



TAPESTRY CAPRICORN
FELINE SECRET AGENT

LIZZIE MILLS

Tapestry Capricorn, Feline Secret Agent

by

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Tapestry Capricorn
Feline Secret Agent

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Chapter 1 – Adrian and the cat

Behind parallel rows of dilapidated, semi-detached, council houses, between their overgrown gardens, ran a straight path, like the groove between the right and left pages of an open book. It was along this path that Adrian Larch was hurrying on his way to school one morning, when he heard a man's voice nearby.

'So, you fort you could steal my breakfast, did yuh?'

Puzzled, Adrian stopped walking. Was the man was talking to him?

But then another voice chimed in: 'Yeah, but Lefty was too quick for yer, weren't he?'

The whole estate had been empty for a year, abandoned, waiting for developers to knock it down to make way for a tower block, so Adrian wasn't expecting to encounter anyone. He looked around, and spotted two men standing in one of the gardens. One of them was holding up a helpless cat by the loose skin at the back of its neck, giving it a rough shake.

Adrian crouched behind the broken fence at the bottom of the garden, peeping through a gap where a piece had broken away.

The second man was brandishing a big chef's knife, pointing it at the cat's helplessly exposed white belly. 'We'll make sure you don't come back again, sniffing around,' he shouted.

Horrified, certain they were about to kill it, Adrian raised his head over the top of the fence and called out, 'Hey!' Then, feeling vulnerable, ducked down out of sight again.

He prepared to run away, but ... nothing happened. The two men apparently had not heard him – he had secretly hoped they wouldn't. He peered through the gap in the fence again – the situation was unchanged – and asked himself if he really needed to get involved. He didn't even understand what was going on. Perhaps the cat belonged to them – maybe they were just messing about. But, from what he could see, they didn't seem to be joking. The knife gleamed in the morning sunlight, moving ever closer to the poor cat.

Adrian's heart pounded with a mixture of fear and anger. He couldn't stand by and pretend this wasn't happening. He had to do something. Summoning all his courage, he jumped out from behind the fence. 'Hey!' he yelled again, louder. It was still a thin squeak, but this time they heard him and turned to face him. 'Leave it alone,' he said, weakly.

'Oh right, now I'm scared,' sneered the man with the knife. He took a step towards Adrian, waving the blade menacingly, then hesitated. He shook his head, as though confused, as though he had heard a voice in his head, telling him to stop. After a moment, he gathered himself. 'Clear off, kid,' he shouted.

Adrian looked anxiously around, hoping someone would be nearby to help, but the estate was abandoned and derelict; few people ever came this way. He wouldn't have taken this shortcut himself if he hadn't been late for school. *Oh hell*, he thought, as he remembered why he was there. *I'm going to be really late, now.*

But at that moment, the cat took advantage of the distraction and twisted its body enough to rake its claws down the side of the face of the man holding it. With a yelp, the man dropped the cat and clapped a hand over his cheek, where blood was already oozing from four parallel slashes. The cat landed on all four feet, already running as it hit the ground, and scuttled across the yard towards the wilderness beyond.

While the two men watched with amazement, their prisoner disappeared, and Adrian decided that he should run, too. He didn't stop until he reached the main road, and was relieved to see, when he

looked back, that he was not being followed.

Perkins

Later, as the summer morning became warmer and warmer, the school lessons dragged tediously on and on. By the last class of the morning, maths, Adrian was daydreaming. The sounds of the classroom were just a dull background hum as he gazed out of the big windows at birds circling in the cloudless, blue sky, and an airliner that glittered at the end of a long, white vapour trail.

Suddenly his dream exploded when he heard his name bellowed nearby.

‘Larch!’

Perkins, the sadistic maths teacher, was homing in on him. As well as maths, Perkins also took Physical Education, and his healthy complexion and perfectly toned body exuded arrogance and menace. He looked and behaved like an Egyptian god.

Adrian was unable to move. He sat rigid, sweating anxiously, waiting for the day’s abuse to begin.

Soon, Perkins was towering above him. ‘Well?’ he demanded.

‘What, sir?’

‘Your homework, Larch. Where is it?’

‘Oh. Please sir, I haven’t done it,’ Adrian said, miserably. He had spent every evening down by the canal with his sketchpad, and had completely forgotten about the homework. Not that it would have mattered, as he didn’t understand the questions, and stood no chance of answering them.

Perkins’ eyes sought help from on high, and he gave a loud sigh. ‘Again,’ he said, caustically. ‘Stay behind after class and see me, Larch.’

‘Yes sir.’

He watched Perkins’ back as he patrolled around the remainder of the tables, collecting homework from all the other kids. How did they manage to always do it, he wondered, his cheeks burning as he felt the eyes of everyone on him, and he squirmed with embarrassment as he imagined their thoughts.

But Perkins stopped again when he reached Noah Danjuma, an expression of amazement on his face. Noah was a clever lad – a bit mouthy sometimes, perhaps, but he always did the work and got good marks. He had emptied the contents of his school bag onto the table, hunting for the missing book.

‘Sorry sir, I forgot it,’ Noah was saying. ‘I mean, like, I done it, but I must have left it at home.’

‘See me afterwards,’ boomed the teacher, every syllable dripping with disappointment.

‘Sir,’ grinned the boy.

Friends

The bell rang and the rest of the class dashed out to enjoy their lunches in the sunshine, but Adrian and Noah stayed behind, waiting by Perkins’s desk. The teacher pointedly ignored them for five minutes, making the boys sweat while he flicked through the homework books he had collected earlier, marking them with a red pen.

Eventually he looked up. ‘I expect both of you to hand in that work tomorrow, or you will suffer. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, sir,’ they chorused.

‘Right, clear off then.’

They scuttled out of the classroom and along the corridor. Once they reached the playground, they stopped.

‘You got any lunch?’ Noah asked.

He and Adrian scarcely knew each other. Truth to tell, Adrian didn’t know anyone at school very well – he wasn’t good at mixing.

‘Thought I’d get some chips,’ he mumbled shyly.

‘I’ll come with you.’ It wasn’t a question, or an offer, just a simple statement. One thing Adrian had realised about Noah was that he didn’t lack confidence, unlike himself.

As they walked to the chippie, Adrian’s curiosity loosened his tongue. ‘I’m surprised you forgot your homework.’

‘I didn’t,’ Noah grinned.

Adrian was speechless, and stopped in his tracks.

‘What?’ laughed the other boy.

‘You didn’t forget your homework?’

‘That’s right. It was in my bag. See, old Perkins is a bully, he picks on those he can get to. But he knows he can’t upset me, so I knew he would give us both another chance.’ He grinned again.

Adrian had mixed feelings. He was grateful, but at the same time something niggled at him. Did everyone think he was a wimp? After a moment’s thought he realised that they probably did.

They reached the chip shop and joined the queue.

‘Ady, did you have a problem with the homework?’ Noah asked. ‘I could help, if you want.’

Nobody at school had ever called him ‘Ady’. He discovered that he liked the informality of it. He had heard other kids call Noah ‘Dan’, short for his last name of Danjuma, but Adrian hadn’t become friendly enough with anyone for them to give him a nickname.

He shook his head. ‘Nah, I just forgot to do it.’

To admit that he didn’t understand it would be one admission too many. After a short pause, he added: ‘But, thanks, Dan.’ It felt odd, saying it, feeling that he had a friend for the first time.

Chapter 2 – That cat again

A short way from the school, a parade of shops faced a square that was supposed to be a communal hub. There was a central concrete area, marked out for ball games and surrounded by a high, wire fence, and around it were walkways, seats, patches of grass, and gardens, planted by the council with flowers and shrubs. At lunchtime every day it became a stadium and a forum and a battleground, briefly bursting with young yin and yang.

Adrian and Noah came out of the fish and chip shop with their polystyrene trays of chips, and sat on one of the brick walls that enclosed the raised flower beds. Almost as soon as they started to eat, a cat appeared and began rubbing around Adrian's legs.

'Hello, puss,' said Noah, extending a hand towards the cat, who sniffed it, then ignored him and resumed its affections with Adrian.

'I think this is the cat I saw this morning,' Adrian told Noah.

In response, the cat jumped up onto the wall beside him and began to rub its nose into his neck. He laughed and cupped its face in his hands, stroking from cheek to ear in a way he knew cats liked. It responded by purring loudly.

'Two men were going to cut it up, but I shouted at them and it escaped.'

'Wow,' said Noah enthusiastically. 'Why would they cut up a cat?'

'Dunno. One of them said it had been after his breakfast.'

At this the cat gave a loud meow and jumped down to the ground. With its tail erect, it walked a few steps, then stopped and looked back at the two boys. When they failed to respond, it rolled on its back on the paving slab, legs stretched out front and back, inviting them to tickle its tummy. Adrian got up and walked towards it, leaving his tray of chips on the wall, but as soon as he got near, it jumped to its feet and strutted a few yards further, then stopped again.

'It's got you on a string,' laughed Noah. Adrian laughed too.

The cat meowed again, then stood waiting. Noah jumped down from the wall, absently picking up Adrian's discarded chips. 'I think it wants us to follow,' he said, grinning.

At this, the cat trotted towards a shrubbery at the corner of the square, a mass of bushes and thorns, and vanished into the thicket. The boys ran after it, but when they pushed through the branches into a little clearing beyond, they found, not the cat but a young woman. Confused, they skidded to a halt.

A Shape-changing Cat

The girl appeared to be about sixteen years old, with short hair – about a number six cut. There was nothing too special about that, but one striking aspect of her appearance was very disconcerting – she wasn't wearing any clothes. All that covered her was a thick layer of fur, tabby-striped all over, apart from a white area that stretched from her chin to ... well ... her legs. Adrian and Noah stared, open mouthed.

'Are you ... ?' began Adrian.

'Well who else were you expecting?' the young woman snapped. 'Look, I can't stay like this for long right now, it's too public, but I wanted to thank you for helping mee this morning. They would have killed mee, for sure. Will you both meet mee at the allotments tonight after dark? I need to talk

to you.'

They nodded, dumbly.

'Good,' she said, not convinced. 'I'm going to change back now. You may like to look away – it can make some people feel funny.'

But they could not take their eyes off her. As they watched, she began to shrink, and her body twisted and changed shape, her face became rounder and her ears moved to the top of her head. Within seconds she was a cat again. They shook their heads in amazement as she trotted off into the bushes.

After a moment, Noah looked at Adrian, and when he spoke his voice was croaky. 'This is a dream, right? Stuff like this doesn't happen outside movies and dreams.'

They thought about that.

'So why aren't we waking up?' Adrian said. 'It's a well known fact that you wake up once you realise you're dreaming.'

Noah shrugged. 'Dunno, but it can't be real.'

'No. Except ...'

'Yeah, I know.' He handed Adrian his chips.

'Thanks,' Adrian said, absently.

After another period of silence, in which they each tried to understand what had happened, Noah looked at his watch. 'We had better get back to school or we will be in more trouble,' he said.

They ran back across the square, dumping their cold chips in the bin on the corner, and headed towards the school gates. They felt light-headed, as though they were on the edge of something really big.

The Allotments

That evening, at dusk, a torch clicked into life at the entrance to the allotments, then another, their beams slashing the darkness like searchlights. Tapestry sat on the roof of one of the sheds, watching the lightshow, testing the air with her nose. No-one else was around, only the two boys who had just met at the entrance.

The lights went out, and she heard them calling out: 'Cat, where are you?'

She jumped down and trotted along the path that ran through the centre of the allotments. When she reached Adrian and Noah, she scooted up one of the gate posts beside them and meowed a greeting.

The two torches suddenly burst into blinding light again, pointing straight at her. Damn! She threw herself down out of the glare, her eyes now useless. *Why are humans so stupid?* she thought, not for the first time. With only her nose to guide her, she ran quickly back along the track, the beams of the flashlights following her, spotlighting her as though she was on a stage.

She reached the shed she had chosen earlier, and dived into the thick weeds growing behind it. She quickly morphed into human form, then slipped into some clothes she had hidden there – she had noticed that the boys found it hard to concentrate when she had nothing on. The clothes were not too complicated, just a skirt, a teeshirt, and a pair of trainers – if she had to morph back in a hurry, they would simply drop off.

She heard the boys arrive at the front of the shed, and saw flashes of light as they cast around with their torches. 'Where are you, puss?' one of them whispered loudly.

She covered her eyes with her hand as she emerged from behind the shed. 'Why are you whispering, you idiot?' she hissed. 'Anyone within a kilometre knows you're here. Turn off those damn torches.'

'But I can't see in the dark without it,' said the talkative one, as the two torches went off.

'You could see a lot more than you realise, if you would just try,' she replied. 'Please don't ever point those things at mee again, you blinded mee.'

'Sorry, miss,' they chorused.

She opened the shed door, which sagged a little as it creaked back. A musty, dusty smell wafted out.

'Inside, boys, quickly,' she urged, holding the door open for them.

They didn't move.

Again she mentally cursed humans' inability to use their senses. 'Ok, one of you cover the end of your torch with your hand and switch it on. Just let out enough light to find the doorway.' She closed her own eyes in readiness, and heard the lads clatter past her.

'Find something to sit on, then turn off your torch,' she called quietly after them. She knew that there was an old canvas chair inside, and some boxes suitable for humans to sit on – she had checked it out earlier. When the torch went out, she entered the shed herself, and shut the door. Her senses told her where the others were sitting, and she found a spare box for herself.

Chapter 3 – An Explanation and a Mission

‘Boys, what do I call you?’ Tapestry asked.

The confident one spoke up: ‘I’m Dan – Noah Danjuma, and he’s Adrian Larch – Ady,’ he said.

‘Well, first of all, thanks for coming here tonight. Are your eyes adapting to the darkness now?’

‘Yeah, actually they are,’ Dan replied. ‘I can see you, kind of.’

‘Good. Now, thanks again, Ady, for helping me out of that fix this morning. It took a lot of courage, and the distraction you created saved my life.’

Adrian was embarrassed, and mumbled something even he didn’t understand. Tapestry smiled kindly. It was as well the shed was in darkness, as the sight of a cat smiling, even a humanoid cat, can be quite disconcerting.

‘As you are involved, I had better explain what is going on,’ she continued. ‘For a start, my name is Tapestry Capricorn. I am a special agent, on a mission, and this morning’s unfortunate incident happened because I got careless with the two dumbheads in that house. The trouble was that the smell in there is so bad that I didn’t sense one of them creeping up on me.’

‘What is this mission, Tap?’ interrupted Noah.

Tapestry let out a little hiss. ‘Guys, I know you like to call each other by short names, like Ady and Dan, but please don’t shorten my name – it is Tapestry, not Tap, or puss or anything else. I chose it myself, and I get very upset if people mess with it. Does that sound fair to you?’

They both nodded. ‘Sorry Tapestry,’ said Noah.

‘It’s ok, I understand. Cats and humans see most things very differently. For instance, to you, the world is limited almost entirely to what you can see, you hardly ever use your other senses. But cats use all their senses to build a much bigger picture.’

The boys nodded again, beginning to understand.

‘And the Earth is just a lump of rock whizzing around in space, and it just accidentally got itself populated with all kinds of life, right?’

‘Yeah, that’s what they teach us at school,’ said Adrian.

‘Well, they are wrong,’ she stated, flatly. ‘It’s much more exciting than that. You see, every planet, including the Earth, is a focal point for other dimensions, millions of them.’

She saw that they were puzzled. ‘Ok, I’m not explaining it very well. Look, imagine a big plate with a pizza on it. The pizza is cut into, let’s say twenty slices, and each slice is pulled outwards, so most of it is off the plate, the edge is lying on the table, and only the pointed end is still on the plate. Got that?’

‘Yep, got it,’ they chorused.

‘Good. Now, the plate is the Earth, and you humans are living on it. But the inhabitants of all the pizza slices can also come here, through the pointy bit of their slice, using a Portal – a doorway, created by a machine. That’s how I got here. Then imagine that each pizza slice has a different topping, some are good for you, some are poisonous, and there are millions of varieties, not just the twenty slices we are imagining here, and you will begin to see the picture.’

‘Crumbs! So, you’re like an alien, then? Wow,’ chirped Adrian, genuinely interested and excited.

‘You’ll never see cats the same again, will you?’ Tapestry laughed.

‘So, what is your mission?’ asked Noah.

‘Good. That was the right question, and I’m glad you asked it again. I am here to kill some rats.’

Cats and Rats

There was a stunned silence.

‘Er, that’s your mission?’ said Adrian, disappointed.

‘What you are really saying is: ‘Is that all?’ Am I right?’ Tapestry demanded, tight-lipped.

‘Well, yeah. I mean, that’s what cats do, chase mice and birds and stuff, init?’

‘Yes, Earth cats do, but my job is different. Look, every creature on Earth came here originally from one of the other dimensions, including humans. Some decided to stay and have offspring, and their descendants have been here for thousands of years. Earth rats evolved long before humans, from ancestors that arrived from a disgusting dimension that has allowed itself to be ruled by forces of evil. It’s a horrible, filthy world. When some of those plague-rats came back to the Earth, a few hundred years ago, they brought their dirt and their vile ways with them, spreading it around your world, along with diseases. The badness in their minds was affecting everything around them, by a kind of telepathy, and the organisation that I work for was set up to stop them, and any other harmful lifeforms, from spreading through the universe. Once the flow of plague-rats was stemmed, and the humans on Earth discovered how to reduce the spread of diseases by improving hygiene, the only rats remaining in the wild have had to live in secret places like sewers. Humans have even bred some friendly versions to keep as pets. But the rats I am after are recent arrivals; they have broken their quarantine and have started to return to Earth.’

‘Is that why you were in that house this morning?’ Adrian asked.

‘Exactly! The rodents have discovered a technology that enables them to morph into human form, like I can – those two men you saw are really specially trained plague-rat agents. They have set up a portal in the house, and they are running a farm, bringing through thousands of plague-rat fetuses and incubating them. They are planning to flood the Earth with their kind, wiping out all the naturalised rodents and replacing them with their own vile offspring. That’s why I had to ask you to come here tonight. I need your help to destroy that farm.’

‘What can we do? Why not just tell the police?’

‘Can you imagine the police taking mee seriously, with a story like this? Besides, if they arrested the men, they would just morph back to rats and escape. No, I can stop them, but I need human help. Will you work with mee?’

Recruited

‘Yeah, it’ll be great, won’t it Ady?’ Noah was excited at the prospect of an adventure.

Adrian was a little less enthusiastic ... it might be dangerous, and he didn’t see himself as the hero type. ‘I s’pose so,’ he mumbled.

‘Don’t worry,’ Tapestry said quickly, seeing his reluctance, ‘I won’t give you any of the dangerous stuff to do, that’s what I’m trained for. I just need you to act as lookouts and messengers for me. Will you do that?’

Relieved, Adrian nodded. ‘Ok, I can do that.’

‘Good. Thanks for signing up. Now, the first thing we need to do is to find out when both the men

go out. It doesn't happen regularly, and not very often, but I need to get into the house when they are not there, to scout around. That means we need someone watching the place twenty-four hours a day, and someone else to let me know when it happens. Do either of you have any friends who could help?'

They fell silent, thinking. Adrian didn't really have any school friends, and Noah realised that he didn't trust any of his mates not to let them down.

Suddenly Adrian remembered someone who might help. 'There's an old man. His name is Tommy. He stayed on in one of the council houses after everyone else left. Said it was his home and they had no right to chuck him out. He's still there now, in the row opposite where the farm is. I could go and see him.'

'Well done,' said Tapestry, enthusiastically. 'That's a great idea. I'll come with you. And I have someone in mind to act as messenger, I'll introduce you next time. Shall we meet at Tommy's at lunchtime tomorrow?'

Chapter 4 – Trans-dimensional Gateway

The one called Lefty was in a bad mood. ‘How did that damn cat get so close to the portal?’ he demanded. Lefty always seemed to be in a bad mood these days.

‘I don’t know, boss,’ answered the other one, miserably. He was called Toad. It wasn’t the name he had chosen for himself; he wanted to be called Harold King, but Lefty seemed to be determined to make him look stupid. ‘Why do you have to blame me every time something goes wrong?’

‘Because you’re the only one here apart from me, and I don’t make stupid mistakes,’ Lefty thundered.

‘It was you what dropped the cat,’ retorted Toad, petulantly, then ducked to avoid a backhanded swipe from Lefty. ‘Only saying,’ he added, defensively.

‘Don’t start trying to be clever,’ Lefty snarled. ‘You had better make sure you’re more careful today, there’s a new batch coming through at six o’clock tonight, and we don’t want no slip-ups.’

‘Ok, boss. Can I press the button this time? Can I? Can I?’ He flinched as Lefty’s famous left hand snaked out and grabbed his jacket, pulling him closer.

‘I keep telling you, that’s my job. I’m in charge here, you just do as you’re told. Now go and get me some breakfast, I’m starving.’ He released his hapless assistant, pushing him in the direction of the kitchen.

Minutes later, however, Toad returned, long-faced and empty-handed. ‘There ain’t no grub, boss. You ate it all yesterday.’ He kept a safe distance.

‘Well, go out and get some more!’ Lefty shouted. ‘And steal it this time, don’t go spending all our money.’ As Toad turned to leave, Lefty had an afterthought. ‘And get me a gun. If that cat shows up again I’m gonna finish her good!’

Tommy

At lunchtime, Adrian and Noah slipped out of school and made their way nervously past the front of the Rat House. There was no sign of activity, apart from a fleeting glimpse of a tabby cat that could have been Tapestry, but now that they were aware of it, the smell of the place reached them even on the pavement outside.

They crossed the wide, tree-lined road to Tommy’s house and knocked on the front door. His real name was Albert Thomas, but he liked to be called Tommy. He kept his home looking nice: the garden was neat, with vegetables growing side-by-side with the flowers, and the door and windows were freshly painted. It looked out of place among all the derelict houses around it. Adrian saw the curtains move a little as Tommy checked to see who was calling, and a moment later the door opened.

He smiled when he saw them. He knew Adrian, a nice, polite lad who had enjoyed helping him in the garden. ‘Hi kids, what brings you here?’

‘Hello Mr Thomas,’ Adrian said. ‘This is my friend Noah. We have to ask you something. Can we come in for a minute, please?’

‘Sure, come on in. Bring your cat, too,’ Tommy replied.

The boys looked down, and there was Tapestry, rubbing against Tommy’s legs. They laughed. ‘Tapestry, behave!’ Noah grinned.

As the boys settled into the armchairs in Tommy's living room, Tapestry jumped up on the old man's lap, purring.

'This is all rather mysterious,' Tommy said, noticing the tension in the boys' faces, as he petted the cat. 'What's up?'

Noah and Adrian looked at each other, unsure how to explain. 'Have you noticed anything going on in the house opposite?' Adrian asked.

Tommy thought for a moment. 'Now you mention it, I've seen a couple of shady characters recently. What are they up to, drugs?'

Adrian looked at Tapestry who, believe it or not, actually shook her head. 'No,' he replied, 'something strange.'

The boys were clearly struggling to find the words to describe the situation, so Tapestry jumped down and meowed to Adrian, before leaving the room. He stood up. 'Excuse us for a moment, please,' he said, feeling foolish as he followed her.

A Walking Raincoat

By the time he arrived in the hallway, Tapestry was standing there in all her disconcerting, furry but human, beauty. 'I need some clothes,' she hissed. 'I can't let Tommy see me like this.'

Adrian looked around the hall. Near the front door, a row of hooks was fastened to the wall, with jackets, a coat and an umbrella hanging from them. 'How about Tommy's coat?' he asked.

'That will do,' she replied, squeezing past him to reach the coat.

Adrian fought a disconcerting stirring inside, and quickly turned back towards the living room. 'I'll get back,' he suggested.

'Yes,' she said, as she slipped on the coat, 'tell Tommy anything he wants to know.'

Adrian re-entered the room and sat down again next to Noah. 'Tapestry wants us to tell Tommy everything,' he informed his friend.

Tommy grinned. 'You lads are behaving very strangely. Tapestry is your cat, right?' They both nodded, then stopped.

'Not exactly ours,' Adrian said.

'But she can talk to you?' The boys were not sure if Tommy was mocking them.

'Yes,' answered Adrian. 'She is not an ordinary cat. She is a very extraordinary cat, in fact. She is from another dimension, here on a mission.'

Tommy was about to make a wisecrack when his coat walked in through the door, aided by a young woman. 'Who are you?' he managed to blurt out, looking first at Tapestry, then at the boys.

'How ...?' At that moment, realisation dawned. 'You're that cat, aren't you?'

Tapestry nodded. 'I'm sorry to shock you like this, Tommy, but we don't have much time.' She took the remaining seat on the settee, between the two boys, carefully pulling the coat together at her knees.

'I thought the boys were kidding me,' Tommy said, shaking his head. 'But I can see that you are the real thing. So, what's going on?'

Tapestry explained about the rats and the portal.

'The correct name for the device is "TG" – "Trans-dimensional Gateway",' she said, 'but everyone calls them portals. They not only allow transmission from the home world and back, but also sustain

all the existing transferees. I have to somehow destroy the rat's portal. If I can succeed, all the rats that came through it will go straight back to their world.'

Chapter 5 – A sudden change of plan

When the school bell rang at four o'clock, the boys sprinted out of the gates and headed back to Tommy's for a briefing with Tapestry. The front door was ajar, so they let themselves in. Closing the door behind them, they followed the sound of Tommy's voice to the front room. There they found him sitting in his armchair, with the cat on his lap and a big mug of tea on the nest of tables beside him.

'Hello again, lads,' he said. 'Come on in and sit down. Tapestry and I have been having a chat about her world.'

'You mean, you can understand her even when she's in cat form?' said Noah.

Tommy nodded. 'If I relax and empty my mind, she puts thoughts there.'

Tapestry jumped down and left the room, returning moments later in human shape, wearing Tommy's coat. 'Your minds are so full of chatter that I can't get through,' she told the boys, bluntly. 'But Tommy has the gift of opening a channel that I can use to reach him. Now, listen, we need to get down to business. Things are moving fast, there's a change of plans, and we have to act tonight.'

'Tonight?' the boys exclaimed in unison.

'Yes. Our spies have discovered that there's a new delivery scheduled to arrive at six o'clock. I have to try to prevent it from getting through.'

'How will you do that?' asked Adrian.

'I have a bomb,' she answered, simply.

'A bomb?' squawked Noah.

'Yes, we have been developing the technology in my world, and they sent it through my portal this afternoon. It uses the energy released by a gateway, turning it back on itself, and destroying not only the machinery at this end, but also the transmitter back in their home dimension. If we succeed here, it will put the rodents out of action for a long time.'

'Where is the bomb now?' asked Adrian.

'On my kitchen table,' Tommy answered, nodding in the direction of the door.

The boys jumped up and ran to the kitchen, and there, sure enough, they found an alien device on the table. It was roughly cylindrical in shape, about forty to fifty centimetres long, and twenty centimetres in diameter at the centre, tapering cone-like towards the ends, like an extended rugby ball. After a few moment's hesitation, Noah cupped his hands under it and lifted it off its stand.

'It weighs about two kilos,' he informed Adrian, as he carefully replaced it.

'And that is the problem,' said Tapestry, arriving behind them. 'I cannot carry it into the house, and set it, in cat form. I have to go as a human, and to do that, I need both of the rat men out of the house. You two are going to have to get a bit more involved.'

The boys stared at her.

'How much more?' Noah asked. 'How big is "a bit"?''

Tapestry shrugged. 'Oh, nothing technical. Just some running about.'

Cabbage

‘Lads,’ Tommy’s voice called from the front room, ‘I think you should come in here and see this.’

Tapestry walked ahead of them down the hallway, preventing them from scampering into the room. When they followed her through the door they couldn’t, at first, see anything odd. But they followed Tommy’s pointing finger to the old sideboard against a wall. There, hovering above a bowl of fruit, was a fairy, her wings a blur. She was green, and glowed, like a Christmas tree decoration.

They stared in amazement, then turned to Tapestry. ‘I thought ...’ began Noah.

‘That’s not possible,’ said Adrian, emphatically.

‘Fairies aren’t real,’ continued Noah. ‘It’s a trick, right?’

Tapestry shook her head. ‘There’s always some truth in every legend,’ she said. ‘Cabbage is from a dimension where having wings is commonplace, and their time is different from your time and mine, so they appear to travel very fast.’

‘Cabbage?’ spluttered Noah.

‘Yeah!’ said a challenging, high-pitched voice. Then the same voice came from somewhere close to his right ear. ‘You want to make something of it, big guy?’

He jumped, and flapped a hand at his ear, but the fairy had already moved. He could see her, hovering in front of his nose, eye-balling him, her hands on her hips.

‘Sorry,’ he said quickly. ‘I didn’t mean to be rude. It’s just that, well, I thought that fairies were named after flowers.’

‘Well, we can’t all be called ‘Rose’ or ‘Forget-me-flipping-not’!’ she replied, caustically.

‘Folks,’ said Tapestry, ‘we don’t have time for arguments. Boys, I need Cabbage to be our spy and co-ordinator, reporting on every movement, every change. And this is where you guys come into the plan. You have to lure Lefty and Toad away.’

The Attack Begins

An hour later, after the five of them had carefully discussed their plan, Tommy put on his old clothes, and took up position in his front garden, where he could watch the rat house, while pretending to tend his plants. Cabbage flew across the road and into the house through the hole in the front door where the letterbox used to be, while Tapestry and the boys waited in Tommy’s living room, observing through the window.

Shortly, Cabbage re-joined them, and Tommy followed her indoors. ‘Both the men are in the house,’ she reported. ‘The smell coming from the incubator room is vile, and I had to get out quickly before it overpowered me! Lefty is upstairs, fiddling with the portal, copying settings from a printout into the control panel. Toad is in the kitchen, stirring some disgusting-looking stew.’

Tapestry didn’t reply. She was sitting at Tommy’s dining table with the bomb before her. She had removed a panel from one side of it, and was poking about inside it.

Everyone looked at her, expectantly.

She looked up when she suddenly realised that the room had fallen silent.

‘I’m setting the timer,’ she informed them, off-handedly. ‘There won’t be time to do it when I am inside their house.’

She returned her attention to the machinery in front of her.

They waited.

After a few more moments, she stood up. 'Ok, the clock is set; I just have to activate it when the house is empty. Now, are you all clear about what you have to do?'

Adrian and Noah answered together, nervously.

'Right,' she said, 'off you go then. Good luck, and stay safe.'

Tommy went back out front to resume his gardening, and the boys followed him a few moments later. They parted at the gate; Adrian, with Cabbage hovering at his shoulder, strode off down the road to the corner, while Noah, dawdling nonchalantly, began to cross to the far side, down a little from the rat house.

Adrian

At the end of the road, Adrian began running, circling the block to reach the rear of the house, where Toad should still be working in the kitchen. As Adrian approached the back gate, Cabbage whizzed ahead to look in the window, returning to his shoulder in two seconds. 'He's still there,' she twittered in his ear.

'Thanks, Cabbage,' he answered, tensely, stooping to pick up a suitable stone – heavy enough to fly the distance and do the job, but a manageable weight for throwing. He entered the garden and stopped about ten metres from the window, pausing while Cabbage flew vertically to hover at roof height, where she could see what happened next.

Adrian flexed his arm, getting the feel of the stone. When he was ready, he twisted his body to wind up for the throw, then swung his arm fluidly, releasing the stone in a smooth action. It flew straight to its target, smashing the glass of the kitchen window with a satisfying crashing sound. He smiled, pleased at his work.

Toad's face appeared at the broken window.

Adrian pulled a face and made a gesture with his hands that his mother would have been shocked to see, then turned around and bent over, pointing to his behind. He heard an enraged roar from Toad, then the thunder of huge feet on the wooden floor. He ambled towards the gate, until he heard the back door being thrown open, then he broke into an easy trot along the path, looking over his shoulder to make sure that Toad was following.

Noah

As Adrian led Toad down the lane between the back gardens, Cabbage flew over the roof and dropped down to where Noah was waiting out front. 'Ok, go!' she shouted.

Noah, who had also selected a suitable stone, sprinted to the front of the house and lobbed it at the upstairs window. It fell short, bouncing off the wall just beneath the window, and landing back at his feet. Cursing, he picked it up, paused, then threw it again. This time his aim was good, and the glass shattered, releasing the awful stink of the incubation room. He waited.

Cabbage flew up to the window and, after taking a deep breath, disappeared through the broken pane, emerging a moment later to hide behind a drainpipe. Seconds later, the bulk of Lefty's huge body filled the frame as he peered out.

On the pavement below, Noah had already armed himself with another stone, and threw it as hard as he could at Lefty's head. It hit him square between the eyes, and he was pleased to see Lefty's face contort with pain. Lefty disappeared from the window, and a moment later, Noah heard the

drumming of his feet on the stairs. He began to run, up the hill, making distance between himself and the rat-man, while Cabbage hurtled off to check on Adrian's progress.

Tapestry

Tapestry, meanwhile, watching through Tommy's window as Lefty burst out of the front door, hurried to the table, activated the timer on the bomb and screwed the panel back in place. Then she lifted the bomb into a heavy-duty shopping bag, hurried outside and across the road to the front entrance of the rat house, which Lefty had kindly left open. She had set the timer at five minutes, giving her time to position the bomb on the platen of the portal and get out of the building before the boys would have circled the block and brought Lefty and Toad back to the street.

Cabbage found Adrian a street away, comfortably holding a lead over Toad, who was already out of breath. She saw Adrian stop, to allow Toad to catch up a little, and she dived to hover in front of him. He grinned at her, and gave the thumbs-up sign. She returned the action, then flitted back over the rooftops to Noah, who was also a safe distance away from Lefty, though not making any distance on him; Lefty was obviously fitter than Toad.

A Problem

Thanks to the open front door and the two broken windows, some fresh air was wafting through the house, and the smell was less overpowering than on her previous visits. Tapestry sprinted up the stairs and into the room where the portal had been installed.

It stood against a wall in an otherwise bare room – a sleek, egg-shaped machine, reaching almost from floor to ceiling. But when Tapestry reached it, she discovered that the hatch was closed and locked. It was such a tight fit that there was only a fine line to show where it fitted into the shell.

She put the heavy bag containing the bomb down on the floor, and examined the smooth surface of the device, looking for the control panel.

There! A small circle beside the hatch, an almost invisible groove.

After she had tried a few experimental pushes at different points around the circle with a fingertip, the circle slid silently back to reveal some buttons, a small screen, and a simple numbered keypad.

There were eight keys on the pad, arranged in a square. Right, if the machine followed the universal practice of using an octal number system, that would make a million possible combinations. Not good. This was not what she had been hoping to find.

She glanced at the display on the bomb beside her – four minutes to go – then looked around the room. Lefty was not smart enough to remember anything as complicated as an eight-digit code from one day to the next; she felt sure he would have it written down somewhere nearby.

There was a pile of papers in one corner. She ran over, but it was just fish and chip wrappers – nothing with numbers on.

Time was running out. Where else could it be?

'Tommy,' she subvocalised. 'I've hit a snag. The portal is locked, and I have no way of knowing the combination.'

'Won't the bomb work outside it?' he replied at once.

'Well, it will explode,' she replied. 'Probably with enough force to destroy the house, but it won't affect the gateway. The bomb has to be inside, on the platen, with the door closed ... and the portal must be activated to transmit.'

As they conversed, she checked the room again. There was an old, dirty, mirror hanging above the fireplace. She ran to examine it, looking at the timer display again as she passed – there were now three minutes left.

‘Can you deactivate the bomb?’ Tommy asked. ‘Maybe we try again.’

She was studying the mirror’s surface for any obvious writing in the layer of dust that covered it.

‘No, I don’t have any tools.’

‘I could bring them over.’

‘No! No-one is coming in here,’ she said, emphatically. She would not put anyone’s life in danger.

There was nothing on the mirror, nor on the grimy mantelpiece below it. It was hopeless.

‘How much longer do you have?’ Tommy asked.

‘Just over two minutes.’

‘That’s it, then. Get out, now!’ he ordered. ‘We need you alive to fight another day.’

Chapter 7 – Confrontation

While he talked telepathically with Tapestry, Tommy was standing by his gate, watching the two ends of the road for the boys to return. They appeared at almost the same moment. Adrian came over the rise at the top of the hill to his right, ambling almost casually along, followed by a wheezing Toad, and Noah turned the corner to his left, closely pursued by Lefty. Dan was staying ahead, just, and Lefty did not seem to be tiring.

Tommy refused to let his disappointment at the failure of the mission show in his face as he stepped out onto the pavement and waited, arms folded across his chest, for the boys to reach him. He saw Tapestry emerge from the front door of the rat's house. She had reverted to cat shape, and jumped up to sit on the wall. Cabbage came to hover beside her.

Adrian and Noah passed behind him together, running down the path to his front door, then he stood, blocking the gateway to the two rat-men.

'Out of my way, old man,' spat Lefty.

'Now, why would I want to do that?' Tommy replied, easily. 'This is my home, I choose who I want to come in.' Whether the plan had worked or failed, he had no intention of letting them harm the two boys.

Lefty made a growling noise at the back of his throat, then reached inside his jacket and produced a pistol. 'Tell those two kids to come out here,' he said, menacingly pointing the gun at Tommy's face.

Goodbye

If Tommy was surprised or scared, he did not show it. 'You can come out, lads,' he called over his shoulder to the boys. 'Don't worry, you're safe. These idiots can't harm you.'

'One minute,' Tapestry said in his head.

Puzzled, he looked across the road, and saw her jump down from the wall and start to cross the road.

'One minute to what?' he asked out loud in astonishment.

'Until the bomb goes off,' she replied, as though it was obvious. He could have sworn that she was smiling.

'But I thought ...'

'It's that cat,' exclaimed Toad when Tapestry reached Tommy and began to rub against his leg.

Still panting from his exertions, Toad aimed a kick at her, but was amazed when, faster than he could react, Tommy stooped and grabbed his flying leg, lifting it as high as his shoulders. It happened so quickly that the rat-man fell backwards, his head making a dull thud on the pavement. Tommy immediately released the leg and shot a challenging look at Lefty. He saw from the corner of his eye that the two boys were halfway along his garden path.

'That one on the ground is called Toad,' Tapestry informed him. 'The other one is Lefty.'

As his colleague lay groaning with pain on the ground, Lefty waved the gun, threateningly. 'Not another move, old man, or I will blow your head off,' he said.

Tommy grinned. This was what he was used to.

‘Mister Lefty,’ he said, ‘my years serving in the Royal Marines taught me several things. One of them was how to defend myself in unarmed combat.’

‘Ah, but it’s not so easy when your opponent has a gun, is it?’ the rat-man leered, pushing the weapon towards Tommy’s face.

‘Thirty seconds,’ Tommy heard Tapestry say in his head.

‘Another thing I learned,’ Tommy continued, still grinning, ‘was how to tell whether a gun is loaded or not. It is especially easy with an ancient cowboy pistol like that one.’

Lefty scowled, unsure for a moment what to do next. He pulled the trigger several times, hearing only ‘click-click-click’, then glared at Toad, who was groggily getting to his knees. ‘I can’t trust you to do the simplest thing, can I?’ he whined, throwing the gun at his hapless colleague.

‘Ten,’ said Tapestry, ‘nine ...’

‘Ah well, never mind,’ said Tommy. ‘It all matters nothing now, anyway.’

‘Seven ...’

‘What do you mean?’ said Lefty, puzzled.

‘Five, four ...’

Tommy beamed. ‘Goodbye, Mister Lefty, Goodbye Mister Toad. Don’t bother to keep in touch.’

‘Meeow,’ said Tapestry.

There was a soft sound from across the road, like the plop of a stone tossed into a pond, and all eyes turned to the rat house. It shimmered for a moment, like heat haze over a highway, then, swirling like water disappearing down a drain, seemed to be sucked into a tiny point of light, which then blinked out. At the same moment, with a look of horror on their faces, the two rat-men also vanished.

‘Wow, I didn’t expect the whole house to disappear,’ said Tapestry’s voice in Tommy’s head.

‘I don’t understand,’ he said out loud. ‘I thought you had to abandon the bomb.’

‘I had one more idea,’ she replied. ‘I tapped in the standard factory default setting for all devices ... 88888888 ... it seemed worth a try, and it worked.’

Tommy laughed. ‘You mean, they never changed it?’

‘Nope.’

Chuckling, he stooped down to pick her up. ‘I think we have earned a small celebration. There’s a tin of salmon with your name on it in my cupboard, if you fancy it, and cake for the rest of us.’

In reply, she purred and rubbed his face with hers.

Grinning, Tommy cradled her in his left arm, and turned to high-five the two boys. They all blew kisses to Cabbage, who was hovering beside them, then they headed indoors for tea, cake and tinned salmon.

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