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WARP

THE FOREVER MAN

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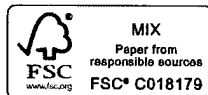
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NEED TO KNOW

Towards the end of the twentieth century, quantum physicist Professor Charles Smart figured out how to construct tunnels from exotic matter with negative energy density. Simply put, Smart managed to access wormholes into the past at various quantum *soft points*. And, like almost every invention in the history of humankind, this one was quickly exploited by powerful people for their own greedy and violent ends. In this case the FBI established the Witness Anonymous Relocation Programme to stash federal witnesses in the past. This was an idea so monumentally complicated and expensive that it was doomed to catastrophic failure. And fail WARP did when the military tried to take over the programme, and Charles Smart disappeared into the past, taking his secrets with him.

Consequences of the collapse of the WARP initiative included but were not limited to:

- The loss of billions of dollars' worth of equipment at WARP sites through the centuries.
- The stranding of several witnesses and their handlers in various historic eras.

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- The setting loose of Albert Garrick, a psychotic Victorian assassin, in modern London, where he cut a bloody swathe through the city.
- The unleashing of Colonel Clayton Box in nineteenth-century London, where he very nearly succeeded in using his futuristic weapons to overthrow Parliament, and he would have done it too if not for two darned kids.

Namely:

- Chevron Savano: a Shawnee FBI juvenile consultant who travelled to the past to fix the future, which was even more complicated than it sounds.
- Riley: a Victorian orphan who managed to strand his genuinely evil master, the assassin Albert Garrick, in the time tunnel before being instrumental in foiling Colonel Box's plan, which was quite the pair of accomplishments for a fourteen-year-old boy with nothing at his disposal but quick wits and an expertise in stage magic.

No need for newcomers to the story arc to worry about the nitty-gritty.

All you need to know is that our two uniquely talented and resourceful teenagers have just discovered that Riley's long-lost half-brother has been imprisoned in Newgate Prison and have rushed over there to liberate him.

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I think you can probably guess that things are going to go disastrously awry and much deadly danger will ensue.

Don't fret – there are laughs too and japes.

But I should not mislead: it's mostly deadly danger.

So, if you are of a sensitive disposition, abandon ye this volume now and find for yourself a book about ponies or the like.

You have been warned.

Also 'ye' is just an old word for 'you', so 'abandon you this volume now' is what I mean to say.

I was going for a mood.

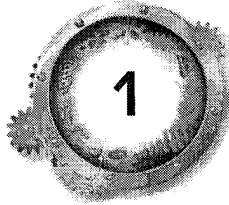
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DOWNLOAD SPEED

Professor Charles Smart.

Smart by name, smart by nature?

The man who opened the Einstein–Rosen bridge (that’s a wormhole to you and me), and understood as much about it as a chimp does about the molecular composition of the banana it has just peeled; Charles Smart poked a *hole* in the banana peel and then tossed people in there, hoping they would come out intact at the other end. In fairness to the professor, most did, but some were changed utterly. There were a few positive changes – such as the time when FBI Special Agent Cody Cue-Ball Potter got his hair back, or when stumpy little Jerry Townsend went in five foot one and came out six foot three – but most of the mutations could be judged as negative. Men got spliced with animals: there were dog-men, monkey-men and, on one particularly memorable occasion, a tyrannosaur-guy. Time travellers picked up tumours and lesions and third-degree burns in all sorts of sensitive areas. Doctor Marla DeTrois, who funnily enough was from Detroit, went into the time tunnel a statuesque thirty-something Lutheran lady and came out a bent-over

octogenarian Jewish guy. This shook people up even more than the dinosaur incident. And, with every fresh wacky episode, the folks involved realized how little they understood the giant animal they were poking with a sharp stick.

Professor Smart himself said it best: *You want to know how much we know about time travel? Let me put it this way: if we imagine the quantum network to be a giant interlocking system – something like the London Underground, for example – then we are just a swarm of ants who happened to fall through a grating on to one of the tracks.*

Not exactly a vote of confidence. And this is from the big cheese himself. The man who was running the show.

The point being that there were things about the wormholes that Smart could not possibly have known when he hacked into one. There were consequences that the professor could never have foreseen, but as a proud Scotsman he should at least have remembered the lesson taught to him on his pappy's knee: *Nothing is free in this world, Charley boy. Nothing is even cheap. Everything will cost you dearly.*

Pappy Smart was right. Everything must be paid for eventually, and Mother Nature is the cruellest creditor of them all. As a direct result of his meddling, Smart paid with his life. Actually, because of a time paradox, Charles Smart paid with his life *twice*. But Mother Nature was still not satisfied – there were other meddlers in the wormhole from whom blood payment had to be extracted, as Chevron Savano and Riley were about to find out.

Cuecreepyforeshadowingmusic: *Bom-bom-bommmmmmmmm.*

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Newgate Prison. The City. London. 1899

Newgate Prison: the most notorious block of lumpen misery ever to put down foundations in old London town. Built on the orders of Harry Plantagenet way, way back at the last gasp of the twelfth century, and refashioned on the say-so of Lord Mayor Dick Whittington himself, which is rarely mentioned in the storybooks.

Constructed in accordance with the principles of the French *Architecture Terrible* school, with deliberate, heavy repulsiveness, the building itself served as a warning to those who looked upon it of the fate of those who would choose a life of crime. The prison contained not a single elegant line nor a decent patch of natural light.

Outside this forbidding structure, flinching at the sounds of diverse wailings from within, stood the boy magician Riley, not yet fifteen, and his companion, Chevron Savano, warrior-maiden from the future and two years his senior, both thinking thoughts along the lines of:

This place is hell on Earth.

And:

We must free Tom from here.

‘Gold will do the job, Chevie,’ Riley said, with a slight tremor in his voice that only a close friend would notice. ‘Shillings for killings and pound-letters for debtors. Cash is king in the Gate.’

‘Right,’ said Chevie in the American fashion, and squeezed his fingers.

For in this, young Riley was indeed correct.

Newgate was every bit as much a financial establishment as Threadneedle's bank. Food, clothing, family quarters. Everything was on offer for cash in the prison, up to the striking of a man's manacles from his ankles and a dram of laudanum to quiet the condemned's nerves on his short walk to the triple gibbet.

And the man to be hanged need not be a murderer. There were hundreds of crimes that would get a man or woman invited to dance the Newgate Jig. One of these crimes was that of defaultery.

London was a city of commerce, and, to many of the local business folk, renegeing on one's debts was a crime most heinous. A man who would cheat his neighbours deserved no less than a spot of capital punishment while his fellow prisoners cheered and jeered. And, according to all available information, Ginger Tom Riley was in debt up to the apple of his soon-to-be-stretched neck.

Unless.

Unless the wronged man could be paid off.

In that case it would be all kisses and cuddles and off you go, Tommy boy, into a bright new tomorrow.

But not so quick, youngster. Not so sprightly.

Negotiating this class of deal was trickier than tying a knot in a jellied eel. One party had the other in sight of the rope that would hang him, and it would take a wheedler of real talent to wring any leverage out of that situation, especially when Tom Riley had defrauded a man of stature – namely, Sir James Maccabee, the finest attorney in London, with more souls on his account than the Great Fire.

Riley could attempt the wheedle himself, but he would be eaten alive by Maccabee, and so he had engaged the services of the famous prison negotiator Tartan Nancy Grimes, who could have outmanoeuvred Bonaparte himself had the wee Frenchman been unlucky enough to have found himself across the barter table.

So Tartan Nancy had come, tested the sovereign advance with a grind of her molars, and then promptly disappeared into the bowels of the prison to see what was what and who was who, and, most importantly, how much was enough.

And now Chevie and Riley waited for the wheedler to return. They waited, shuffling and uncomfortable in the teeming shanty town that sprang up in the shadow of Newgate and was dismantled every month or so by the militia, only to grow again like a winter weed between the flagstones. They waited among the destitute families and the visitors and the hawkers and veterans. They averted their eyes from the human tragedy clamouring on all sides, for Riley had troubles of his own and Chevie had not yet convinced herself that any of this was real.

I am in a coma, she told herself repeatedly. I am in a coma and this is what I get for reading Charles Dickens late at night.

It was a reasonable theory, much more credible in fact than the timeline presented to her by this reality: FBI, time machines, magician assassins, megalomaniacal army colonels and so on.

Coma or not, Chevie had agreed to pull on a dress from the Orient Theatre's costume wardrobe, wearing it over her FBI jumpsuit to spare Riley's blushes. She topped off the

outfit with a straw bonnet that hid her dark hair and skin so as not to attract more attention.

I must look like Darth Vader's daughter wearing this monstrosity, she had thought at the time.

Being the only Shawnee Native American in the entirety of England was stare-worthy enough, without being dressed in a shockingly immoral fashion for the period.

Or as Riley had put it: 'We got us plenty of eyes on stalks without you parading yerself like a slattern.'

Chevie was pretty certain that being a slattern was not a good thing and so tied the bonnet tight under her chin, scowling all the time and wondering why it was OK for Riley to wear his magician's cape in the street, even though surely that would also attract attention. But now, as she looked around, Chevie had to concede that there were plenty of becaped guys wandering the area. It was like some kind of old-timey comic con out here.

Some time later the wheedler's stocky frame barged through a side gate, and, heedless of the ragamuffins clustered around her voluminous skirts begging for a twist of baccy or a pull of gin, she gestured for Chevie and Riley to join her and they hurried across the street to where Nancy was applying an ember from a nearby brazier to the clay bowl of her pipe. Tough customer that she was, Tartan Nancy held the ember in her bare hand, little finger cocked as though she were pouring cream from a sterling jug.

Tartan Nancy Grimes was not Scottish and neither did she wear the tartan of any clan. While waiting for Nancy to return with tidings, Riley had informed Chevie that the nickname

'Tartan' was a touch of Cockney rhyming slang applied to the wheedler on account of her gassy insides.

Oh, Chevie had said, and then: *Ohhhhh*, when the penny had dropped.

And, though no elaboration had been requested, Riley had proceeded to particularize: *Nancy has been wearing them old skirts so long that they've grown rigid. They act like a bell, they do. Amplifying the sound, as it were, Chevie. Only don't ever mention it as Nance don't like it brought up.*

Being indiscreet like this was not usually a part of Riley's nature, but he was agitated and the words tumbled out. He needn't have worried; Chevie was hardly likely to raise the subject in the middle of a sensitive negotiation, as she had two semesters of hostage negotiation at the FBI compound in Quantico under her belt.

Tartan Nancy Grimes tossed the smouldering ember into the gutter and puffed up a storm cloud on her pipe. She was a stout woman with grizzled ringlets of fading red hair framing her round face as strands of weed might frame a pitted river rock. On her head sat a pristine white bonnet, which seemed out of place with her own self and the rest of the environs, but keeping a fresh bonnet was central to Nancy's credo – if a lady may not have a fresh bonnet, then what in the name of God may she have?

'Have you seen Tom?' asked Riley, and then: 'How did he seem? Hale and hearty?'

Nancy puffed a while longer and said, 'I seen him, young fella. He's a mite battered, but nothing as will put him under,

lessen he gets himself infected, which could happen easily enough.'

Tom being still above ground was about the best news they could have hoped for, as it was not uncommon for new fish to croak on the first day – to mix cold-blooded metaphors.

Chevie squeezed Riley's shoulder. 'There, you see? We're gonna be OK. Family reunions by dinnertime, right? Or is that teatime?'

Not one of the party smiled, not even the joker.

'And how is Maccabee's mood?' Riley asked the wheedler. 'Has the notion of payment cheered him?'

Nancy knocked out her pipe, then spat in the bowl. 'Ah, now here we arrives at the nub, my young fella, for it ain't Maccabee what has been wronged. It's another gent, a mysterious shadowy fella what lurks.' Tartan Nancy jammed her thumb into the pipe bowl and worked the spittle. 'And Old Nance hates a lurker. It's the devil of a job to read a lurker. Maccabee is simply his attorney. And for a man to have a man like Maccabee beaking for him inside the Gate itself –' here Nancy whistled between a gap in her side teeth – 'well, that man is a man among men.'

Chevie was confused by this string of men. 'So this guy Maccabee isn't the guy . . . man?'

'Nah,' said Nancy. 'He's a front is all. The gent behind him, the *Lurker*. *He's* your guy and I ain't even seen his face, just boots poking from the shadows. Black riding boots, so black they don't shine where they should. How can a body trust boots like that?'

Tartan Nancy spat into the bowl once more, filling it to

the brim. Chevie must have winced, for she said, 'Pardon my manners, princess, but I don't like to clean me bowl during negotiations.'

Chevie nodded. *Cleaning your bowl* during negotiations did not seem like a good idea.

Riley had a million questions. 'Does Tom remember me, Nance? Did he say what my name was, perhaps? What in the name of heaven did he do to land himself in these dire straits?'

Nancy pointed the stem of her pipe at him. 'And this is why I am doing the wheedling and not you, youngster. You be tripping over yourself, Riley lad. One at a time, calm and measured, like the world is your teahouse.'

Riley swallowed his impatience. 'Right you are, Nance. The crime, then. What is he accused of?'

'That's a queer one,' said Nancy. 'Defaulting in general is on the bill. But no specifics. And Maccabee ain't talking much. And, as for Lurky Boots, not a word outta his gob. I never worked a job like this. They got your brother in a nice private cell, all ready for bargaining, and then they turns up their noses at gold like it's sewer droppings. A right puzzler, this is.'

Chevie, who had at least theoretical experience in these situations, cut directly to the important question. 'There's always a demand. What is it?'

'The Injun maid has put her finger on it,' said Tartan Nancy. 'They has a demand right enough and a strange one too.'

'Anything,' blurted Riley, already forgetting Nancy's advice that he play his cards close. 'Anything they want.'

'They wants you, young fella,' said Nancy, incredulous at the idea that this stripling could be worth more than shining

sovereigns to anybody. 'You seem like a nice chap, Riley, but I offered twenty sovs. I *opened* with twenty.'

Chevie's soldier sense buzzed and something told her there was more going on here than a simple pay-off.

'I don't like it. How does this Lurker guy even know that you exist, Riley?'

Riley was not interested. 'What do they want of me, Nance?'

'Your person. In the cell. They will talk only to you.'

'No,' said Chevie. 'Absolutely not. If Riley goes in there, he isn't coming out.'

'Once again the Injun is spot on,' said Nancy, looking Chevie up and down. 'You ever think of apprenticing in the wheedle trade, miss? Your exotic appearance could be a real boon, throw the customers off balance. Perhaps you would consider a scatter of facial tattoos?'

'Thanks for the offer, Nancy,' said Chevie. 'However, let's concentrate on today. Purely in terms of bargaining power, it would be disastrous to let Riley into that prison.'

'That is true,' admitted Tartan Nancy. 'But they is not giving a smidge on that front. It's the boy Riley in the box, or go to blazes and the ginger fella swings.'

Riley squared his shoulders and frowned his best determined face. 'I have to do it, Chevron. There ain't no other way.'

Chevie thought that her friend's determined face was pretty effective, and one look at it made it clear that his mind was not for changing.

'OK, pal. But, if you're going in there, I'm going with you.'

Nancy wagged the pipe stem. 'Just the boy, Maccabee said. And him alone.'

Chevie swatted the objection aside with her palm. 'Yeah, well, Maccabee is going to have to learn to live with disappointment. This is a negotiation, isn't it, Nancy? Give and take? Well, I'm going in there, so you can take that, put it in your pipe and smoke it.'

Nancy snorted appreciatively. 'Strong tone. Good posture, not a sign of a bluff. If you makes it out of the Gate alive, girl, come see me. You're a born wheedler.'

A born wheedler.

Chevie did not know whether to be flattered or insulted. She would, she decided, not worry about it, as she was in a coma after all.

A born wheedler?

Which dark corner of her subconscious had that one come from?

Please, doctor, she broadcast as she followed Tartan Nancy towards the prison. *Now would be a good time to resuscitate me.*

Tartan Nancy Grimes led them quickly through the throng to the prison gate. Such was her grease in the Gate that the guards parted before her without so much as a challenge to the identity of her company and with only the most cursory of searches, for it was in everyone's interest, from cook to warden, that Nancy's commerce proceed unhindered.

They passed through a wrought-iron gate and then a reinforced door, both of which clanged ominously behind them, and Chevie could not help but worry that this was a one-way trip for Riley and herself, and the *triple gibbet* she had heard about would be full to capacity by morning.

Calm yourself, she thought. *You have done nothing wrong.*

It was, she realized, becoming difficult to hang on to the coma theory with the black stone of Newgate Prison closing in on all sides.

Riley must have noticed the anxious sheen on her brow as he sidled closer and whispered, 'Fret not, Chev. These locks are cake to me. I got jemmies in me hair.'

Cake locks and jemmies?

Maybe it was a coma after all.

Onwards they strode, hurrying to keep pace with Tartan Nancy's pneumatic stride. She might have been a steam engine with the pipe as her funnel.

Nancy spoke as she walked, and the wheedler's words drifted over her shoulder encased in puffs of smoke.

'I'll do the talking, boy.'

'Yes,' said Riley obediently. 'Not a peep out of me.'

'And no bawling neither,' added Nancy. 'As far as Lurky Boots is concerned, you don't give much of a fig for this Tom fella. You is only here outta family duty, see?'

'I see,' said Riley. 'Not a fig does I give.'

'That way we keeps the price low.'

In truth, it was for keeping the price low that Riley did not give a fig. He would gladly fork over the last gold sovereign from Albert Garrick's ill-gotten stash to see Tom free, but he knew better than to express this opinion to a wheedler like Tartan Nancy, as the shock could set her bell ringing, so to speak, and nobody wanted that in an enclosed space.

The corridor opened on to the main yard, where prisoners shambled about in manacles if they had not the price to have them struck off. Many of the interned lolled around the gate,

scratching at manacle blisters, their time served but without the exit fee demanded by the system. Each year many men and women died inside Newgate because they couldn't scrape together the shilling to get out. The sounds and smells were cacophonous, overpowering and uniformly in the negative. Even the famously buoyant Cockney spirit could not stay afloat in such an environment.

I don't belong here, thought Chevie, feeling the horror and historic grimness of the place push her close to panic. *This is not my time*.

In truth, nobody on Earth belonged in Newgate, and Newgate did not belong anywhere on Earth.

Mercifully, Nancy did not lead them through the yard but turned with marching-band precision into a doorway, marked out from the wall only by a marginally darker shade of gloom, and disappeared into the shadows beyond. Riley picked up his pace and Chevie had little option but to follow, even though her Quantico training buzzed in her skull like a trapped bee at the notion of waltzing into the black unknown, especially since her night vision was one of the qualities she seemed to have lost in the wormhole.

Chevie had noticed over the past few days that this latest jaunt through the time tunnel had affected her in many ways. Nothing big yet, no dinosaur parts, but she was a changed person. Her hearing was not as sharp as it had been and the chevron tattoo on her shoulder had become a straight-edged birthmark. She found running a little awkward and would swear that one leg was half an inch longer than it used to be. And the latest thing on her growing list of mutations was that

a couple of times a day, and only for a second or two, she would swear that she had X-ray vision.

Dear Professor Charles Xavier, she thought. I am writing to you because . . .

Curiouser and curiouser.

And then there were the headaches.

But later for these thoughts.

Now for surviving.

The dark swallowed them and Chevie made herself focus because, whether or not the coma theory was sound, everyone knew that if you died in your dreams you died in your bed too.

Dream deaths are just a wake-up call for people who aren't ever waking up.

Which made zero sense.

Chevie disguised a bitter laugh as a cough. *Sense?* How long had it been since anything made sense?

Chevie realized that she and Riley were holding hands, and not in a young-love kind of way, which would have been weird, but in a white-knuckled, I-want-to-make-sure-my-friend-is-beside-me kind of way.

The poor kid doesn't even know he's dragging me along, she realized. That's how much he wants to see his half-brother.

Chevie understood. What would she not do for one more day with her dad? One more shared bottle of orange cream soda.

Two straws, one bottle.

That had been their thing. Then a single spark in a leaky Harley gas tank and it was all over.

One in a million, the highway-patrol cop who'd come to

their little Malibu home had told her. *I ain't never seen nuthin' like it, miss.*

One in a million, thought Chevie now. *Those kind of odds seem to beat me all the time.*

But back to the prison corridor: Tartan Nancy, deadly danger and so on and so forth.

Nancy stormed ahead with the confident stride of the powerful or the bluffer, and Chevie wanted to call after her: *Slow down. Don't be so eager.*

For they had no way of knowing what awaited them in that room. Whoever this *Lurker* guy was, he wanted something from Riley, something worth turning down cold hard cash for.

Chevie ran through possibilities while they walked.

An old enemy?

Maybe. One of Box's men?

No. Too soon to have set this up. Those guys are barely twenty-four hours out of the picture.

One of Garrick's victims?

No. Garrick's victims were precisely that. Victims. They weren't hunting down anyone ever. Garrick was the man who killed Jack the Ripper, for God's sake. Out of jealousy!

Another witness from the WARP programme, then?

Possible. It seemed unlikely that someone from the future would care about some kid magician in the past, but 'unlikely' was a term in which she was fast losing faith.

Chevie found her free hand patting the Timekey that hung round her neck, underneath her clothes. There hadn't been a peep out of it for days, doubtless broken by the various treks

across London and a dunking in the city's delightful sewers, but if there was some *future guy* in that cell it could be that this was his endgame: get hold of the key and destroy it.

Funny how nobody from the future wants to go back there. Except me.

But did she really?

I don't even know which future I would be going back to.

Social media and reality shows? Or worldwide fascist empire? Or some blend of the two perhaps.

Whatever the future held, Chevie was determined to hold on to the key just in case she needed a way out.

If there's a portal to go in. If there's a pod at the other end.

It would take a dire situation to force her to jump into the wormhole with no sure way out, but she had to admit that dire situations were ten a penny in this century. It seemed to her that all situations were dire and all smells uniformly terrible. Even the sweet smells were infected by what they tried to mask.

Speaking of terrible smells, they had arrived at yet another door, which was even blacker than the first and seemed to be composed of gathered shadows. The door was flanked by one of the foulest-smelling beings that Chevie had ever been unfortunate enough to sniff. With her eyes closed she would never have guessed he was human by his odour or the snuffling sound of his breathing. The guard's uniform seemed to have been cannibalized from those of dead soldiers from various campaigns and was topped off with a ridiculous Napoleonic hat, which might have been comical in another setting.

'Broadband,' said Nancy, saluting him with a dip of her pipe.

Chevie was surprised. Had Nancy just referred to the second guard as 'Broadband'?

Broadband acknowledged the pipe dip. 'Back so soon, Nance. How's the wheedle?'

Nancy whistled through the gap in her teeth. 'Slow connection today, Broadband.'

'Too many users,' said Broadband. 'They is congestin' and stuff.'

Chevie blinked. Were they messing with her brain, or was her brain messing with her?

'Broadband's your name?' she asked, suspicious of a wind-up. 'How come?'

Nancy answered, as if the guard was too slow to remember the reason behind his own nickname.

'On account of this prison vest he used to wear during the frosts. From up north somewhere. Had a broad band instead of the Newgate broad arrow. So, Broadband, ain't it?'

Chevie puffed a sigh of relief. That was a perfectly acceptable explanation. Nobody was going crazy.

'Broadband,' she said with a slightly hysterical laugh. 'What's your download speed?'

The guard considered this seriously. 'I can empty a cart in an hour or so, depending on me boots and gloves and what-not. A barge takes a day on me lonesome. Less with a chum.' He added to this information with a nugget of wisdom. 'I finds that a job is done quicker with more lads doing it.'

Nancy cackled and tapped Broadband's forehead. 'Smart. That's what you is, dearie. Which is for why they puts you guarding the big-knob cells.'

Usually Riley and Chevie would have shared a chortle at this, but not today. In fact, Riley said not a word.

He hasn't spoken, Chevie realized. *Not since the outer corridor.*

She glanced down at her friend. His pale face seemed to glow in the gloom, and the rough and tumble of the past few days had his hair sticking up in a hundred different ways.

Very Manga, thought Chevie. *He's ahead of his time.*

But, in spite of all the life experience crammed into his fourteen years, Riley seemed very much a small boy, squeezing her fingers and staring at the cell door.

What must be going through his head now that he is finally about to be reunited with his only living relative?

In truth, the inside of Riley's head was all a jumble, with images and emotions falling over each other trying for the upper hand. It was more than his young head could process. At least Chevie knew about the future. At least she had some understanding of the past. Riley had been a wide-eyed ignoramus in the twenty-first century and now felt a stranger in his own time.

Ginger Tom will be my anchor, was the thought that finally broke through the maelstrom in his head. It was a good strong thought and he began to murmur it under his breath.

Tartan Nancy raised her eyebrow at this but made no remark, for she was used to unusual behaviour during the wheedle. One musty sea dog had taken to answering questions in the voice of a small girl, which had been most disconcerting. It was a good ploy, though; the screws couldn't wait to see the back of him.

'Shall we?' she said.

Riley squeezed Chevie's hand again and his fingers felt like a fistful of sardines so slick were they, but she held fast nevertheless – they had been through worse liquids together than honest sweat.

'Let's go,' she said. 'I wanna see what's so special about this Tom guy.'

Broadband pulled out a key on a cord from under his shirt and Chevie was about to do the same with hers and shout *Jinx!* but then wisely decided against it, as in her experience the sudden drawing of cylindrical objects around armed men often led to the *drawer* getting shot.

Broadband slotted the key into a hole large enough for a mouse to creep through and twisted it two clunks anticlockwise.

'Usual, is it?' he said to Nancy.

Nancy did not speak money out loud, as was her custom with guards, who were technically not supposed to extort over and above what was on the warden's price list. Instead she dipped her pipe twice.

Broadband shook his head. 'Nah. Two ain't enough for this one, Nance. That geezer in the shadows is giving me the wil-lies. You wanna wheedle again today, it'll cost you four sovs.'

With the flat of his hand, the guard barred the entrance to Ginger Tom Riley's cell door until, with four dips of her pipe, Tartan Nancy agreed to the price of admission.

