the urge to open his eyes; such irritations were a trick of the mind, he reminded himself, so he set the sound aside and strove to focus his thoughts.

His daydream budded slowly.

Dark grey clouds gathered above his head; and with the clouds came a chilly breeze; and with the breeze came the pungent scent of rain. He held the image for a few minutes, letting it assume physical form like a phantom presence materialising before his eyes.

His images were always lifelike, but this was far superior to anything he had previously experienced. He gave himself a mental pat on the back and opened his full awareness to the perception.

The scratching by his knee started to annoy him, so he included the sound within his image and pictured the hazy outline of an insect rubbing its legs together. The insect fitted snugly into his scene and Russell drew his attention back to the gathering clouds.

The clouds billowed high into the sky, closing together and shutting out the blue. A brilliant flash of lightning forked across the clouds and Russell jumped. *Something isn't quite right here, he thought. Where did the flash come from? I want rain, not lightning.*

The scratching sound grew louder and more persistent. With a disapproving grunt, Russell gave in and opened his eyes. A long, slender, greenish-brown insect swayed on spindly legs, and Russell recognised it as a praying mantis. 'What are you doing here pestering me?' murmured Russell. 'You're supposed to be in the Mediterranean or somewhere warm.' Then he chuckled. 'Yes, I know, it is warm.'

As he spoke, the hairs on his forearm bristled and he shuddered. The room remained dark and cool as if the heavy clouds still hung over his head, and the scent of rain still lingered in the chilly air. A menacing roll of thunder rumbled in the distance and he supposed, at long last, that a real storm was on its way.

The six-centimetre mantis remained where it was, unafraid and unperturbed, and as Russell watched, he could swear the ugly little monster grew...

This is a bad omen, thought Russell. Something wasn't quite right here. Something unpleasant was about to happen. 'Are you real or am I still dreaming?' he asked the insect. 'If I wasn't such a nice guy I'd squash you under my boot.'

The mantis grew to the size of a cat. It sat back on four rear limbs and held a stout pair of front legs together in prayer, rubbing them gently as if looking forward to something. Dark circular points in the centre of each bulbous green iris glared at Russell—and now the mantis was dog size.

'What are you and what do you want?' gasped Russell, a quiver of fear in his voice.

The insect's front legs had sharp spines and claws. Behind them, its piercing eyes were now on the same level as Russell's. The claws twitched as they prepared to grab. Unable to move, the beginning of a scream gurgled in Russell's throat...

CHAPTER 2 A Dry Planet

The vision burst and Russell laughed as if he had just come to the end of a big-dipper ride. 'Spooky,' he said and looked at his watch. 'I don't know what that was all about, but it took twenty minutes.' Once again, the room was bright, hot and stuffy, and the memory of his nightmarish vision soon withered into obscurity. 'If I hurry,' he said, 'I'll be at Trevor's by eight; just like I promised.'

He didn't usually talk to himself, but found the sound of his voice reassuring. 'I must have eaten something bad,' he said, 'or perhaps I need some salt like they keep telling us on the radio.' He jumped to his feet and reached for his water bottle, half the water went down his throat, the rest he poured over his head.

He opened a tap in the shower. It gurgled and spluttered but no water ran out, not even a drip. It didn't bother Russell, he could shower when he arrived at Trevor's. His brother had his own water well so he wasn't affected by the water rationing. Russell wiped the sweat from his body with a towel and changed into a light tracksuit.

After locking his dojo securely, he stepped off the pavement and crossed the busy road, dodging hooting traffic as if it was a game. Safely across, he entered a large public park and broke into a run.

A young man dressed in sporty tee shirt and shorts jogged on the path ahead. The path was long and steep but Russell's long stride soon had him trotting beside the stranger.

'Come on, man, race you to the top,' said Russell.

The jogger leant forward, lifted his knees, and sprinted. His feet pumped up and down in a clumsy, inefficient manner. Russell breathed easily and slowed his pace to allow the jogger the pleasure of winning. When they reached the hill top, the jogger gasped for breath and huge sweaty patches soiled his immaculate tee shirt.

'Good race, thanks,' said Russell. He gave the young man an encouraging pat on his shoulder, left the path, and sped off across the dry and dusty grass towards a distant line of trees.

He passed a long fenced-off section and noticed a drowsy group of donkeys grazing on the other side. Their necks, ears and tails hung with fatigue, exhausted after so many weeks of hot dry weather.

'Had a hard day, fellows?' called Russell, waving his arm in salute as he trotted past.

The narrow dirt track twisted between prickly gorse and tall bushes until it led up a steep hill into a barren wooded area. The warm summer evening lingered on. Sunlight flashed and twinkled through the trees causing Russell to blink and shade his eyes.

Without warning, a large man blocked his way.

'That's far enough,' growled the man. 'Give me your wallet.'

Jogging on the spot and smiling, Russell assessed the tall stout stranger. He was dressed in frayed baggy jeans and stained vest. Broad hairy shoulders bulged with muscle and a well-fed stomach bulged with fat. He had a broken nose, cauliflower ears, and short-cropped hair the same length as the stubble on his chin.

'Stop prancing about and give me your wallet,' he repeated.

'Why should I?' asked Russell.

'Because if you don't, me and me mate will break every bone in your body and hang you over a branch to dry.'

Two huge Alsatian dogs dragged a new man into view. The dogs strained on chain leashes, gnashing and snarling, their eyes fixed on Russell, eager to tear him apart. The new man dug his heels into the ground and, by sheer size and weight, held the animals at bay.

'Worried now, ain't you?' said the first man, not taking his eyes away from Russell's bouncing figure.

'My name is Russell,' he said, trying to sound natural. 'I live around here and I've used this path ever since I was a boy. I don't think we've met before.'

'Hey, Bert,' he called. 'We've got a smart arse here, looks like we're going to have a lynching party.' His cold green eyes never left Russell as he spoke, and he pushed his mangled face close into Russell's. 'If you want to know, you ain't seen us because me and Bert are specialists. We move about from place to place, a quick grab or two and move on, and we don't mess about with little old ladies and sissy girls, do we, Bert?'

'Not likely, Alf. They go to the cops and cry their little eyes out. Gets us into trouble they do.'

'Yeah, but not tough boys like you, eh, sport?' said Alf, prodding Russell in the chest with a gnarled finger. 'Tough guys like you are too proud to snitch.'

'A good plan,' admitted Russell, still smiling. 'I like your strategy even though it won't work with me. I'd really love to stop and chat with you guys,' he stopped jogging and let his body relax, 'but I really am in rather a hurry. And before anything else happens, I have to inform you that I have a black belt in five different disciplines of martial arts.'

'Well excuse me,' said Alf, mimicking Trevor's upper-class accent. 'You've got me shaking in me boots.'

'Yeah, me too,' said Bert, 'shaking in me boots.' He burst out laughing so hard he almost lost grip of the Alsatians.

'Well if you want to know,' snarled Alf, 'me and Bert here are prize fighters, and we eat wimps like you for breakfast. Now, give me your damned wallet.' A long-bladed knife appeared in his right hand and sunlight flashed from the clean steel as he waved it in front of Russell's nose. He stretched his left hand out for the wallet.

What happened next mystified Alf. He suddenly found himself lying on his back, winded. Rising onto one elbow, he noticed in bewilderment that Russell now held his knife. He watched the tall slim boy gauge the knife's weight and balance. With a fluid motion, the boy hurled it away. Not wanting to lose his precious knife, Alf followed its flight. It turned twice in the air and struck a tree trunk with a solid thud, its point buried deep into the hard wood.

'Set the dogs on him, Bert,' he gasped.

Russell bent down on one knee and waited for the animals. The dogs skidded to a stop when they reached him, barked ferociously, gnashed their teeth, and sprayed blobs of saliva like irrigation hoses.

'You handsome fellows don't really want to eat me,' cooed Russell. 'I bet you've already eaten and your tummies are good and full.'

This wasn't the reaction the Alsatians were used to, and the confused dogs growled suspiciously.

'What fine looking dogs you are. How's about you and I being friends? I bet you'd like your ears scratched?'

The Alsatians cocked their heads sideways, lifted their ears, and frowned. Russell's pacifying tone had the dogs spellbound and they took comfort in his calm voice. They eased their noses forward and sniffed his outstretched hand—then lunged with open jaws to bite it off.

Russell snatched his hand back. Sharp teeth scraped the back of his fingers and he winced. The dogs' jaws snapped shut with a loud bang. Before the dogs had time to realise his fingers were still attached to his hand, Russell leaped to his feet.

'Stand off, Chums,' commanded Bert. The dogs grew rigid. Only their brutish heads and ravenous eyes followed Russell as he backed away. 'I'll teach you to mess with me dogs,' shouted Bert, running forward and drawing his own knife.

Russell told himself to stay calm. He felt sure he could handle the thugs, but the dogs were an interesting problem. Dogs as large as ponies were about to molest him and he wondered if this was the meaning of his vision. He shook his head to clear it, but the vision had been vivid and his confidence was shaken.

This was the first time a real situation had confronted him, the first time he would make use of his martial arts in a real fight. He was used to pain. Black eyes and broken bones were all part of his life, and during his years of training and competitive fights, he'd broken his nose twice and both arms and left leg below the knee once. But on those occasions, medical help had been close at hand and referees had jumped in to stop fights if they became too injurious. For the first time in his life, Russell was in fatal danger—and the prospect made him tingle with excitement.

Of the five martial arts Russell mastered, he preferred aikido, and his body softened into a composed stance. 'The way of harmonious spirit,' he muttered as Bert charged towards him like an angry bull. *Such a graceful art, he thought, such little effort required.*

Bert lunged with his knife, his bulky body charged with brute power. He drove the knifepoint at Russell's right shoulder. In an instant, Russell's shoulder swayed aside and an effortless side-stepping counter sent Bert's feet lifting off the ground. He flew through the air and flapped his tattooed arms like an overweight turkey with clipped wings, landing with a strangled squawk on top of Alf. The thugs cursed and untangled themselves in time to see Russell weigh and balance Bert's knife. Again the knife turned twice before thudding into the tree trunk, landing so close to Alf's knife the handles vibrated against each other with a sound like a neurotic woodpecker.

'Kill,' shouted Bert, and the Alsatians sprang forward.

'No. Call them off,' screamed Russell, dashing for the nearest tree. He grabbed a branch above his head and swung his feet up like a trapeze artist. The biggest of the dogs bounced up, caught Russell's jacket, and hung by his teeth. The combined weight was too much for the dry branch and it snapped with a loud crack. Russell fell backwards and landed on top of the dog, he heard air wheeze from its lungs like a violent sneeze and hoped the animal was stunned.

The second dog lurched forward with its shiny white teeth aimed at Russell's thigh. Russell still held the branch and pushed it into the dog's jaws. With his free hand he gathered the dogs' chains and wrapped them tightly around the branch.

'Well, it's been nice talking to you gentlemen,' said Russell as he turned to sprint away. 'But I really must be getting along, perhaps we can have a friendlier chat another day, and by the way, I don't carry a wallet. Bye.'

Alf stuck his boot out and Russell tripped. His nose and forehead splattered against a tree trunk and he only managed to stay on his feet by holding onto the tree. With blood spouting from his nose and stars blurring his vision, he spun to face his aggressors.

The thugs laughed so hard they found it impossible to stand up. Russell prodded his nose. He didn't think it was damaged, but his injured self-esteem craved retaliation. The rabid Alsatians strained against their chains and drew closer, tripping and stumbling in their eagerness to reach him. Russell bunched his muscles and clenched his fist so hard the joints cracked. The martial arts were for self-defence he reminded himself, not for aggression. He swallowed his anger and ran.

'Come back here, you skinny runt,' called Alf. 'We'll meet again all right and when we do I'll bash your dimwit brains out.'

'Yeah, me too,' said Bert.

Russell hurried on through the woods with a salty mixture of blood and sweat in his mouth, but the bleeding stopped as quickly as it started, and his injured pride eased. *I did well*, he consoled himself. *I mostly managed to stay calm*.

He glanced over his shoulder. Neither the thugs nor their dogs followed so he slowed to a comfortable pace and breathed deeply. This part of the woods was relatively unspoiled by human activity, and he felt Mother Nature's gentle spirit reach out to ease his soul. Birds sang above, crickets chirped below, and the rhythmic pat-pat of his feet sounded like a gentle heartbeat. He sighed; life wasn't so bad after all.

All too soon, the path came to a high-wire fence and split off in two directions. Russell turned right, carried on for another hundred metres then stopped in front of a padlocked gate. He unlocked the gate, closed it behind him, and snapped the padlock back in place. He was on his parent's property now, the extensive estate surrounding the Cloud's mansion, and set off along a barely perceptible path.

The narrow path wound its way down a steep cliff, skirted a large, dried-out pond, passed a few rundown outhouses and ended at a dirt-track road. His parents' stately house stood to the left, visible through the trees, but Russell turned right knowing his brother would be busy playing with his experiments under deeper forest cover.

Earlier in the day, Trevor had phoned him and babbled about the 'crowning result of his experiment', and how Russell had to be there at eight-o'clock sharp 'to witness the outcome—one way or the other!' Russell had grown accustomed to his brother's crazy experiments. Not all of them were successful, in fact, most of them were a miserable flop and Russell's job was to pat him on the back and wish him better luck next time.

For months now, his brother Trevor had spent every waking hour constructing a hideous, egg-shaped—something or the other. He never clarified his experiments until finished and working. If they worked, he'd sleep, eat, and play with them a few days until a new project popped to mind. If they didn't work, he'd sleep, eat, and walk around with his hands in his pockets until a new project popped to mind. All in all, Trevor wasn't the most talkative person in the world. Not that Russell minded, he didn't understand a quarter of Trevor's explanations anyway.

Trevor's greatest achievement so far was a communication device he called a 'Zip-ling'. The Zip-ling was no larger than a memory-stick Russell plugged into his computer. The Zip-Linq came equipped with various coloured buttons for various obscure operations, and was designed to clip onto a zip. Trevor had flapped his arms and dribbled with excitement as he praised the Zip-Linq's qualities. 'It utilises a completely new technology,' he had ranted, 'making it undetectable and able to communicate over extreme distances, even to the moon.' Russell took his word for it, but he couldn't see the point. As far as Russell could make out, it did the same as an ordinary walkie-talkie.

This latest experiment of Trevor's had taken far longer than any other. Russell had watched with much merriment as Trevor erected a wire frame as large as a cowshed, covered the frame with fine wire until it looked like a rusty old scouring pad, and finally packed it in crinkly kitchen foil so it resembled a gigantic baked potato. What met Russell now as he plunged into the clearing made him skid to a stop and rub his eyes in disbelief.

In the baked potato's place, stood a huge majestic egg as white and luminescent as a fluffy summer cloud.

Russell crept forward and placed both hands on the shell. The texture resembled satin, or velvet, or smooth silk, but something beneath the surface resisted his prodding like solid iron. It was neither hot nor cold, but reflected his hand's temperature like polystyrene foam.

He rapped his knuckles against the peculiar surface then smacked it hard with his flat hand; either way, no echo or sound bounced back. Fascinated, he walked around the entire circumference searching for joins or marks—and found none. Without doubt, the object was as dead and lifeless as a giant, solidified, marshmallow.

'Hallo, Trevor, where are you?' he called, then cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted into the woods. 'Trevor. Where are you?'

'I'm inside,' came a reply from somewhere within the egg. 'Hang on a minute and I'll open the porthole for you.'

Low down towards the egg's curved belly, an elongated hole appeared. A narrow ramp reached out to touch the ground. 'Come on in,' said Trevor, beckoning from inside the doorway.

Walking through an open doorway is normally done without physical discomfort, but as Russell stepped through this one he jolted in agony. An electric surge tore into his body. Sparks danced and crackled from his toes to his fingertips and out the top of his head.

'Yow!' he cried, sinking to his hands and knees in front of Trevor.

'Oh dear, did it hurt that much?' said Trevor, frowning. 'Must've been a bit off with my calculations. I'm afraid I haven't had a chance to test it properly yet.'

'Why didn't you warn me?' gasped Russell, his arms and legs shaking. 'It feels like I've swum across the English channel—towing the car ferry. I'm exhausted, shattered, done in...'

'If it's any consolation,' said Trevor, more interested in his own theories than his brother's discomfort, 'you won't feel anything the next time you go through. What happens is this; I tell the computer to expect a body mass of such and such, and as you come through, the computer takes an exact biochemical copy and remembers it for evermore. The closer I am with my initial calculations, the easier it is to come through first time.'

'But why didn't you warn me?'

'Well, yes, I'm sorry about that. But believe me, it would have been much worse if you came through hesitantly. And if I'd warned you, you might not have dared come through at all.' Trevor cupped his hand under Russell's arm and gave a little tug. 'Here, let me help you up. But what's this I see, blood all over your face and your tracksuit torn to bits? That isn't my doing. What's happened?'

Russell let his head drop. 'Oh nothing really,' he mumbled. 'I met a couple of guys walking their dogs and they asked to borrow some money. They were a bit disappointed when I told them I didn't have any, but they soon cheered up. They were laughing when I left them.'

'But where did the blood come from?'

'I was a bit clumsy and tripped, that's all.'

'You picked a fight with them, didn't you?' Trevor spread his legs and held his hands on his hips. 'You're eighteen years old, Russell. I told our parents I'd look after you while they're away. How can I look after you if you keep getting into fights? Come and lay down on the sofa until you regain your strength.'

Trevor propped his shoulder under his brother's trembling armpit and they staggered across to the sofa. Russell collapsed into a ball and put his head in his hands.

'I'll be all right in a minute,' he mumbled through his fingers. 'My head is spinning and I'm famished; do you have anything to eat and drink, do you have any salt?'

'I'll fix you something. Just you relax.'

For a long time, conversation was impossible. Russell gobbled cold chicken, cheese and pickle, cold ham, salad, coleslaw, pickled onions, crusty white bread, butter and jam. Followed by half a fruit cake, moist and heavy, apple pie and tinned custard. With everything washed down with four bottles of brown ale, Russell sighed, burped, rubbed his swollen tummy and smiled.

'I'm sorry it's only cold food,' apologised Trevor, shocked to see all his provisions devoured in one ferocious gulp. 'But as you can see, I don't have an oven in here yet.'

Russell looked up for the first time and glanced about. His smile vanished. 'Ah! That's revolting,' he said, gazing at living skin stretched all around them. The sun's last rays shone through, silhouetting an intricate map of pulsating arteries and veins. 'Well, I was impressed by the outside,' he said, 'but let's face it, the inside is disgusting. It feels like I'm sitting inside a giant chicken stomach with flashing Christmas tree lights hung all over the place. What's the point of this thing you've created—apart from nearly killing people when they enter?'

'Yes, I'll have to look into that,' mused Trevor. 'But can't you see what we've got here?'

Russell laughed. 'A giant hard-boiled dinosaur egg with the centre shovelled out?'

'Ha, ha. Very funny,' said Trevor. 'To start with, let's stop calling it an egg; an egg sounds so fragile.' He moved over to his desk and sat facing Russell, so excited he couldn't sit still. 'What we have here is a travel machine. We can go wherever we desire, anywhere, through the sky, under the ocean, even up in space. Can you imagine that, Russell, we can visit the moon if we want to.'

'Oh no. Not me. I don't want to go anywhere in this thing. How safe is it anyway? And look at the state of it in here, it's a shambles, a grungy mess, we can't live in here. No, no, just let me out.'

'Have another piece of cake,' said Trevor, pushing the last half under Russell's nose. 'Let me try to explain.' He leaned forward, placed both palms on his knees; and spoke softly, stressing each word. 'The shell of this machine is indestructible.'

'What do you mean by "indestructible"?' said Russell, licking his fingers.

'I mean impossible to destroy. It absorbs energy from anything and everything. If a force presses against it or tries to destroy it, the shell soaks up the energy and uses that same energy to strengthen itself.'

'Yeah, but how much energy can it absorb before all the wires melt?'

'That's the beauty of it,' said Trevor, and smiled with pride. 'There are no wires. Energy floats around on ultra-violet ions and laser beams. Do you remember that very fine mesh on the outside?'

'Yes, the whole thing looked like a giant scouring pad.'

'Precisely. Actually, it was an elaborate cobweb of extremely special filament wire, and when electricity first flowed along those delicate circuits, the wire evaporated into a kind of ion gas. From then on, and forever more, energy will flow along those same circuits—supporting themselves.'

'What do you mean, "forever more"? Can't you just turn it off?'

'I have created a magnetic continuum, a kind of cosmic sphere with a billion pathways along which energy flows. The circuit draws energy from the environment surrounding it: the sun, the wind, the warm earth, gravity, everything. It's a living thing, self protecting and programmed for life.'

'You're joking? I might not be as clever as you, but I know perpetual motion is impossible.'

'Of course, every idiot knows perpetual motion is impossible, but this isn't perpetual motion. I utilise the free energy around us. Understand this, dear brother, the planet we live on, the planet Earth, is one gigantic battery. It has stored the sun's energy for millions of years. The sun makes trees grow, trees turn into oil, oil turns into electricity, and electricity turns into light and heat in

our homes. This machine of mine draws energy from the battery Earth, or the sun, or any other source whatever the form.'

'Yes, I see,' said Russell, scratching his head. 'But how do you use this energy?'

'If you jump on a trampoline, the springs absorb the energy and throw you back up into the air. My machine does the same. It's the same effect. Gravity pulls us down, I use that energy to push us up... we float in gravity-energy changing form.'

'Well I can certainly feel my energy returning,' said Russell, losing interest. He dropped to the floor and counted fifty press-ups.

'At this very moment we are floating in gravity,' continued Trevor, used to his brother's abundant vitality. 'While you were inspecting my machine before you came in, did you notice it's not resting on the ground but hovering a couple of centimetres above it? I can just as easily make it float two metres above the ground, or two hundred, or under the sea—or out in space...'

'Yeah, but not with me on board. How does it work...all this...stuff?'

Trevor puffed his cheeks and raised his eyebrows. 'We're discussing hyper-dimensional physics, what can I say? This ionised gas in the shell is a super conductor of electricity and causes a kind of rotating plasma which reacts to magnetic fields.'

Russell nodded his head, then shook it, then shrugged his shoulders.

'Plasma is made up of ions and electrons that are found in the sun, the stars, and fusion reactors...'

'Okay, okay. I believe you,' laughed Russell. 'Spare me any more details. How about calling your machine "The *Cloud*"? After all, our surname is "Cloud" and this creation of yours looks like a cloud from the outside. But you'll have to do something in here, you can't live in this.'

'I was hoping you'd help me fit it out. You're gifted when it comes to carpentry and decoration. I'll give you a free hand—anything you want. There's room for three floors in here, you can have the top floor all to yourself. Fit it out with a gym or dojo if you like, your own lounge and kitchen and bathroom—your very own apartment. I'll take the middle floor for my apartment and control room, and at the bottom here we could have stores and tools and a garage. And when it's all finished, we can go for trips, anywhere you like.'

'How can we go anywhere in the *Cloud*?' asked Russell. 'The military will shoot us to pieces before we get one hundred metres into the air.'

'You haven't been listening,' sighed Trevor. 'We're indestructible. Besides, nobody will be able to see us. I can make the *Cloud* invisible simply by reflecting an image on one side of what's on the other; it's like looking right through. And radar signals won't be reflected back, we soak up the energy and use it ourselves. We can go anywhere and nobody will know anything about us. Eh! What do think? Sounds exciting, doesn't it?'

Before answering, Russell drummed his fingers on his knees and pursed his lips. 'Well, I must admit,' he said, touching his bruised nose, 'nothing ever seems to happen in my life. Tell you what, I'll do the fitting out and have it looking like a palace in here. But let's not go anywhere just yet.'

'Good. That's settled then. I'll do the electrics and plumbing, plus a few other small details.'

Russell jumped to his feet, eager now to get started. 'I'll come back tomorrow with a caravan and park it outside next to yours. That way I can live here until we've finished. Come on, it's getting late, you better get back to your caravan and grab some sleep.'

At the porthole, Trevor hesitated and pulled back.

'Aha!' said Russell. 'You haven't been through it yourself yet, have you? How long have you been in here?'

'I've been in here since this morning when I turned the *Cloud* on.'

'And you say I'll feel nothing this time when I go through?'

'That's my theory. You go, I'll stay here a while longer.'

'Oh no you don't,' said Russell, lifting his brother under one arm. He gritted his teeth, closed his eyes, and darted through the port.

CHAPTER 3 Vanishing Vapour

The scene terrified Professor Maurice Masterson. The middle of July and England's green and pleasant lands were parched and dry like the southern Mediterranean. Everything was dead. Night-time temperatures sank below freezing, day-time temperatures rose above thirty degrees. Woodland fires flourished, water rationing was reduced to one hour per day, youngsters were kept home from school, and the elderly were dying of dehydration and heat stroke.

The professor stood at his office window and scowled. He straightened his bow tie, took a large white handkerchief from his tweed-suit trouser pocket, and mopped his brow.

'What can I do?' he shouted, and waved his fist at the cloudless sky.

Skirting his tidy desk, he rambled across to a large glass display-cabinet and scowled at his many trophies. Those were the days, he thought, captain of the rugby team, captain of the cricket team, and twice Olympic gold-medallist in fencing. *I was a young man then*, he thought. *Now I'm old and useless.*

His old discarded cricket bat leaned against the cabinet side. He picked it up, felt its weight and wondered what he could smash.

He laid the bat on the desk, picked up a felt-tip pen and marched to the corner where his training equipment stood. He wasn't an artist, but the caricature he drew on the punchball was unmistakable.

'Now look here, Mr High and Mighty out-of-space alien fart face,' said the professor through clenched teeth. 'Come to bully us, have you?' He replaced the pen on his desk and swaggered back with his bat. 'Come down here and face me like a man, you yellow-livered coward.' He prodded the punchball alien face, setting it rocking. 'You dastardly fiend... you pirate of the universe... you thieving heathen... you extraterrestrial freak... I'll teach you a lesson...'

The bat whistled through the air with all the force a seasoned cricket captain could muster. With a mighty twang, the alien head snapped off, rocketed across the room, and crashed through the window.

One of his personal bodyguards burst in from an adjoining room.

'It's okay, James,' said the professor. 'It's only me letting off steam again. Put your gun away and tell George to get the mini ready— 'm going out.'

~*~

Russell Cloud parried Professor Maurice's sword and delivered a potentially lethal thrust to his chest.

'Touché!' acknowledged the professor.

'Your actions are mechanical, your movement is clumsy, and your mind is elsewhere,' said Russell. 'You haven't managed to deliver a single strike tonight.'

'You talk too much,' said the professor. 'Don't forget, it was me who taught you to fence. I could beat you blindfolded, with my legs tied together, and carrying my grandmother piggyback.'

'Come on, Professor,' said Russell. 'Your mind's not on it tonight. Suppose you tell me what's up?'

'Nothing,' said the professor, 'except for this damned heat.' He lunged forward for the kill.

Russell parried and drew the professor in so their heads almost touched.

'I shouldn't have come here today,' whispered the professor. 'I have a problem; the whole world has a problem.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'I can't ... it's driving me nuts, but I can't.'

'Trust me. You obviously haven't come here to sword fight. I can keep a secret, I promise.'

The professor pushed Russell away and made ready for a new attack.

'You and your brother are a pair of wasters,' said the professor, letting his frustration show again. 'I wouldn't trust you to look after my ballpoint pen. Your brother was the best physics pupil I ever had. He was the best pupil the university ever had. And what does he do now? Play with model aeroplanes.'

'Well, yes, something like that,' admitted Russell. 'Although "flying-saucers" might be closer to the mark.'

'Flying-saucers?' repeated the professor, momentarily impressed. 'Codswallop! The boy's crazy. Scientists have been working on those things for years without success. Why doesn't he join them in America where they have the resources, know-how, and facilities? I'll tell you why: because he's an ass.'

Russell smiled and placed his hand on the professor's shoulder.

'And you're no better,' continued the professor, prodding Russell with his sword. 'Why don't you do something with your life? We need men like you. Become a bodyguard. Join the army. Join the police. Get a job. Do something ...'

'Would you like to meet Trevor again?' asked Russell. 'How long has it been since you saw him last, two ... three years? He has a place where we can talk in complete privacy.'

'You blithering idiot. There is no such place, I don't fully trust my own highly secured environment.'

'You're forgetting how clever my brother is. A mosquito couldn't get into his den if it wasn't welcome. Come and see at least. Give your bodyguards the rest of the day off. Let me be your bodyguard until we get back here.'

The professor grunted his consent and they set off through the parkland in silence—followed at a discrete distance by two dedicated bodyguards.

~*~

'In there we can talk,' said Russell, pointing to the *Cloud*. 'If Trevor lets you in.'

The professor stopped and stared, his back erect, chin up, hands adjusting his bow tie. 'What do we have here?'

'Trevor and I call it the *Cloud*, It's a flying egg.'

'I haven't come all this way for the sake of my health,' grumbled the professor. 'If this is a waste of time I'll have you thrown in a prison cell for a month.'

They stepped away from the trees and into the clearing where the *Cloud* hovered. As they approached, the porthole opened and Trevor jumped out.

'Russell,' said Trevor. 'You know what we agreed on. No strangers. Who is that?'

'Don't you recognise him?' said Russell, drawing closer. 'He's an old friend of yours. He works part-time for the government now and needs to talk to us in private. Can we come in?'

'Gosh, yes, the professor,' said Trevor. He ran forward and took his old tutor's hand in both of his own, his face shone with pleasure. Then he turned to Russell. 'You know it's against my policy to let anybody in. This is our secret, how can it remain a secret if we start inviting guests to tea?'

'What is this magnificent object?' asked the professor, staring at the opaque bubble with professional interest. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

A dog barked in the distance.

'Somebody's prowling about,' said Trevor. 'Did anybody follow you here? Never mind, forget my bad manners, Professor, come on, let's get inside.'

'Is it okay?' asked Russell, nodding towards the porthole.

'Yes, yes. I've adjusted it now; but let me go in first to configure the computer. I'll call when it's clear. Come on, let's hurry.'

Bushes rustled in the distance and the dog barked again.

'Come on in,' called Trevor. 'It should be fine now.'

Russell stood aside and the professor bound up the narrow ramp. As he passed through the open port, his hair stood on end and sparks flashed around his jerking body. 'Damn it,' he managed to scream before fainting. With a cobweb of purple static electricity dancing and crackling though his clothes, the professor fell in a heap and lay prostrate.

'Oops!' said Trevor. 'I must have adjusted it the wrong way.'

~*~

With a groan, the professor opened his eyes and wondered where he was. He laid on a comfortable bed, in a plush and peaceful bedroom—a bedroom he had never seen before. After a moment, he remembered. Closing his eyes again he made a mental examination of his body; every muscle and joint ached, and a faint smell of singed hair and burnt clothes tugged at his nostrils.

'Where are you two jerks?' he screamed, sitting up so fast he nearly fainted again. 'Where am I? I'll break your skulls into a mush. I'll... I'll...'

Russell skittered in. 'Ah, welcome back with the living. You've been out for almost eight minutes. How do you feel?'

'I feel like murdering you, that's how I feel. The moment I'm back on my feet I'm going to knock your head off. I only wish I had my cricket bat with me.'

'Well, if it's any consolation, I know exactly how you feel, and so does Trevor. But if you can get to your feet, come with me, there's something I think would interest you. Here, take my arm.'

The professor trembled to his feet and threw a wild swing with his right fist. Russell caught the feeble punch and lifted the professor's arm around his shoulder. Without further protest, the professor let himself be hoisted out of the room.

They crossed a broad landing and hobbled down a shallow flight of stairs.

'Is this your house?' asked the professor in a weak voice. 'Very pleasant, and it'll be my pleasure to send a bulldozer through it as soon as I get out of here.' He shook his head and glanced at his watch. 'Eight minutes? Did you say I've been unconscious for eight minutes? More like twenty-eight. I must get in touch with my people before they miss me—they're supposed to know where I am at all times, and if I don't send them a message every...'

Russell threw open a door and the professor stopped speaking mid-sentence.

'My God! You crazy people,' gasped the professor, managing to stop himself falling to the ground fifteen metres below.

Outside, three metres away, floating in mid-air, Trevor sat at his desk. A massive grandfather clock floated beyond the desk, and a sofa and two comfy reclining chairs floated in front.

'It's quite safe,' said the two brothers in unison.

Russell stepped through the door and strolled across the open space to stand beside his brother at the desk. 'Come on, Professor, try it,' he encouraged.

'What is it, glass?' asked the professor, searching for a reflection or mark that would give it away. He tapped one foot across the threshold, and felt something solid. Hanging on to the doorframe with both hands, he stepped onto the invisible floor and cursed.

'My God! You crazy people,' he repeated, feeling giddy from the height. He released the doorframe and, forgetting to breathe, shuffled across to the desk. Behind him, the door floated in empty space, the rest of the *Cloud* had vanished.

'I... Is there an edge we can fall off?' stammered the professor.

'We're standing inside a room, Professor,' said Russell, 'but the walls, floor, and ceiling are all invisible. Show him, Trevor.'

With the touch of his keyboard, drab grey walls sprang into existence. With the next touch, they disappeared again.

'Neat, eh, Professor?' said Trevor.

'Yes,' agreed the professor, still hardly daring to breathe. 'My heartiest congratulations, and my deepest apologies for all those unkind words. I assume we're still inside your contraption. I'm not sure what you have here, but it's obviously something monumental. Why, this is simply spectacular.'

'Look down there,' said Trevor, pointing to the ground beneath their feet. 'A man just broke into your caravan, Russell, and another is on watch outside.'

'They look too well dressed to be thieves,' said Russell. 'Who are they? What are they looking for?'

'That's easy,' replied the professor. 'They're looking for me. They're my bodyguards and I expect they're worried about me. I was supposed to send them a message four minutes ago.' He tapped a short message into his mobile phone and pressed the send button.

'I'm afraid they won't get that message,' said Trevor. 'Nothing comes in or goes out unless I let it. Here, borrow my phone.'

The professor snatched the mobile phone and tapped again. He looked down as the message peeped on his bodyguard's phone. The bodyguard opened the caravan door and called to his companion. They read the coded message, nodded, and sat down on the caravan step, satisfied for the moment all was well. One of them lifted the phone to his ear and spoke.

'He'll be asking for a trace,' said the professor with a smile, 'and checking who owns the phone. That won't be a problem, they know I am in the Cloud brothers' company, but they'll certainly wonder where we're hiding.'

A flock of crows flew into the *Cloud's* side. Six birds dropped to the ground, landing at the bodyguards' feet. The surprised bodyguards looked skywards and scratched their heads.

The professor ducked. 'They've seen us,' he said.

'No, they can't see us, we're invisible; not only to eyesight but also to any instrument. But the birds were something I hadn't thought about. Shall we take you back to your office?' asked Trevor.

'In this?'

'Yes. It'll be its maiden flight—in honour of you.'

'I'll have some explaining to do when I suddenly turn up back at my office, but it'll do them good; keep them guessing; keep them on their toes. Come on then.'

'Look now,' said Russell, pointing below.

His two thugs blundered into the clearing, Alf leading and Bert holding the Alsations back.

'He's going to ask for their wallets,' chuckled Russell. 'This could be interesting.'

The bodyguards drew guns, but the dogs had obviously been trained to recognise weapons and leaped at their wrists.

Bert threw the guns into the bushes and tied his dogs to the caravan. The men faced each other a moment, measuring and estimating what they were up against. A fight was brewing and none of them wanted to back down.

'Art of the trade versus brute force,' said the professor. 'My boys will win. I'll give you four-to-one odds, one hundred pounds down.'

'You're on,' said Russell. 'Don't underestimate those thugs, they've been in a fight or two.'

The art-of-trade bodyguards sprung into action, peppering the thugs with short, sharp blows. If Bert felt pain, it didn't show. He raised his arm and swung his fist like a wooden mallet, thumping his bodyguard on the head. The bodyguard's eyes crossed, his legs turned to jelly, and he melted to the ground. Bert sat on him.

'Good grief,' said the professor. 'It's like an elephant sitting on a tiger.'

Bert made himself comfortable on the human cushion and watched how his partner faired. Alf crouched forward in a typical boxer's stance, protecting his head. The bodyguard pumped his fists but soon grew impatient. It was like hitting a punch-bag and just as ineffective. He pirouetted on one foot and aimed the other at Alf's stomach.

'That was a mistake,' said Russell.

Before the foot landed, Alf stepped forward and caught the bodyguard in a bear hug. He lifted the bodyguard off his feet and squeezed until the man's lungs peeped. With no apparent effort he raised the bodyguard above his head and pirouetted. Alf twirled for a whole minute, spinning the bodyguard like a helicopter blade. Then he dropped him.

The bodyguard swayed to his feet, threw a wild punch, and toppled over. He didn't try to get up again.

'Nice one, Alf,' said Bert. He climbed off his bodyguard and pulled the man to his feet.

'Yeah. Fought well though, didn't they?' said Alf, and helped the other bodyguard to his feet.

Trevor burst out laughing. 'They enjoyed it. They've had fun. Ha! Ha! Ha! Look at them, the best of friends.'

'Yes,' agreed Russell. 'There's a strange code of respect amongst those sort of people. Let's call it a draw, eh, Professor?'

'Blah! My boys were only playing. It was like two tigers sparing with an elephant and a gorilla. But I concede.'

They shook hands.

'Are you sure this contraption works?' said the professor.

Trevor nodded. 'Positive.'

'You'll have to fly low, can't have you causing a risk for aviation traffic. Do you have radar?'

'Um, no, not yet, I didn't think of that.'

'Of course you didn't, stupid question really. Now take me back to my office.'

'Where to?'

'You can drop me off on top of the department store in town, that's close enough.'

The *Cloud* shot sideways—straight through a high-voltage electricity line.

'Sorry,' muttered Trevor and jiggled his joysticks with more care. The scene around them flashed past, and although there was no sensation of movement within the *Cloud*, both Russell and the professor lost balance and tumbled to the invisible floor.

'Not so fast,' shouted the professor. He lay on his stomach and kicked himself around until he faced the direction of travel. With arms and legs spread-eagled, he knew now how superman must feel as he shot through the air. 'Higher,' he shouted. 'To your left, watch out for that block of flats.' He scrunched his eyes closed, covered them with his hands, and didn't dare opening them again until Trevor spoke.

'Here we are, Professor,' he said, 'all safe and sound. Flies like a dream, doesn't it?'

The professor peeked through his fingers and recognised the helicopter pad on the roof of the building above his office. Russell was already on his feet and bent to help the professor. 'Get your hands off me,' he barked, and wobbled to his feet unaided. He brushed himself down and straitened his bow tie. 'I can't have you two flying around in this thing. Go straight home and stay there until I decide what to do about this. Do you understand?'

Trevor and Russell glanced at each other. Russell cleared his throat. 'Before you go, professor, wasn't there something you wanted to get off your chest?'

'You two are certifiable crazy,' said the professor, checking his cufflinks. 'I don't see why I should tell you anything. But then again, I can't see why not. We both have a secret to keep, and you two are so crazy nobody would believe you even if they tortured you.' He adjusted his chain and pocket watch, and fastened the top button of his tweed jacket. 'Put the walls up, before I turn as crazy as you two.'

They appeared.

'Thank you. Feels much safer, don't you think?' Relieved at having a normal floor under his feet he paced up and down, and wondered how much he should tell them.

'A little over one year ago,' he began, 'reports started landing on my desk concerning irregular global weather conditions. Only short memos, you understand, but exceedingly urgent. Of course, there's been plenty of hysteria around this global warming phenomenon, but these new apprehensions were of a slightly different nature.'

He reached the wall and turned abruptly.

'How much do you two know about global warming?' he asked. 'Never mind, I'll explain briefly. The sun warms up Earth's surface, and infra-red radiation cools it down. It's a fine balance, and to keep the climate warm and habitable these temperatures are regulated by gases in the atmosphere; mostly water vapour and carbon dioxide.'

The brothers nodded.

'All this hysteria around global warming is based on increased levels of carbon dioxide, caused by fossil fuel burning and such nonsense. I must admit, when I saw these reports my first reaction was to screw them up and throw them into the waste bin.'

He paused.

'Now then, of these two gases—water vapour and carbon dioxide—water vapour is by far the most significant. Eighty-five percent of the earth's natural greenhouse effect is due to water vapour.'

The brothers nodded again and waited.

'These new reports were not concerned with increased levels of carbon dioxide, they were concerned with decreased levels of water vapour.'

The professor resumed walking the floor, gathering his thoughts.

'Well, what could I do? I authorised a certain amount of funding expecting nothing more to come from it. But three weeks later, a new report took me totally by surprise.'

The professor indicated the sofa and waited for the brothers to sit. He cleared his throat and said, 'The next report stated that our water vapour was being siphoned off by extra-terrestrial aliens.'

Russell burst out laughing. The professor's serious expression only made his fit worse. Unable to control himself he doubled up, slapped his knees, and howled.

'I'm sorry,' spluttered Russell, blowing his nose. 'I can see it wasn't meant to be a joke. Please go on.'

'Oh, it's all right,' said the professor. 'My first reaction was the same. Unfortunately, it doesn't end there. We pinpointed the aliens with our telescopes and their existence is indisputable. They ignore all communications, and recklessly—I can see the folly of my decision now—I voted in favour of sending a NASA space shuttle to investigate. We sent the *Wayfarer*.'

The professor lowered his eyes. When he looked up again they sparkled with moisture. 'The two crew members on board are close friends of mine.' His fist clenched in anger. 'Nobody understands what happened, but as the space shuttle approached the aliens—it disappeared. Vanished without a trace...'

'When did this happen?' asked Trevor.

The professor opened his fists and sighed. 'Four days ago.'

'I'm sorry,' commiserated Russell. 'I really hope no harm has come to your friends.'

The professor shrugged in agreement.

'I suppose,' said Russell, 'this explains why everything is so dry and hot. If anybody other than you had told this story, I wouldn't have believed it.'

'It had to happen sooner or later,' said Trevor. 'It's extremely egoistic to imagine we're the only inhabited planet in the universe. Do you know how the water vapour is being siphoned, professor?'

'The scientists are working on it. They say the alien's method of removing moisture from Earth is similar to that used by a de-humidifier. But time is running out. Soon the whole planet will look like the Gobi Desert.'

'Can't you simply blast them with an atom bomb or something?' said Trevor.

'It's been suggested, and a missile is in preparation, but don't you suppose the missile will vanish as easily as the space shuttle?' The professor stood and adjusted his bow tie. 'Now you know it all. If you will excuse me, I have other important things to attend to.'

Trevor opened a desk draw, found what he was looking for, and held a neat ornament in the palm of his hand. 'This is a "Zip-Linq",' he said, handing it to the professor.

'A Zip-Linq,' repeated the professor, turning the trivial object in his fingers. 'What am I supposed to do with it?'

'It's a communication device. Press the blue button and we'll be in direct contact with each other. It's my own design so it's quite secure, nobody else has the technology to eavesdrop. Just clip it onto a zip.'

'My tweed-suit uses buttons.'

'Well then, put it on your key-ring.'

'Thank you,' said the professor, slipping it into his trouser pocket. 'One last word before I leave. I cannot stress enough the importance of secrecy. I have divulged this information because I know I can trust you, and because you are two of the cleverest, "craziest" individuals on this planet. Who knows, perhaps you will come up with something? Any suggestion could be helpful. I for one, for the first time in my life, am totally gob-smacked. I am at a total loss. Good day, gentlemen.'

CHAPTER 4 Test Flight

'Let's investigate,' said Trevor. 'We can't let aliens mess about with our planet and get away with it.'

Russell gazed at his brother and shook his head. 'Are you suggesting you want to fly up into outer space in this *Cloud* contraption and take a closer look?'

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