

**THE AMBIVALENCE  
CHRONICLES:  
A SCI-FI COMEDY IN 8 BITS  
BIT#1: THE CHIP WHISPERER**

by Steve Trower

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7. <https://www.books2read.com/u/mqPJZ3>

# 1

It all started, as so many good stories do, on eBay.

Phil Grundy had been shivering with anticipation for so long that, when he saw someone manhandling a large, but mostly unassuming, parcel out of an unmarked van, he made an Olympic qualifying sprint to the front door, barely noticing that he almost shoved his sulky teenage daughter head first into the downstairs toilet on the way.

Phil met the delivery man at the front door, thanked him effervescently, and then hurried around to his garage with his latest purchase.

The purchase in question had been long sought after, and after a fierce bidding war with the chipwhisperer, it was his for the somewhat higher than hoped for sum of £102.43 (plus p&p).

The sender had not been shy about using parcel tape, and had helpfully labelled the package 'Handle with Care', and 'from 20th Century Toys', and 'The Only Way Is Up'.

The sulky daughter mooched into the garage behind him, feigning indifference. 'You got?'

'This, Charlie.'

'Charlotte.'

'Charlotte,' Phil corrected himself, 'is the stuff of legend.'

Charlie (he would always call her that in his head) blew bubble-gum through her black-painted lips.

'If this is what I think it is,' Phil went on, hopping around like an excited puppy, 'it's practically the Holy Grail among collectors.'

'An old computer then?'

Phil carefully selected a knife from the workbench.

‘Not just any old computer,’ he explained. ‘A Sinclair ZX81 with the legendary Issue Zero motherboard. The developers model. Among some of the more secretive retrocomputing forums they say these were only ever used by Sir Clive himself.’

‘Later, Dad.’

‘Oh, er... bye, Charlie,’ Phil said, before setting to work on the most challenging round of pass the parcel he was ever likely to be part of.

Thirty minutes, two Stanley blades, and an acre of bubble wrap later, the parcel was open. Stealing himself for the big reveal, Phil took a deep breath and slowly opened the outer box. After shovelling a few handfuls of polystyrene chips onto the floor, Phil lifted his latest acquisition delicately out of the packaging debris.

Over the years since his wife had passed, Phil had built up an enviable collection of ZX Spectrums and associated peripherals, and this was the next step.

Carefully, Phil opened the box, wincing at the squeak of polystyrene, and lifted the lid with more reverence than any polystyrene box had ever been shown in this universe.

‘That is beautiful,’ he whispered to himself, running his fingers across the membrane keyboard in awe.

Of course, the seller had offered no guarantee it would ever be more than a novelty doorstop, but Phil, having been a Cub Scout back in the 80s, was prepared: he had been picking up old computer parts at car boot sales for long enough that he could solder his way out of most hardware problems.

He switched on an ageing black and white TV, which had been lying in wait for precisely this moment, and while it warmed up, hooked up the little computer. Then he waited.

The TV picture eventually came on, only to show white noise.

‘Not surprising,’ Phil said, a little disheartened.

He was sure he had the TV tuned correctly, but having checked the ’81 was powered up, he twiddled the knob a little anyway, until his twiddling was disturbed by an unnecessarily loud exhaust rasp coming from somewhere outside.

With one eye on the screen full of white noise in front of him, Phil kept his other eye - and both ears - on the approaching car, attempting to judge the best moment at which to nonchalantly wander out of the garage.

When that moment arrived, Phil gathered the excess packaging from around him and strolled out of the garage, contriving to arrive at the recycling bin at the exact moment Sam Cooper got out of the small - but surprisingly loud - purple car that lived next door with her.

‘Hi, Sam,’ he called, waving cheerily and promptly dropping an armful of cardboard.

‘Presents?’ she asked, indicating the large box Phil was trying to fold with his feet as if that had been his intention all along.

‘Oh, just something I picked up off eBay. Not sure it even works,’ he added with a shrug.

‘Anything I can help you with?’

Phil shoved the excess packaging into the recycling bin, in the vain hope of closing the lid over it. ‘I didn’t think old computers were really your area?’

‘Maybe not,’ she agreed, ‘but two heads are better than one, so I’m told.’

‘Well, feel free to take a look.’

Despite the fact Phil’s suburban semi was now shared only with Charlie - who was out more than she was in, with her current crop of goth friends and their strange nocturnal habits - he had kept his computer hobby in the garage rather than move it into the house.

Sam had never been invited inside before, but she knew this was Phil’s man-cave and exercised appropriate respect as she stepped through the narrow section of the side-hinged door.

Inside, it was a shrine to eighties technology; on the walls, several display cabinets were filled with rows of old computer game cassettes, and another filled with similarly old computers.

A workbench ran along the walls at the far end of the garage, complete with counter flap where a door led out into the back garden; in the corner, the ZX81 was trying to exert its will over a stubborn black and white Sanyo.

‘Is that it?’ Sam said, approaching the tiny plastic case curiously.

‘Sure.’ Phil followed her inside, leaving the door open behind him.

Sam smiled and glanced back at the classic Mini on her drive; a stripe along the bottom of the door identified it as ‘T. REX’, a nickname only partly related to its impressive roar. ‘Great things come in small packages, eh?’

Phil made a concerted effort to look at something else as Sam bent over the little computer, checking and re-checking all the connections.

‘So what do you think?’ he said after a few moments of pretending to be otherwise engaged.

Sam stopped twiddling and stepped back to survey the minimalist desktop setup and the box from whence it had come.

‘I don’t suppose...’

‘What?’ Phil said into her silence.

Sam paused for a moment and then spoke the forbidden phrase:

‘Did you read the instructions?’

‘It’s a ZX81,’ Phil said. ‘How hard can it be?’

But Sam was already digging in the box, pulling out the rather hefty BASIC programming guide that was packed with the ZX81.

‘Pretty hard, judging by this,’ she suggested.

‘Be careful with that!’ Phil said. ‘It’s practically mint and boxed!’

‘Alright, calm down!’ Sam said, trying not to laugh. ‘You’re right though,’ she added. ‘It doesn’t look like anyone has opened this book, ever.’

‘So why start now?’ Phil gently tried to remove the book from her grasp. ‘Please, Sam. You’re still oily.’

Sam looked at her hands - mechanic’s hands, holding a pristine book that was probably older than she was. ‘Fair point.’ As she handed the book over to Phil, a few loose pages fell onto the desk. ‘Is that the quick start guide?’

‘What?’ Phil held the book protectively, discreetly inspecting the manual for oily finger marks and such. ‘They hadn’t invented those when this was made.’

‘Now that’s what I call old school,’ Sam said, reaching for the papers on the desk. ‘I guess it was just called school then though, huh?’

‘Don’t touch anything!’

‘Sorry, Mr OCD.’

Phil only scowled slightly at her as he reached across to pick up what looked like a sheaf of folded paper, of the sort you might have found in a dot matrix printer back in the days when you might have found a dot matrix printer.

‘What is it?’ Sam asked, screwing her face up as she peered over Phil’s shoulder, as if, somehow, that might make sense of what was written in the paper.

Phil flicked through several of the pages; it was indeed computer paper, pages of it covered in random alphanumeric characters in faded uniform rows. ‘Looks like some sort of hex,’ he said eventually.

‘Hex? Who would want to curse a ZX81?’

Before Phil could come up with a suitably clever answer, there was a noise outside. Phil was very protective of his precious retrocomputing stash, and hurried over to see if there were any undesirable elements snooping around, possibly with a view to reducing the size of his collection.

There was nobody in the immediate area except what looked like an old ice-cream van chugging away down the street. Phil watched it until it was out of sight, committing it to memory as best he could, then wishing Sam had witnessed it, cars (and presumably therefore vans) being her thing in the way that redundant computer tech was his. Except, of course, she managed to make a decent living out of her thing, whereas Phil did precisely the opposite.

He turned with a sigh and headed back into the garage to take another look at the ZX81.

‘What was that?’

‘Nothing,’ Phil replied, utterly unconvinced.

Sam nodded. ‘I better go clean up. Good luck!’

‘Thanks,’ Phil said absently, as he flipped the user’s guide open to the setup instructions and carefully laid it down on his workbench.

After several long minutes of plugging and unplugging, twisting, retuning, swearing, switching, and swapping, Phil eventually resigned himself to having bought a dud, and thumped the desk in frustration.

Now, anyone who has ever owned a ZX81 will know where this paragraph is heading, so please feel free to skip ahead to the next one, in which the ZX81 is working. Because, of course, that is precisely what happened; one thump from Phil’s usually unfonz like fist, and the ’81 buzzed to life - such as it was.

Phil grinned inanely, and settled down in the comfy leather office chair that was his retro gaming spot, basking in the glow of a tiny figure K as he flicked idly through the mysterious sheets of computer paper.

He was still looking for some clue to its purpose when Sam, having availed herself of some Swarfega, whooped and clapped her way back into the garage; at least, until she got close enough to see how spectacular a ZX81 boot screen wasn’t.

‘Is that it?’ she said, for the second time since meeting her first ZX81.

‘Yes!’ Phil whispered, as if speaking any louder might cause the computer to crash (which, in fact, was often the case with these things).

‘Er, well then,’ Sam said, ‘I guess my work here is done. I’ll leave you two alone.’

‘You don’t fancy sticking around for a game? I’ve got 3D Monster Maze.’

‘That’s a very tempting offer, but I literally just looked in on my way to the gym. Maybe another time, huh?’

‘Sure,’ Phil said, looking rather awkwardly around his desk. ‘Anytime. Least I could do.’

Sam smiled. ‘Have fun,’ she said, and trotted off.

Later that day, having scared the ever-living crap out of himself playing 3D Monster Maze (he felt sure the PEGI people would have had a thing or two to say about this being freely available), Phil booted up his token nod towards modernity - a moderately specced laptop PC, which he used alternately for buying more interesting computers on internet auction sites and running emulators of every obscure 80s platform ever emulated.

He checked into eBay first; Phil was a stickler for leaving feedback as soon as he felt he could, and the afternoon’s maze-based adventures had been successful enough for him to want to leave glowing praise for 20th Century Toys - and check their latest inventory while he was there.

While he was composing a suitably favourable reply, a message alert pinged, putting him right off his flow. As he had forgotten what he was going to write, he opened the message.

It was from thechipwhisperer, his erstwhile eBay rival:

*This may seem like a strange question, but I am wondering whether you have received and/or opened the ZX81 yet? I am a very serious buyer and willing to pay well above what you paid if you will pass it on to me, especially if unopened. What do you say?*

‘Well, that ship has already sailed, Mr Chip Whisperer,’ Phil said to himself.

But despite himself, Phil was intrigued; on a whim, he decided to take a look at thechipwhisperer’s profile to see what he could find out about this stranger who had suddenly become his eNemesis.

Oddly, given how desperate thechipwhisperer seemed to be to acquire the ZX81, it turned out that Phil had, in fact, bid on a few pieces of Sinclair kit being sold by thechipwhisperer over the last few months. Why would he be clearing out a collection one minute, and desperately trying to buy a piece the next? Either raising funds, or a dealer... A dealer who knew Phil’s address... Phil’s mind wandered back to the impression he had earlier that someone was snooping around outside, and to that ice-cream van which drove off afterwards...

*Sorry, Phil messaged back, the ZX81 is not for sale at any price.*

*I am sorry to hear that, came the reply. If there are any items you don’t require, perhaps anything within the package which is not needed to run the ZX81, would you let me know? I may be interested in taking them off your hands, for a good price. I will consider anything, however trivial it may seem.*

Definitely a dealer then, Phil decided. Unless... he glanced over at the pile of computer paper that was gathered nearby, like a bonfire in a dress rehearsal. Phil gathered the pages up, and went to look for a ZX81 hex loader.

## 2

‘Have you been here all night?’ Sam poked her head into the open garage on her way past the next morning.

Phil had, in fact, been up much of the previous night, typing apparently random hexadecimal sequences on one of the least responsive so-called keyboards the world has ever seen, obsessively saving the results every few lines lest RAM pack wobble steal his treasure away. He thought better of explaining this to Sam, however, and mumbled something non-committal in response.

‘Monster Maze that good is it?’ Sam asked.

‘Have you ever heard the word Entelechus?’

‘Can’t say that I have,’ she replied. ‘Can I have some context?’

‘It’s written on this hex code. Must be the title of the program or something, “The Entelechus Hex.” Doesn’t mean anything to me, though.’

‘Is that what you’ve been playing with all night?’

‘Not so much playing, but yes, I have been inputting the code.’

‘What does it do?’

‘So far, it doesn’t do anything.’ Phil took the opportunity to take a break and stretch his aching fingers. ‘For all I know, I’m torturing my carpal tunnel for nothing more than a “Hello world” program.’

‘Do you want me to take a shift?’

‘Thanks, but I’d rather only have myself to blame if it all goes pear-shaped,’ Phil said. ‘One digit wrong and the whole thing could be completely screwed up.’

‘More of a “Hello WRULD” program, you mean?’ Sam laughed. ‘Ok, I guess that wasn’t what you meant,’ she added when Phil failed to show amusement.

‘Sorry, it’s late.’

‘It’s nine in the morning.’

Phil shrugged. ‘Fact is, I don’t know what this code could do, so I don’t know what it could do wrong.’

‘Hang on a sec,’ Sam said, and disappeared next door.

Phil was saving the latest iteration of the code and had stepped away from the workbench when Sam returned, bringing with her a rather substantial looking dictionary.

‘What’s it called again?’

‘The Entelechus Hex. I don’t even know if that’s a word,’ he added, to explain his failure to think of the obvious. ‘Could be the author’s name or anything...’

Sam was about to drop the Concise Oxford onto the desk and open it up, but Phil spotted it and shouted ‘Noooooooooooo!’ like a remastered Sith Lord, leaping - well, edging carefully - forward to stop the hefty tome hitting the desk and possibly causing the most inconvenient RAM pack wobble in history.

Phil fluffed the catch, but knocked the book out of Sam’s hands to drop harmlessly to the floor, while he toppled sideways to avoid awkward physical contact with Sam, collapsing rather uncomfortably onto his office chair, which carried him safely across the garage under the combined forces of momentum and embarrassment.

‘What was that about?’ Sam asked once Phil and his chair had come to a stop a safe distance from the fragile operation under way on the workbench.

'The ZX81 was never the most stable of devices.' Phil tried to extricate himself from his chair, which promptly let out a crack of disagreement and deposited Phil on the floor.

'Looks like you have a matching chair now,' Sam said, trying to disguise a chortle.

'Put something like, say, a two thousand page hardback down on the same desk without proper precautions and you'll cause a major disturbance in the Chuntey.'

'A who in the what now?'

'Chuntey,' Phil corrected him. 'You've got a dictionary - look it up.'

'It's not exhaustive,' Sam said, retrieving said dictionary from where it cowered under the workbench.

'The Chuntey field exists around tape-based computer systems,' Phil explained. 'It can be disrupted by any number of external factors, causing a tape loading error - or in this case, a failed save.'

'Right.' Sam nodded in the manner of someone who has understood approximately a third of what was just said to them.

'Sorry about your book,' Phil added, noticing the way she was smoothing out the pages.

'Don't worry. It's not like it's a ZX81 programming guide or anything, after all.'

'True,' Phil said. His sense of irony was not very highly tuned.

Sam moved along the bench, edging away from the ZX81, until Phil gave her the nod; a safe distance from the ZX81, she placed the dictionary down carefully and opened it up at the 'en' page. 'How are we spelling Entelechus?'

Phil showed her the title page of the hex.

Pages riffled.

‘Entele...’ Sam’s fingers danced over the words. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I’ve got entelechy; that’s as close as I can find.’

‘What does that mean then?’ Phil asked absently,

‘In the philosophy of Aristotle, a realisation or actuality as opposed to a potentiality,’ she read. ‘In some philosophical systems, a vital agent or force directing growth and life.’

‘Hmm,’ Phil pondered.

‘Hmm?’ Sam replied.

‘Hmm,’ Phil nodded.

‘You have an idea?’

‘Well, maybe. I mean, maybe the hex adds a little more realism to games - reasonable graphics, sound, things that were largely absent from the standard ZX81,’ he suggested. ‘I guess that would also explain why it doesn’t appear to be doing anything so far.’

‘Have you ever heard of anything like that?’

‘There were hi-res graphics drivers available back in the day, but they were called... well, hi-res graphics drivers, not some cryptic name borrowed from a philosophy text book...’

‘So?’ Sam prompted as he fell silent again.

‘What would be a step beyond that?’ he wondered. ‘Artificial intelligence?’

‘Is that even possible?’

Phil shook his head. ‘It would take more than some fancy code and a 16K RAM pack to turn a Zeddy into Siri.’

### 3

Phil was woken by the vaguely familiar sound of a vehicle pulling up outside. It wasn't T. Rex; that would have woken him up ten streets away, and for precisely that reason was banned from being driven in urban areas between the hours of 10pm and 6am. No, this was an entirely different sound, and was accompanied by a sliding door; a delivery van then. A very early delivery van, Phil realised as he squinted at his alarm clock to see it was before 3am.

He groaned, rolled over, and tried to get back to sleep.

Then he woke, properly, with a start. There was a noise downstairs - something was being delivered before 3am, and even the best eBayers didn't do that without charging extra. Phil crept out of bed and pulled on some clothes, listening intently for any out of place sounds. Something was going on - something that should not be going on, and he was going to find out what. The idea of a burglar would normally have Phil cowering under his bed waiting for sleep to reclaim him before any possible intruder felt the need for violence; but on this occasion, he was acutely aware of the mysterious hex listing that was still tucked away in the retro computer corner of his garage.

Phil made his way downstairs as quietly as he could, but his urgency must have betrayed any sneakiness he may have had, and suddenly the noises became less discreet, more hurried.

When Phil opened the door that led from his kitchen into the garage, he was confronted by a man in dark clothes and grey hair, a few years older than Phil, busily making a mess of Phil's carefully sorted software collection. For a moment they froze,

their eyes met, each wondering who was going to make the first move, until the intruder suddenly threw caution to the wind and made a dash for freedom.

The intruder reached for the garage door, when Phil let out a primal scream and leapt on him in what he thought may have been reminiscent of a rugby tackle. The man kicked out wildly, putting a somewhat ostentatious cowboy boot through Phil's previously pristine copy of Yie-Ar Kung Fu.

While Phil was distracted the nearly-thief managed to work his way loose and was about to bolt, when the garage door opened, and the intruder stumbled backwards in shock as a ghostly pale face loomed out of the darkness in front of him.

Phil took advantage of the element of surprise and soon had the man pinned down in his battle-scarred office chair.

'I knew your nocturnal adventures would come in handy sooner or later,' Phil said, panting for breath.

'What's going on?' Charlotte asked.

'I've been robbed.' Phil brushed some cobwebs from the knees of his jeans. 'Nearly.'

'What do you want?' Charlotte wrapped a delicate black fingerless glove around the stranger's neck with deceptively powerful fingers.

'Let me go and I'll explain,' he squawked through squeezed vocal chords.

Phil nodded to Charlotte, who reluctantly allowed the man to breathe again.

'Come on then,' Phil said, closing the garage door once again. 'What do you think you're doing here?'

'The thing is, I was bidding against you.' He spoke with an American accent that Phil thought was possibly New York-ese.

'For the Zee Ex Eighty-one, you know. Thechipwhisperer, that's my handle. I was really hoping...'

'OK, first up, it's pronounced Zed Ex. It's English born and bred; there's no such thing as a Zee Ex Eighty-one, and to suggest otherwise is frankly offensive. And secondly, what the actual hell is up with you, with your stupid American sense of entitlement? You didn't win the auction; that doesn't make it ok to come and steal it from me. That kind of behaviour should be reported to eBay!' Phil stopped for breath, and realised that both Charlotte and thechipwhisperer were staring at him. 'How did you know I won it anyway?'

'A lot of eBayers will sell more than the contents of their attic - for the right price...'

'You bribed my address out of the seller?' Phil exclaimed. 'And I left that scumbag positive feedback, too!'

'Live and learn, eh?' thechipwhisperer said.

Phil narrowed his eyes and tried that 'steely' look he had been working on for months. 'I'm not selling,' he said firmly.

'I know, of course,' said thechipwhisperer. 'I realise that. You can keep the Zee- the Zed Ex, no problem.'

'So if you don't want the Zeddy,' Phil said, 'what do you want?'

'Does the word 'Entelechus' mean anything to either of you?'

'No,' Charlotte said.

Phil shook his head.

'No?' the stranger looked at them both intently. 'You've never come across the word?'

'Oh, yeah,' Phil said with a shrug. 'I think I've heard it at some point. I just don't know what it means.'

‘Maybe I was wrong to come here,’ he said, and made to get up.

Charlotte stepped towards him, black painted lips curling into a snarl. ‘You come here, sneak around our garage, bribe an eBayer to find us in the first place, and interrupt us before we’ve even started playing...’ she glanced around for a game of some sort. ‘Krazy Kong,’ she finished with a grimace. ‘I, for one, would like an explanation.’

Thechipwhisperer looked over at Phil, as if for some brotherly support.

Phil just shrugged. ‘The girl’s got a point.’

Thechipwhisperer made one of those ironic noises that’s part snort, part laugh, and wholly impossible to express in writing.

‘I just want to know what you think I have that’s worth all this trouble.’

‘I was mistaken,’ thechipwhisperer made to get up, but Charlotte’s 14-hole Docs made a persuasive argument that his groin was better off staying close to the chair.

‘But I’m curious now,’ she whispered, and without Phil noticing, she had found a bungee cord somewhere and secured thechipwhisperer to the rickety office chair, like an extremely reluctant Christmas tree on the roof rack of his dad’s old Triumph.

‘What are you going to do, torture me?’

Charlotte glanced up at Phil, who had sort of expected to land the role of Good Cop rather than Torturer.

‘Er...’ he looked around discreetly for inspiration, which turned out to be in an innocent looking cassette case with a blue label. ‘Worse. We’re going to play some games.’

## 4

Twenty minutes later, after half a dozen or so of the slowest and least comprehensible Spectrum programs ever to masquerade as games (culminating in what could loosely be considered a racing game which made such gratuitous use of the Spectrum's limited colours it physically hurt to play for more than a few seconds - which was a moot point really, since the controls weren't sufficiently responsive to keep you away from the garish crash barriers for more than a few seconds anyway), the chipwhisperer had had enough.

'Oh, don't say that,' Phil said. 'There's 44 more of these we haven't tried yet!'

'How many of those are terrible Pac-Man rip-offs?' the chipwhisperer moaned.

'Oh there's bound to be a couple,' Phil said with glee. 'Shall we keep looking?'

The man just groaned and tried to slump back into the chair, only to be reminded that it was broken, and if he didn't stay alert, it would probably tip him onto the floor without a second thought.

'I've got a better idea,' Sam Cooper said, opening the door from the kitchen.

'Oh, no, there's another one.'

'Sam, it's 3am,' Phil said. 'What are you doing in my kitchen?'

'Sometimes, I feel I almost know,' she said.

'Are you sleepwalking?'

‘Charlotte texted me.’ Sam tipped her head towards the house, where Charlotte had sought refuge. ‘Said you were in some kind of trouble.’

‘I actually have it under control, thanks all the same.’

‘So I see,’ Sam nodded at the screen. ‘What the heck are you playing?’

‘Boggles.’

‘Damn right it does. Who’s your friend?’

‘Thechipwhisperer,’ Phil failed to explain.

‘I’m more of a curly fries girl myself. Mind if I call you something else?’

‘My name is Benito Stetson.’

‘What?’ Phil spluttered.

‘My mother was Italian, my father was Texan. Just call me Benny if it helps.’

‘What the hell does someone from Texas want with a ZX81?’

‘I grew up in New York.’

‘OK then,’ Sam said uncertainly. ‘Anyway, shall we have a little talk about what Entelechus means, and what exactly you were expecting to find with my friend’s new toy?’

‘Untie me, and I’ll show you.’

Phil looked uncertain, but Sam released the stranger. ‘We’re not gangsters, Phil.’

Benny got to his feet gratefully. ‘Back in the late 70s,’ he explained, ‘when microprocessors were beginning to revolutionise the world, a small and secretive cartel discovered a way to exponentially - no, more than that, super-exponentially, hyperbolically even - increase the power of a small computer. Not in the way mainstream technology has done - it’s a well-documented fact

that most people carry around in their pockets more computing power than sent men to the moon - but in an entirely different, non-technological way.'

'What do you mean?' Phil asked.

'In layman's terms, the Entelechus is like a magical incantation; a spell transcribed into machine code. A very powerful spell - one that has been in existence since the very dawn of time - but until the computer age arrived, was unusable.'

'I don't believe in magic,' Phil said.

'Whether you believe it or not is irrelevant. Many powerful individuals do believe in it.'

'What powerful individuals?' Phil smirked. 'Clive Sinclair? He's nobody now, he just helps people cheat at cycling.'

'Many of the world's most powerful individuals are not recognised as such. In fact, many are not recognised at all.'

'OK, so there's a mysterious group of super powerful, but anonymous, computer nerds hiding out in a bunker somewhere, probably spying on my Facebook...'

'You jest...' there was an ominous tone to Benny's voice.

'Well what have they done with this spell thingy then?' Sam asked.

'Nothing,' Benny said, 'yet.'

'Why not?' Phil asked. 'If it's all that powerful...'

'In 1981, one member of this group realised the others wished to use the Entelechus for their own purposes, to extend their power over the proletariat.'

'Big Brother?' Sam said.

'Indeed.' Benny nodded and pulled a dog-eared notepad from a deep pocket inside his coat. 'One member of the group

wanted to use the code to benefit mankind, but was overruled. So he took matters into his own hands...'

Benny waved the pad towards Phil.

'That's the original code?' Sam asked, her penny finally dropping.

Benny nodded. 'Part of it, anyway. The elements needed to activate the Entelechus were split up and spread out across the country in secret, hidden way out of the cartel's reach.'

'What about the other elements?' Phil took the pad from Benny and flicked idly through it; hexadecimal code filled every page in small, neat handwriting. There was still no indication what it was supposed to do.

'It has come to my attention that at least one of the remaining elements has recently surfaced, in the hands of a group calling themselves the Assembly - a group which I believe is made up of members of the original cartel, making another attempt to get the code working. Through watching their movements I thought I'd tracked down another element to the ZX81 you bought.'

'I was bidding against them, too?'

'On the contrary,' Benny said. 'I believe they were selling it.'

'What would be the point in that?' Sam asked. 'If they had the code, why release it back into the wild?'

'Maybe to lure me out of hiding.'

'You were in the original cartel?' Sam realised.

'But why get the band back together after 30 years?' Phil asked.

'Won't it be hopelessly out of date by now anyway?' Sam said. 'You just said we carry the computing power of 1970s NASA in our pockets. How will a ZX81 compete with that?'

'The technology is irrelevant, really,' Benny said. 'But by running on outdated hardware they can hide it in plain sight.'

'Is that why there's a retrocomputing revival at the moment?' Phil asked.

Benny looked thoughtful for a moment. 'It is possible that the revival was engineered to bring the Entelechus back into circulation.'

'It's also possible,' Sam suggested, 'that the people who grew up with these creaky old systems have now reached their mid-life crisis and are getting all nostalgic for them.'

'But why use a Zeddy?' Phil ignored her. 'I've used practically all the memory just with the...'

Benny's eyes widened. 'So you do have it!'

Sam facepalmed discreetly.

Phil groaned as the cat irretrievably fled the bag. 'Yes, I have it,' he said, pulling the computer paper out of a drawer.

Benny scurried across and began to pore over the hexadecimal code as if he could read it.

'Yes, yes...' he muttered over and over. 'This is it,' he decided finally. 'The next piece of the puzzle. Now, we must keep these safe - and preferably separate. There's no point making it easy for the Assembly, is there?'

'Can't we just let them keep a third of it and destroy the rest?' Sam asked. 'Then it would be useless, surely?'

'We can't be sure,' Benny said. 'There could be duplicates, cached copies - yours, for example, is printed.'

'So?'

'So it must have been typed in at some point,' Phil explained.

'Who knows how many copies were printed or saved from that original,' Benny said.

Phil nodded knowingly. 'I've heard tales of people spending hours typing in program listings from computer magazines, only to lose all that hard work by not saving the data in time. Logic dictates that at least one software copy exists, somewhere, of any data that was typed in.'

'OK,' Sam said, 'so how much of this code are we missing?'

Benny squinted towards one of the darker corners of Phil's garage. 'If I'm right, and they are trying to find me, they may already have everything else they need.'

'So what's so special about you, cowboy?'

He turned back to face Sam. 'I didn't come over here for the weather, you know,' he said. 'I was recruited by the cartel because I have a very particular set of skills. Skills I have inherited from a very long family heritage.'

'You come from a long line of Z80 coders?' Phil said.

'I have Native American blood in these veins.'

Sam rolled her eyes. 'Of course you do.'

'I said the Entelechus was magic,' he carried on. 'It needs three elements: the complete code, the hardware to run it, and a channel for the mystical energy.'

Sam shook her head. 'This guy's a nutcase, Phil, can we get rid of him so I can go back to bed?'

Phil went on ignoring her. 'So, even if this Assembly has the code, and the hardware, they still won't be able to use it properly unless they can get Penn and Teller to explain how the magic works?'

'The work of a chip whisperer is no mere illusion,' Benny grunted.

'The what of a who now?' Sam said.

‘Don’t worry,’ Benny grinned. ‘I’ve evaded them for over three decades, there’s no way they can find me now.’

‘Unless they notice that an eBay user by the name of thechip-whisperer has been actively bidding on old computers lately,’ Sam said.

‘Oh.’

‘And unless some other eBay users can be persuaded to divulge the addresses of buyers,’ Phil pointed out.

‘Ah.’

‘You don’t think they’ll come after us, do you?’ Sam asked.

‘You?’ Phil replied. ‘No. You can go back next door and deny all knowledge. It’s just me and Charlie that have to worry about some quasi-mystical cyber-terrorists tracking us down.’

‘We should move,’ Benny said. ‘The Assembly mean business. When they find out you’ve spoken to me, they won’t leave you alone.’

‘That’s reassuring,’ Phil muttered.

‘I’m not trying to reassure,’ Benny said. ‘Merely to state facts.’

‘And bring the Assembly after us,’ Phil pointed out.

‘The second you came into possession of the Entelechus, you became a target,’ Benny said ominously. ‘You should be grateful I got to you first; nobody can protect you from the Assembly better than I can.’

‘Who are you, the frickin’ Terminator?’ Sam asked.

‘Hasta la vista, baby.’

‘So what now?’ Phil asked.

‘Come with me if you want to live,’ Benny said.

‘Yeah ok, we caught the first one,’ Phil said.

‘Right now?’ Sam asked.

Benny nodded. 'We've wasted enough time,' he said. 'Get the scary pale one. I've plenty of space for all of us. Once we get out of town we'll lose the CCTV and can relax a little.'

'No way,' Sam said, turning to leave.

'You can't escape them otherwise, be assured of that,' Benny called after her.

'I dare say,' she replied, 'but if I'm going on the run, I'm damn well taking my own wheels.'

## 5

Phil and Benny were discussing the relative merits of Buggy Boy and Stunt Car Racer when the unnecessary growl of Sam's small purple vehicle alerted Phil to the fact that she was ready to go.

Having decided that Benny was actually an alright kind of guy, Phil felt somewhat guilty about subjecting him to *Cassette 50* in the middle of the night, and was doing his best to purge that memory with a few *Spectrum* classics.

Luckily, Sam's insistence on taking her own, strictly curfewed, car on any potential road trip had enforced a delayed departure until sunrise, which comfortably allowed time to sample *JetPac*, *Manic Miner*, and *Saboteur*.

'That's quaint,' Benny said of the Mini. 'Noisy though. Like Great Aunt Hilda's yappy little dog.'

'Hey, Rex is a recognised and well-respected classic,' Sam said, getting out and caressing the roof of her Mini. 'The ultimate evolution of the Car of the Century.'

'Rex?' Benny laughed. 'You even named it after Aunt Hilda's dog.'

'He's called T. Rex, cowboy,' Sam pointed to the decal bearing the name. 'He's an apex predator on the open road. Whereas you appear to be driving a pregnant guppy.'

'I believe the appropriate British phrase here is "touché".'

'Actually, what are you driving?' Sam said, observing the rather large, and somewhat old, vehicle waiting patiently across the street.

'Is it an ice-cream van?' Phil asked.

‘Well, it was advertised as a Dodge Ambulance,’ Benny explained, ‘which plainly means something a lot cooler in the States than it does here. Obviously I was disappointed at first, but she had this kind of kooky English charm that I liked. Kind of like a blind date who looks like a moose but wins you over with her personality.’

‘Don’t think I’ve ever had that experience,’ Phil said.

‘I think I’m having the opposite one right now,’ Sam muttered.

‘Used to belong to somebody called St John,’ Benny went on regardless. ‘I gather that’s some kind of traditional English name?’

‘Some kind, yeah,’ Sam agreed.

‘Maybe you’d like to look inside?’

Sam raised an eyebrow, but Phil ignored her and stepped towards the old van.

‘Bring the ZX,’ Benny said, unlocking the back doors.

What Benny drove was, in fact, a high-top Dodge Spacevan which had previously been a community ambulance before passing into the hands of a talented but inadequately funded enthusiast, who reluctantly sold it to Benny in 2001.

‘Welcome,’ he said, opening the back doors with a grand gesture, ‘to the Ambivalence!’

‘Whoa!’ Phil said as he stepped up into the roomy rear section. Benny flipped down a small flat screen from the roof of the van and invited him to plug the ZX81 into it.

‘Steady on boys,’ Sam called from outside. ‘I’m still here, you know!’

‘No, come and have a look!’

‘Not really my thing.’

‘Maybe not,’ Phil said, ‘but I’m sure you’d be impressed.’

‘Oh, ok...’ she sounded decidedly resigned. ‘Let me have a look...’

She stuck her head in through the back door and looked around.

‘Well?’ Phil said expectantly.

‘I suppose, as a piece of automotive modification, I have to admit that it is quite impressive,’ she said. ‘But couldn’t you have found something more exciting than a ZX80 to pimp your ride with?’

‘It’s a ZX81,’ Phil corrected.

‘Of course,’ Sam said. ‘That’s much better, obviously.’

‘Not really,’ Phil said. ‘Have I taught you nothing?’

‘Very little, if I’m honest.’

‘Does all this work?’ Phil turned his attention to the bench which ran along one side of the van’s interior, housing several power points into which were plugged flat screen TVs and 8-bit computers.

‘Of course,’ Benny entered a code on a key pad in the style of a Sinclair calculator, and a compartment over the front seats opened to reveal rows of small drawers.

‘Spares, leads,’ he explained. ‘Well, you’re a collector, you know the sort of stuff you either need or just end up with loads of.’

‘Yeah,’ Phil was still staring around like a kid on his first visit to Hamley’s as he placed his ZX81 on the bench.

Sam rolled her eyes. ‘I’ll go and get Charlotte while you two carry on bonding.’

To say that Benny had been underwhelmed when he first saw the British interpretation of a Dodge Ambulance would have re-

quired a major recalibration of the whelmedness scale - until he noticed it had once been equipped with a wheelchair lift, the wiring for which was soon repurposed to power a mobile vintage computing workshop.

The only thing belying the van's previous life as a charity ambulance was the light box above the windscreen, into which Benny had written the word 'Ambivalence', but was still unsure whether that was a good thing or not.

'And wolla!' said Benny as Phil's ZX81 sprung to life on one of his screens.

'So we can carry on typing the hex in while we're on the move?'

'In theory,' Benny replied. 'But in practice the ride in the Ambivalence isn't great. You'd be better off waiting - or getting a head start now, of course.'

'Dad!' Charlotte called groggily. 'This woman just dragged me out of bed. What's going on?'

'Road trip,' Phil answered absently.

'It's like the middle of the night. And why's the Hamburglar still here?'

'Benny here is, uh...'

'He's a friend,' Sam said. 'Of sorts.'

'Wasn't he trying to steal your antiques?'

'A misunderstanding.' Phil stepped down out of the van.

'One for which I am very sorry.' Benny closed the overhead locker and followed.

'I'll fill you in on the way,' Sam whispered.

'On the way where?'

Sam and Phil both glanced at Benny.

‘Just head out of town for now,’ Benny said. ‘We need to get off the grid so we can regroup and plan our next move.’

‘Furnace Lane?’ Sam suggested.

Phil tried not to shudder at the hazy and often unhappy memories of the times he had failed to get off with the girl next door in the overgrown yards of Furnace Lane’s long abandoned industrial units in his younger years. Undeniably though, for the same reason it had become a teenage make out spot when a BMX had been his transport of choice, it met the (admittedly somewhat vague) requirements of their current situation.

Phil nodded. ‘You take the Zeddy and go round the long way. I’ll show Benny the short cut. And be careful with it!’

Sam carefully wrapped the tiny computer in her coat. ‘I’ll treat it with the same respect I show T. Rex.’

‘That’s what I was afraid of.’

‘Why do you call it that?’ Benny asked. ‘Cos its arms are so short?’ He stomped around in a ridiculous pastiche of a tyrannosaurus.

‘It’s the same car Marc Bolan died in,’ Sam explained patiently.

‘Marc...?’

‘From out of T. Rex!’ Sam said. ‘Honestly, you Americans are so uncultured.’

‘I guess I skipped the lesson on who died in a tiny purple car,’ he said. ‘Care to enlighten me?’

Sam looked at Benny in faux despair. ‘T. Rex were only the greatest glam rock band to come out of Staines.’

‘T. Rex were never from Staines,’ Phil said quietly.

‘Shut up,’ Sam hissed.

‘And this Marc fella was in this band?’ Benny asked.

'Bolan,' Sam said. 'Yes. He was the lead singer.'

'In Yes?' Phil said. 'I thought that was Jon Anderson?'

'No, in T. Rex, idiot,' Charlotte said. 'Marc Bolan and T. Rex, even I know that.'

'Ah, I see,' Phil said.

'And he died in this car?' asked Benny, who didn't see at all.

'Not this actual car,' Sam said. 'One like it. Same colour and everything.'

'So you call your car T. Rex after this band.'

'Now you're getting it!'

'Isn't that a bit morbid?' Phil asked.

'What, commemorating one of the most amazing glam rock stars this country ever produced?'

'Specifically, commemorating the way he died,' Phil clarified.

'There is no cooler way to die than in a 1275GT,' Sam said as she opened the door and tucked the ZX81 away beside the back seat.

'I'll bear that in mind,' Phil said uncertainly, as his only daughter got in the passenger seat.

Benny turned to Phil. 'We get the short cut?'

Phil nodded. 'Sam will be able to slip off the main road discreetly.'

'Discreetly? In that?' Benny said, once the Mini had roared off down the road.

'You don't exactly travel incognito yourself,' Phil pointed out.

'Well...' Benny said after an uncertain pause.

'Don't worry,' Phil said. 'If anyone can pull it off, Sam can.'

‘If you say so.’ Benny slid back the passenger door and indicated that Phil should get in and experience the cockpit firsthand.

Benny climbed in next to him, then Phil got out again because he remembered he had left his garage unlocked, locked the garage, and got back into the van.

‘Meanwhile, we’ll quietly slip out of town,’ Phil said as he clunked and clicked. ‘Truck on, Tyke.’

## 6

Somewhat predictably, Sam was leaning casually against her car when the Ambivalence finally bumbled along the narrow lane between two rows of crumbling industrial units.

‘So what now?’ she said as Phil and Benny stepped out of the Ambivalence.

‘You still have the ZX81?’ Benny asked.

‘No, I threw it out of the window somewhere on the A30.’

‘Hmm,’ Benny said.

‘Never mind that,’ Charlotte said. ‘Can somebody tell me why we’re here?’

‘I thought it was your idea?’

‘Not here specifically, wise guy. Why have you dragged me away from my warm and comfy home to hang around up Lovers’ Lane with this guy? It’s like the worst double date in history.’

‘How do you know-’

‘Now’s not the time, Phil.’ Sam cut off his parenting in its prime.

‘We’re hiding,’ he called after his daughter’s retreating back. She stopped, but didn’t turn. ‘From?’

‘Um...’

Charlotte turned to look at Sam, who just shrugged and glanced across at Benny.

‘You tell it so well,’ Phil said with a smile.

Charlotte ambled back towards the group with a deliberate air of indifference. ‘I’m listening,’ she said, leaning on the roof of T. Rex as if it was her car and not, in fact, Sam’s pride and joy.

‘In a nutshell,’ Benny started, ‘we’re hiding from a secretive group who will stop at nothing to get their hands on something which has fallen into the hands of your father here.’

‘What, like the mafia?’ Charlotte said.

‘Like the mafia, yes,’ Benny started, ‘except that, if the mafia ever got wind that an organisation as powerful and ruthless as the Assembly even existed, they would run crying to their mamas and settle for playing shoddy Doom clones rather than dare to shoot actual people up.’

‘So...’ Charlotte started, dragging that single syllable out for an unfeasibly long breath, ‘how come I’ve not heard of this Assembly? Twitter is full of conspiracies like that. And if they are so powerful wouldn’t they have at least been mentioned by The Independent?’

‘They are far more powerful than any media outlet,’ Benny said. ‘And they are also very secretive. They prefer to manipulate things from behind the scenes, rather than be open like the mafia.’

‘That’s bull,’ Charlotte said.

‘That’s a fact,’ Benny said, ‘and how you react to it will dictate the length of your life from this point forward.’

Charlotte pointed her best cynical look in his direction. ‘Well,’ she said after a moment’s thought. ‘I don’t have anything better to do right now.’

‘Good,’ Phil said. ‘Glad that’s sorted out.’

‘So what’s the plan?’ Charlotte asked.

Phil, Sam and Benny looked at each other blankly.

‘Oh god,’ Charlotte said. ‘You lot are so lame. Tell me the full – de-nutshelled – story, and maybe I can be the brains of the outfit. God knows somebody needs to be,’ she added at a mumble.

Phil and Benny brought Charlotte up to speed with the rest of the story, while Sam opened up T. Rex and fettled her carburettor. There was no need for her to be doing this, but unlike old computers and magic code, it was something she understood.

‘Seems to me,’ Charlotte said, ‘that if this Assembly of yours,

‘Will you guys stop saying they’re mine!’

‘Whatever,’ Charlotte said. ‘If they’re computer nerds, the obvious thing to do would be to hack into their systems, keep track of what they’re up to; maybe we could even find out where they have the missing part of this code.’

‘An excellent suggestion,’ Benny said. ‘Are you a hacker?’

‘Haven’t you done that?’ Phil said to Benny.

Benny shook his head. ‘Finding them on eBay is one thing,’ he said, ‘but I’m pretty sure I couldn’t find a damn thing on these guys unless it suited them for me to do so. How are your hacking skills, Phil?’

Phil chuckled. ‘I’ve hacked the odd Spectrum game,’ he said. ‘Anything more secure than a Commodore 64 though, and I’m snookered.’

‘Well, if it’s a hacker we need...’ Charlotte interrupted.

‘Yeah?’ Benny said.

‘You know hackers now?’ Phil said. ‘Who even are you?’

Charlotte just scowled across at him. ‘Well, the best guy in the country is Doc Nectarine.’

‘Doc what?’ Phil said.

‘Nectarine.’

‘Sounds like a crap Spiderman villain,’ Phil muttered.

‘It’s a hacker tag, Dad.’

‘Well it’s a crap hacker tag then.’

‘Like you would know.’

‘Guys, please,’ Sam said. ‘Stop bickering. We are running for our lives, remember?’

‘Only without the actual running bit,’ Charlotte observed.

‘We’ll run at dark,’ Benny explained.

‘Wouldn’t that make us more conspicuous?’

‘What?’

‘Nobody drives at night,’ Charlotte said.

‘Sam doesn’t, you mean,’ Phil said.

‘That’s harsh, Dad. It’s not Rex’s fault he’s under curfew.’

‘Really?’

‘Besides, we can’t blend into traffic that isn’t there.’

‘Blend in?’ Phil said. ‘A purple Mini and a retired ambulance from the 50s?’

‘It’s from 1982,’ Benny corrected him.

‘Let’s just hope the traffic cameras have something better to look at than us,’ Phil said.

‘And headlights – they’re a bit obvious, aren’t they?’ Charlotte went on. ‘Bit of a giveaway when you’re being chased.’

‘What I meant to say,’ Benny said, ‘is we will run until dark.’

‘How do you know about this Doc Nectarine, anyway?’ Phil asked.

‘Friend of a friend of a friend,’ Charlotte said.

‘Can you get in contact with him?’ Benny asked.

Charlotte was silent for a moment, as if meditating or something. ‘I’ll see what I can do,’ she said in the end.

‘Thank you,’ Phil said, but she had already turned away and was busily doing something on her phone.

## 7

Several hours later, Phil was sat at a greasy table with two polystyrene cups filled with murky, lukewarm liquid masquerading as tea. Probably called itself 'T', Phil thought as he stared into it distastefully.

Through some shady network of online contacts, Charlotte had managed to set up a meeting with the hacker she called Doc Nectarine in Britain's last vestige of secrecy - a little known truck stop somewhere off the A420 in Oxfordshire, which remained untroubled by such modern delights as Closed Circuit Television.

'Is this Earl Grey?' Benny said, taking a seat opposite Phil and sniffing his drink suspiciously.

'No.' Phil picked up his cup to peer at its contents from a new angle. 'This is just grey.'

Mercifully, the phone in Phil's pocket beeped before he felt obliged to taste the tea substitute; he read the text, then excused himself, slipping off to what the management laughingly referred to as the 'tourist information board.'

In actual fact the best information any tourist could have been given in this particular truck stop would be 'you should leave now, while you still can. This place will devour your soul if you stay. At least, if you use the car park for over two hours. Oh, and avoid the pasta bolognese.'

Instead, in a somewhat misguided attempt to make the place a little more family friendly, the board was now rather scantily filled with a handful of leaflets for nearby tourist attractions, highlights of which appeared to be the Imperial Lawnmower

Museum, and a zoo at which the most exciting exotic beast was a llama called Jeff. In fact the information board contained more literature from a variety of over-zealous religious cults than it did legitimate tourist information.

Phil pretended to browse what leaflets there were, but was beginning to tire a little of the same three National Trust properties, when a man in a leather trench coat, shades, and a wide brimmed hat sidled up to the information board.

Discreet, Phil thought to himself. I barely even noticed you. At least you're not drawing attention to yourself. 'Zucchini?' Phil said quietly.

The man ignored him.

Phil cleared his throat and repeated the gourd.

The man glanced sidelong at him and inched away.

'I said, Zucchini,' Phil said, louder now, in case the stranger was backing off for a reason unrelated to Phil's random courgette recital.

'Shut up!' another voice hissed from behind him, startling him.

When Phil looked around to see the voice, there was no one there; at least, not in his line of sight.

'Don't turn around,' the voice whispered. 'Oh, and, no thanks, I'm trying to give them up.'

'Oh,' Phil said, surprised. 'You're-'

'Yes,' the voice hissed.

A hand reached around from behind Phil, picked a leaflet - a thirty-year-old programme of events at Palaeozoic Park - from the rack and placed it in Phil's hand.

'You should pay a visit,' he said. 'Weather looks good for today if you can.'

Phil turned the leaflet over in his hands a few times, not really reading it, but soon realised there was no further conversation coming from the mysterious voice behind him, or from the tall stranger in the inconspicuous outerwear, or from anyone else for that matter. He pocketed the dog-eared leaflet and hurried back to his T before it got even more unpleasant.

## 8

'I've never even heard of the place,' Sam had said when Phil announced their next destination. 'And I've got nephews.'

'What's that got to do with anything?' Phil asked.

'Nephews love dinosaurs,' she replied, as if it was the most completely obvious fact in the world.

'What, all nephews?'

'As far as I can tell. Why is it called that, anyway? I thought the Palaeozoic era was all trilobites and stuff. Hardly the most exciting of prehistoric eras to name a theme park after.'

'Maybe it's a trilobite themed park,' Phil suggested. 'All crustaceans and molluscs.'

'Let's hope so,' Sam said. 'At least that way I won't lose all my cool auntie cred for coming without them.'

As it turned out, Auntie Sam had nothing to worry about.

'How long has this place been closed?' she said, comparing the pictures on the leaflet to the stark reality that stared across the galvanised security fence at them.

'I have the events calendar for 1988,' Phil said. 'Looked like quite a good year.'

'Well, it sure ain't a theme park any more,' Benny said. 'Trilobite or otherwise.'

'Doc Nectarine must know it's safe,' Charlotte said. 'You know, secure, to talk.'

'We are a little... remote,' Phil said.

They had eventually found Palaeozoic Park seven miles along a road which didn't appear on the maps either of them carried in their vehicles, or on Sam's satnav. It lurked behind a nine-

foot-tall barbed wire encrusted fence, which Phil speculated was probably even electrocuted.

'I think the word you're looking for is electrified,' Sam said. 'And I don't think the dinosaurs are real, anyway.'

'I thought you said they were trilobites,' Phil said.

'That,' Sam pointed to a picture on the leaflet, 'is clearly a triceratops.'

'Were they really fluorescent green?' Phil asked.

'I'd have to ask my nephew, but I'm going to guess not. No evolutionary advantage to being the most obvious dinosaur in the forest.'

Phil stepped up to the gates to take a closer look at the security measures that had appeared sometime after the park's closure. 'It's bolted from the inside,' he said. 'There must be another gate. Unless anybody's got a crowbar?'

'I left mine in my other jacket,' Charlotte said.

'I thought you said that was electrified?' Sam said, causing Phil to jump away from the fence in shock. Surprise, that is, not electric shock.

There was a slightly weedy 'peep peep' which made Phil and Sam both turn around to see the Ambivalence speeding towards them. Phil was about to dive out of its path, heroically grabbing Sam on his way down to save her from almost certain irony when Benny's old ambulance hit her, but then he realised that 'speeding' was very much a relative term where the Ambivalence was concerned, and settled for nodding in the general direction and saying 'watch your back,' before ambling off to one side.

Sam, for her part, glanced up at the ambulance indifferently, knelt to tie her shoelace, then strolled after Phil. A moment later the ambulance, um, well crashed is not quite the right verb there,

but made contact with the gates. There was a noise which, had it been amplified by an order or two of magnitude, might have qualified as a crash, but it wasn't. So it didn't.

The gates epically failed to fling open before the charging Ambivalence, and the bystanders were still standing by, locked out, after the attempted break in was over.

'That was lame,' Charlotte muttered and wandered off, presumably in search of somewhere to sit and tweet moodily.

'Should have used your car,' Phil said.

Sam snorted a response, which Phil took to mean something like 'I would rather come up with an alternative plan before attempting that, thank you very much,' and then went to make sure the Mini was locked, just to be on the safe side.

Benny, however, was unperturbed; he backed up the Ambivalence and had another go. Phil checked his watch, and went for a little walk around the perimeter.

In places, the perimeter fence was hidden behind several feet of thick hedgerow - another level of security on top of the fence and barbed wire. And big scary dinosaurs.

In other places Phil was able to peer through gaps in the brambles, occasionally catching glimpses of the dilapidated buildings and silent, broken roller coasters of the long deserted theme park. Where he could get right up to the fence he gave it a rattle every now and then, kicked the fence posts, and eventually found a section with rather flimsier foundations than most, and after some persuasion, he created a gap just big enough to squeeze through.

Leaving only a small part of his favourite Jet Set Willy t-shirt attached to the fence, Phil made his way back along the inside of

the perimeter until he came across the Ambivalence, still beating its automobilian head against the gate.

While the van was backing up for yet another run at it, Phil yanked open a couple of hefty bolts that had been proving effective against the attentions of Benny and the Ambivalence, and repurposed one of them as a crowbar, prying apart the rusting remains of a padlock which was now the only thing keeping his friends out of Palaeozoic Park.

The Ambivalence came, um, speeding towards the gate, which in a dramatic break from tradition, sprung open in front of it. Sam and Charlotte erupted in bored and slightly ironic cheering, and then followed through the gate in the Mini.

'I knew I could do it,' Benny said, sticking his head triumphantly out of the open van door.

'Well done.' Phil slid the now slightly malformed bolt back in place to secure the gates. 'Now, shall we get away from the road, on the off-chance that your antics haven't attracted any attention yet?'

'Good plan,' Sam agreed, revved the Mini's engine a couple of times, and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Phil jumped into the Ambivalence and they followed the cloud like some kind of Dodge-based Moses in a surreal Sinai desert.

Palaeozoic Park had been built on the site of a World War Two airfield which wasn't quite popular enough to last the duration of the Cold War. The main road in from the entrance eventually led to the intersection of the two former runways, where a large circular building served as a hub for the park.

From here, smaller buildings in varying sizes, shapes, colours, and purposes stretched out along streets which led out into the different geological areas of the park.

Phil and Benny found the Mini sitting at a jaunty angle outside the main building, empty, so they left the Ambivalence next to it and went off on foot in search of the others.

The door to the main building was open; whatever kind of security had been left here had obviously given up long ago, leaving the once impressive hub to its Marie Celestian fate. Inside, it was cool and dark, only the most persistent sunlight managing to get through the grubby windows.

Drink and snack vending machines stood along one wall, still stocked – well, to the extent of having some Doctor Pepper and a couple of Bountys kicking around anyway. Fire exit signs hung, damaged, above some of the doorways. Stuff crunched under their feet that could equally have been plaster dust or the crumbling fossils of popularity.

‘Wow,’ Benny’s voice echoed faintly around the room. ‘We just walked into cliché central, didn’t we?’

Computers still sat behind the information desk; eventually, Phil climbed over it to satisfy his curiosity. ‘Amiga 1000s,’ he muttered to himself, glancing casually around in case there turned out to be a comprehensive web of CCTV coverage in the room.

‘Maybe one of them controls the heating,’ Benny said hopefully.

Further exploration was disturbed by a call echoing up from one of the corridors, and reluctantly, Phil abandoned his potential treasure.

They found Sam and Charlotte behind a door marked 'CATION UITE', which was either the Latin name of a very specific trilobite or a broken sign.

The room was dark and musty. Dark because of the heavy red curtains that hung at the windows, weighing down the aging curtain racks; musty because of the heavy red curtains that hung at the windows, weighing down the aging curtain racks.

'We have power.' Sam had picked one of the many PCs dotted around the room and booted it up.

'A Nimbus Network?' Phil said. 'That takes me back!'

'Let's get some fresh air in here,' Charlotte said, tugging at one of the curtains until it crashed to the floor, kicking up a tsunami of dust that swept across the room.

'I'm not exposing my Zeddy to this kind of pollution,' Phil said. 'I'm going to look around and find somewhere clean to do some typing.'

## 9

By nightfall, T. Rex and the Ambivalence had been hidden securely in a nearby shed, having evicted a couple of maintenance buggies which were now abandoned at jaunty angles a safe distance from both the shed and the quiet staff room where Phil had set up his ZX81 and immersed himself, once again, in transcribing the Entelechus Hex.

‘Where’s the next page?’ he said suddenly at about 2.30am.

‘What?’ Sam muttered, half asleep on a dog-eared sofa nearby.

‘The next page of the code,’ he explained. ‘Pass it over.’

‘I haven’t got any,’ she replied, looking around to be sure.

‘Oh,’ he said, surprised. ‘I guess I finished then.’

‘You’ve typed the whole thing in?’ Sam was suddenly alert and searching around Phil’s desk, just to make sure.

‘I guess so,’ Phil said. ‘Wait, stop, don’t touch anything!’

Sam stopped mid-rummage and looked at him quizzically.

‘Don’t move!’ Phil said. ‘He can’t see us if we don’t move.’

‘What?’ Sam gave him her best ‘are you mental?’ look.

‘What?’ Phil repeated in the manner of someone quite sure of his sanity.

Sam stepped carefully away from the desk, while Phil gingerly typed the save command and set the tape recording, before silently ushering Sam out of the room to watch from a safe distance.

‘I see you’ve made yourselves at home,’ a quiet voice in the other doorway said.

‘Nectarine?’ Phil guessed.

'I'm Doctor Nectarine,' the tall figure silhouetted in the doorway replied in the husky, obviously disguised voice of a superhero.

Or supervillain, Phil reminded himself.

'Can this wait? I haven't slept in about 3000 lines. I'm seeing double at the moment and liable to pass out if I have to stay on my feet for too long.'

'If it could wait, would I be hanging around here at three in the morning?'

Phil glanced at Sam. 'It's 3am?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Look, I don't know your hobbies or personal kinks. How would I know what you're doing hanging around the reception building of an extinct dinosaur park at three in the morning?'

'Ok, chill out,' Nectarine said.

'Look, just tell us whatever you came here to tell us, and we'll deal with it after a few hours' sleep.'

'I have the location of the Assembly,' he said.

'Good job,' Phil said. 'Bring it to me after sunrise and I'll get you a 99 or something, ok?'

'If that's what you want.'

'Yeah, it really is.'

## A

‘Um, Phil...’

Phil was woken partly by the sense of urgency in Sam’s voice and partly by the sharp prod in the ribs, which turned out to have been administered by his favourite daughter.

‘Guys, I’ve done my bit, can I just get some sleep now please?’

‘You can sleep later.’

Phil jerked upright at the sound of a man’s voice he didn’t recognise.

At some point, while he had been asleep, the room had filled with the sort of people who wore suits and went everywhere in formation; specifically, there was one small, serious looking man in a sharp suit, flanked by a large, serious looking man in a suit to one side and a tall, serious looking woman in a suit to the other.

‘Who are you supposed to be?’ Phil asked. ‘The Fairy Godfather?’

The small man stepped forward. ‘We represent the Assembly of Newly Uplifted Systems.’

Phil did some mental acrostics and raised an eyebrow at the man. ‘Really?’ he said.

‘Really,’ the short man said simply.

‘You didn’t think...’ Phil started, then said, ‘never mind.’

‘Is there a problem?’

‘No no,’ Phil said. ‘Please, go on.’

‘As I said, we represent the Assembly of Newly Uplifted Systems. And we believe there is something here that belongs with us.’ He spoke with a slightly threatening manner and a gentle

Lancastrian accent, as if Fred Dibnah's more urbane offspring had joined the Illuminati at some point.

'Oh? And what is that?' he asked. 'You know, just in case I have seen it.'

The short man eyed Phil suspiciously. 'Put them with the others,' he said to his goons, apparently oblivious to bad guy clichés. 'Then search the room.'

It should have been no great surprise to Phil and Sam that they ended up back in the dark and musty CATION UITE room with Benny, Charlotte, and the out of service Nimbus PCs.

'What the frak is going on?' he demanded, because clearly this was all Benny's fault.

'Don't worry,' Sam soothed. 'If his Royal Shortness out there carries on the way he has been, he'll explain it all to us in great detail before consigning us to our doom.'

'Oh, you can count on that,' Benny said.

'You know him?' Phil asked.

Benny nodded. 'Viktor Wendig. He was a founder member of the cartel, back in the day.'

'And what about Grell and Fella behind him?'

Benny shrugged. 'Them I don't know. Probably just hired muscle.'

'You were right then,' Sam said. 'He is with the Assembly now.'

'He told you that?'

Sam nodded. 'The Assembly of Newly Uplifted Systems, or something.'

'Sound like a bunch of assholes.'

'Almost certainly,' Phil agreed.

‘How did they find us?’ Charlotte said.

‘I don’t know, Charlie,’ Phil turned on her. ‘Who else knew we were holed up here?’

‘Charlotte,’ she reminded him.

‘Easy Phil,’ Sam said. ‘Even if it was him, Charlotte wasn’t to blame.’

‘Wait, you think Doc Nectarine told them where we are?’ Charlotte said.

‘Either him or one of us in this room,’ Phil said. ‘And I don’t feel like playing Cluedo.’

‘Why would you think that?’ Charlotte said. ‘Doc Nectarine has nothing to gain from handing us over to the bad guys.’

‘Maybe he doesn’t know they’re bad guys,’ Sam suggested. ‘You haven’t exactly been an open book about this whole situation, have you?’

‘Oh, so it’s my fault now?’

‘Guys, guys!’ Benny interrupted. ‘Can’t you be a little more British about this? This fighting is so...’

‘Colonial?’ Phil suggested.

‘I was going to say irritating.’

‘Alright,’ Phil sat down, rubbing his head in case clarification appeared like a genie. ‘They’re here, they’ve almost certainly found the Zeddy by now, which means they could load up the hex any minute and... let it do whatever it’s supposed to do. What is that, anyway?’

‘Pretty much anything they want it to do,’ Benny said.

‘Why do I keep you around again?’

Benny pointed at the locked door. ‘Absence of choice.’

Of course, the door chose that moment to open, allowing Grell and Fella to come in and give them a choice - and then force them to take it.

They were led through to the garage where the Ambivalence and T. Rex had been quietly minding their own business. It smelt faintly of rust and very old bicycle grease.

‘What are we doing here?’ Sam said quietly.

Viktor Wendig stepped out from the shadows. ‘Believe me, if I could have left you out of this, I would have done,’ he smarmed. ‘Unfortunately, our mutual friend here-’ he nodded towards a figure duct taped to a chair in another corner of the garage.

‘Is that...?’ Sam whispered.

‘Nectarine?’ Benny said out loud.

‘Told you,’ Phil muttered.

Charlotte slapped him.

‘Is that what he calls himself?’ Wendig said. ‘Well, as proficient a hacker as he is, unfortunately he doesn’t have the specific talent we require.’

‘I’m not doing it,’ Benny said flatly.

‘Oh, but you already have done it, Mr Stetson. I merely need you to be present for the grand switch on.’

‘Switch on of what?’ Charlotte asked.

‘The Entelechus, of course,’ Wendig replied with a grin that made Charlotte cringe.

‘In a barn?’ Benny said. ‘Is this some British tradition I haven’t encountered yet?’

Phil watched as Grell climbed up into the back of the Ambivalence, emerging a moment later with an innocent looking ZX81 and an all too familiar cassette tape.

'I guess you thought we wouldn't look for it here,' Wendig gestured at the Ambivalence. 'You should not underestimate us, Mr Grundy.'

Phil flashed his most sarcastic smile at the odious little git.

Without taking his eyes off Phil, Wendig clicked his fingers, and Fella trotted over, holding out a small, nondescript little plastic box, with the unmistakable protrusion of a Sinclair edge connector.

'What's that?' Charlotte asked.

Phil rolled his eyes, despairing at his latest parenting fail. 'Some kind of accessory for the ZX81. Presumably related to the Hex I spent all last night typing in for him.'

Viktor Wendig produced a remote control from somewhere, and a TV warmed up on a workbench; around it, Phil noticed a ZX power supply and a tape deck.

'Bring the American forward.'

Grell nudged Benny, and he reluctantly shuffled forward.

'That's close enough,' Wendig said. 'Close enough to affect the chuntey without being able to physically stop the hex from running.'

'You do realise that chuntey is a completely fictitious and made up thing, right?' Phil said.

'Is it?' Wendig said, deadpan, then turned back towards the ZX81.

Wendig had indeed plugged a device resembling a RAM pack into the ZX81; Phil had become quite attached to the little guy over the last couple of days, and felt violated on its behalf.

'Run it,' Wendig said once the computer had fired up.

While Wendig's back was turned, Sam leaned in and whispered to Phil. 'While Fella's got his hands full with Benny-'

‘That’s Grell,’ Phil said.

‘What?’

‘The one marking Benny is Grell,’ he repeated. ‘Fella’s the headmistressy one trying to figure out Sir Clive’s keyword entry system.’

Sam glanced across, and sure enough, the slightly more feminine of Wendig’s henchpeople was staring at the keyboard, her face loading a puzzled expression.

‘Press J, then shift P twice,’ Wendig snapped. ‘Then start the tape. Carefully!’

‘So you’re telling me Grell’s the fella, and Fella’s the girl?’ Sam whispered.

Phil shrugged. ‘Yeah?’

‘Wha- How- Whaaa...?’

‘Don’t try and understand him,’ Charlotte said.

‘What do we do now?’ Fella said.

‘You might as well go and get some coffee or something,’ Wendig said. ‘It could take a while to load this up.’

Phil and Benny - against his better judgement - were watching intently to see what would happen when they ran the code.

Charlotte went and sat down on a metal chest marked ‘Hazardous Chemicals’, largely indifferent to goings on around the ZX81.

Sam slipped off and cut the tape from around Nectarine’s wrists and ankles.

No one went for coffee.

‘Seriously,’ Wendig repeated. ‘Stop crowding me, and get some coffee.’

‘But I don’t want coffee,’ Fella protested.

'I don't care,' Wendig growled. 'I want coffee – get out of my face and find me one!'

The woman grumbled and barged past Phil and Benny, apparently in search of caffeinated beverages.

Phil stayed just far enough out of Wendig's face that they could both get on with the task at hand - which was the rather tedious business of watching a ZX81 loading a program with no idea what, if anything, it would do if it actually succeeded.

When - in blatant disregard of whatever feminist streak had led her into a career as a henchperson - Fella returned with coffee, black and white lightning flashes still filled the screen, and the sound of data transfer still filled the air, as the fruits of Phil's last three days was loaded back into the ZX81's memory.

Viktor Wendig took the aforementioned coffee without so much as a thank you.

Then the noise stopped, and the TV screen went blank.

## B

Several things happened then.

Something exploded. There was no noise to speak of, at least not a bang, but a flash that left Phil blinded for a moment and made Wendig lurch, spilling some of his coffee before crashing to the floor in an undignified heap.

Phil thought he heard again the high-pitched data squeal of a program loading from tape, but that could have been tinnitus caused by the explosion.

Sam and Charlotte hurried forward with stunned expressions on their faces, and promptly vanished.

At least, that was the way it seemed to Phil, but then they reappeared a few moments later. Unfortunately, the rest of the garage had vanished by then.

‘What the hell was that?’ Wendig said, picking himself up and dusting down his suit.

‘I’m guessing the load wasn’t 100% successful?’ Benny said.

‘Well...’ Phil started, but was interrupted by furious shouting.

‘What the hell just happened?’ Charlotte was shouting. ‘What have you done? Where are we?’

‘OK, one question at a time,’ Phil said, running his hands through his hair. ‘In fact, forget that, what do you mean, ‘Where are we?’

‘Have you looked outside, Phil?’

‘What?’ he said, looking outside properly for the first time. ‘Oh my god...’

Phil scrambled up to the window - or, to where the widow used to be - and looked outside. Or, where outside used to be. 'Where the hell are we?' he said.

'I believe I asked that first,' Charlotte said.

Phil climbed up onto the workbench and jumped down on the other side, where the garage wall should have been.

'There's nothing here,' he said, his voice echoing against walls he couldn't make out. 'It's all just... white. And a little bit fuzzy. Like there's been a really heavy and slightly out of focus snowfall.'

'On the plus side,' Sam said, 'the computer works.'

'It does?' Wendig sounded surprised. 'You mean I didn't blow it up?'

'Blow it up?' Phil looked from Wendig to the ZX81 and back again. 'What do you mean blow it up?'

'I didn't blow it up.' Wendig set the remains of his coffee down on the bench beside the ZX81.

'Did you spill coffee on my ZX81?'

'It's my ZX81.' Wendig stretched himself to his full five feet one and tried to assert some control over the situation.

'Um, guys?' Benny interrupted them. 'Can we discuss ownership after we've established what program it's running?'

Phil climbed back over the bench; he could have walked around it now most of the walls had been erased, but that would have been less cool. The ZX81 was, indeed, still working. 'Choose the form of the destructor,' he read from the screen.

'What does that mean?' Sam said. 'Are we playing some kind of game?'

Wendig cackled quietly. 'Some kind, yes.'

The screen refreshed, adding a single word below the previous sentence: CHOOSE

'Well, can we see the instructions?' Phil said.

CHOOSE

'That's weird,' Phil said.

CHOOSE

'And it don't look good,' Charlotte added quietly.

'Wait, what?'

CHOOSE

'Not you, Captain RAM Pack.' Phil ducked closer to Charlotte and whispered to her, 'Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?'

'It's like your favourite movie, Dad-'

'Well, top three anyway.'

'Dad, focus.'

Phil nodded and turned back to Sam and Benny. 'Ok, we need to empty our minds. Whatever we think of - if we think of Henry Hoover, a Henry Hoover will appear and... suck us all up or something, ok? So don't think of anything.'

THE CHOICE IS MADE

'Oh come on!' Charlotte said. 'We didn't choose anything! Dad?'

'You know me,' he said. 'My mind is always blank.'

'Did you choose anything?'

'Not me,' said Sam.

'Well I didn't choose anything!' Charlotte said. 'And why the hell am I shouting at a ZX81?' she asked herself.

'Um, girls?'

Sam and Charlotte turned back to Phil, who nodded towards a very sheepish looking Benny.

'Oh balljoints,' Sam said. 'What did you do, cowboy?'

'I couldn't help it,' he whimpered. 'It just popped in there.'

‘What just popped in there?’

‘I tried to think of the most harmless thing...’ he glanced over at Sam’s Mini.

‘You chose her car?’ Phil said.

‘It’s so quaint and... British. It could never harm anyone.’

‘It’s called T. Rex,’ Charlotte pointed out.

‘Oh.’

‘Nice thinkin’, Tex,’ Phil said. ‘This could go several ways now.’

‘I’m hoping for death by glam rock,’ Sam said.

‘Kill me now,’ Charlotte muttered.

‘Oh no,’ Phil said.

‘What?’ Benny said, hoping for some reprieve from the evil stares he was getting.

‘Tell me you don’t see that?’ Phil pointed discreetly at Wendig’s coffee mug.

‘World’s Best Boss?’ Benny frowned at Wendig. ‘You’ve changed, man.’

‘Inside the mug,’ Phil said.

Benny looked closer. Inexplicably, Sam and Charlotte also leant over to see what was happening to Wendig’s coffee.

‘That don’t look good either,’ Charlotte said, as a ripple spread out across the cooling coffee.

‘Is Jurassic Park in your top three?’ Sam asked.

‘Not any more.’

‘If anyone’s interested,’ Sam said, ‘I’ve got the keys to a Mini 1275GT in my pocket, and I’m not afraid to use them.’

And on that note, she ran across to her car, feeling for the right key as she went, and slotting it easily into the keyhole in an oft-rehearsed move.

The Mini's alarm went off, distracting Viktor Wendig for just long enough to allow Phil to barge past and run for the Mini, followed by Benny, who ran straight into the waiting arms of Grell and Fella.

'Phil!' Sam yelled. 'Get the door!'

Phil looked at where she was pointing. Walls were building up around them again; not as they had been, but bland, blocky creations, like the world was being 3d printed around them. The roller shutter door, however, was firmly in place - Phil ran to hit the ASCII art switch on the wall beside it.

Sam fired up the GT then, the rasp of its enthusiastic exhaust echoing around the rapidly enclosing garage (along with the still blaring alarm siren) in the hope of disorientating some bad guys.

As the door rolled slowly upwards, Phil looked around for Charlotte; unfortunately, when he spotted her she was struggling distastefully in Grell's grasp.

'We need to go, Phil!' Sam shouted as he started towards his daughter. 'We all need to go!'

'I can't leave Charlie!'

'Charlotte!' she shouted as Grell and Fella were bundling her and Benny into the Ambivalence.

'Come on, Philip!' Sam shouted. 'We'll find them later. But we need to go, now!'

'I'll come back for you!' Phil shouted towards Charlotte, before running for Sam's car.

He was barely in the passenger seat before Sam launched the tiny vehicle out of the garage, the roof mounted aerial twanging against the still opening door.

'What was that?' Phil said as a vast shadow crossed over them.

‘You don’t want to know.’ Sam kept her eyes firmly ahead and pointed the Mini down a narrow avenue between two tall and still growing walls.

There was a crash somewhere behind them, barely audible over the mobile cacophony that they had become.

Phil looked back over his shoulder, but could see nothing but a plume of dust billowing up over the grey walls behind them.

Soon they outran the 3D printed world, and Sam pulled into a shady nook between the Shoposaurus and Ice Age Ices, cut the engine, and got out of the car.

A moment later the alarm stopped, and a welcome silence fell. Then it got up again and backed away from the deep rhythmic thuds that were happening elsewhere in the park.

‘That wasn’t the Marcmallow Man, was it?’ Phil said as Sam got back in the car.

‘Marc Bolan? I doubt it very much.’

Phil’s next thought was interrupted by a distorted, melancholy guitar riff from Sam’s pocket.

‘It’s Charlotte,’ she said. ‘Texting,’ she added, as Phil’s expression begged for clarity. ‘At least,’ she said as she read the message, ‘it’s Charlotte’s number. I’m not sure they’re her words, though.’

‘What does it say?’

Sam showed him the message.

‘Well, that’s not sinister at all, is it?’

## C

'I've lost my phone!' Charlotte hissed, fumbling around under the Ambivalence's bench seats.

Grell was standing guard outside the back of the van, while Fella sat in the driving seat fiddling with the radio. It was fairly ineffective and could only pick up Radio 4; a fact which had gone entirely unnoticed by Benny, who just assumed that was what British radio sounded like.

'Shall I try ringing it?' Benny whispered.

Charlotte shrugged. 'What's the worst that could happen?'

'What's your number?'

'Oh seven nine two,' she whispered.

'Oh seven five-'

'Nine.'

'Oh seven five nine-'

'No, oh seven nine-'

'Oh seven nine five-'

'No five!'

'Oh five-'

'Where are you getting this five from?'

'Which one?'

'It doesn't matter! There's not one in my number!'

'No, there's at least two.'

'What are you two up to back there?' Fella growled from the front seat.

'Nothing,' Charlotte said innocently.

'Look, take the damn phone before I accidentally dial for fish and chips, eh?'

She took the phone from him and dialled her own number without another word. 'It's ringing,' she whispered once it connected.

They both peered out of the windows for any sign of its tell-tale glow, but the dim grey light in what was left of the garage wasn't giving anything away.

'Hello?' said the voice on the other end of the phone.

'Wait, what?' Charlotte said.

'Who's that?'

'Er, the person whose phone you're using.' Charlotte used as much sarcasm as she could muster at low volume.

'Moon Caster?' the voice said.

'Moon Caster?' Benny repeated.

'Shut up.' Charlotte said. Then, into the phone, 'Who's that? And how do you know my handle?'

'It's Doc Nectarine.'

'Nectarine?' she exclaimed. 'What the hell are you doing with my phone?'

'Well at the moment, having a pointless conversation with you.'

'Look, where are you?'

'Well, I was hiding out in a grubby little rest room-'

'Eww!' Benny said.

'Learn English, Tex,' Charlotte said. 'Over here, rest rooms have settees.'

'How very British,' Benny said. 'Next you'll be telling me you drink tea in there.'

'Well yes, but-'

'Not in this one,' Nectarine said.

'It's that grubby?'

‘Well, that and the fact that I blinked a few minutes ago and whole place turned grey and... well, pixelated, I guess.’

‘Yeah, that happened to all of us,’ Charlotte said.

‘Although the calendar has become quite an impressive piece of ASCII art.’

‘I can imagine,’ Charlotte said.

‘Imaginative use of the ampersand.’

‘Eyes front, soldier.’

‘Er, yeah, sorry. Do you know what’s going on?’

‘They’ve run the Entelechus,’ Benny explained. ‘And locked us in the back of the Ambivalence so we miss the fun.’

‘In English?’

‘The bad guys have stuck us in the back of a van while they play video games,’ Charlotte said. ‘If you can call them video games, that is.’

‘What kind of games?’ Nectarine asked.

‘Don’t know,’ Benny said. ‘We can’t see the screen from here.’

‘Can you get closer to the screen?’ Charlotte asked Nectarine. ‘Maybe you could tell us what they’re up to?’

‘I don’t know if you remember, but those guys strapped me to a chair with duct tape not too long ago,’ Nectarine said. ‘It wasn’t a particularly comfortable chair, either.’

‘I don’t know if you remember,’ Benny countered, ‘but the entire building has been pixelated, and that is intimately connected to whatever that computer is doing.’

‘Do you think it can be undone?’

‘Yes,’ Benny said, ‘but I need to see it to figure out how.’

‘Besides,’ Charlotte said, ‘you sold us out to these douchebags, you owe us!’

‘Hey, I delivered the Assembly, just as asked,’ he protested. ‘If anything, you owe me. At the very least I was promised a 99.’

‘Oh for the love of... this is not an ice-cream van!’ Benny said, rather too loudly.

‘Hey, you two stop planning a revolution back there!’ Fella shouted.

‘Look, you just better be grateful that Doc Nectarine is a thoroughly nice bloke,’ Nectarine whispered. ‘I’ll be there in a moment.’

Then the line went dead.

A moment later, Nectarine was crouched at the back door of the Ambivalence, showing Charlotte a sequence of text messages apparently being sent from her phone.

REX LIES IN WAIT

‘What does that mean?’ Charlotte showed the message to Benny.

‘It must mean the destructor,’ Benny said.

‘Well, you’d know...’

‘Ok, let’s not dwell on that.’

‘So what, is he controlling the destructor from the ZX81?’ Charlotte gestured towards Viktor Wendig, still standing at the computer and rubbing his hands with evil glee.

Doc Nectarine nodded. ‘And he’s hijacked your phone number to torment his prey.’

HE IS HUNTING FOR YOU

‘Wait a minute,’ Phil said as he read the next message. ‘These messages aren’t as random as they seem.’

‘You’ll have to tell me later,’ Sam said, getting into the car quickly. ‘Legoland is on the march again.’

Phil turned to see those dull white walls building up along each side of the road behind them.

Sam wasted no time in starting the engine, and roared off down the narrow road, g-force pushing Phil back into the ill-fitting passenger seat.

Even at the break-neck pace Sam managed to achieve, the background weirdness quickly overtook them.

‘Ok wisdom guy,’ Sam shouted over the engine noise. ‘What’s going on? What are those messages, and do they have anything to do with the claustrophobia I’m suddenly developing?’

‘Well, I can’t speak for your claustrophobia, but-’ Phil was interrupted by another text arriving.

FOOTSTEPS APPROACHING

‘The messages are straight out of 3D Monster Maze,’ he finished.

The mini screeched to a halt as a wall sprung up in front of it.

‘As, I’m guessing, is the maze?’ Sam said backing up quickly.

‘Yes,’ Phil said grimly. ‘And the-’

‘Don’t say it,’ Sam interrupted. ‘Please.’

‘Alright then. Just keep your eye out for an exit,’ he said. ‘And a Tyrannosaurus rex.’

HE IS HUNTING FOR YOU

‘Take it easy, we’re in the clear at the moment,’ Phil said.

‘All these sodding right angles, he could be hiding behind any one of them.’

‘Not to mention it’s completely disorientating.’

‘Yeah, every damn wall is identical,’ Sam agreed. ‘We might never find the others again.’

‘Oh, we’ll find them,’ Phil said with all the determination of Liam Neeson in *Taken*.

FOOTSTEPS APPROACHING

‘Stop,’ Phil said. ‘Stop the engine!’

The mini skidded to a halt again. Phil held his finger to his lips in a shushing motion and slowly wound down the window next to him. It squeaked, the tiny noise echoing painfully between the high walls on either side of them.

Phil leant out of the window, looking ahead and behind them, listening for those footsteps. Soon enough, he heard them, great stomping, shuddering booms that echoed through the maze, effectively shrouding the monster’s location.

‘I think it’s that way,’ he whispered.

Sam nodded, started the car, and quietly backed up, turning around at a handy corner and driving – she hoped – away from the destructor as sedately as T. Rex was able.

REX HAS SEEN YOU

‘Crap,’ Phil said. ‘He’s onto us.’

‘Where?’

‘No idea. I’ll keep watching.’

‘What’s that over there?’

Phil jerked around, but it was just the reception building. ‘The hub,’ he said. ‘Head for it - maybe we’ll find Charlie.’

‘Well we certainly can’t go around here all day.’

Sam turned the car cautiously in the direction of the hub and began to weave through the complex web of right angles that stood between them and their friends and family.

‘Don’t hang around,’ Phil said. ‘I think I can hear it.’

‘Hear it?’ Sam said. ‘I can feel its footsteps through the damn steering wheel!’

RUN HE IS BESIDE YOU

'Go, he's close!' Phil screamed.

Sam dropped a gear and wound the revs up, the car suddenly accelerating forward.

RUN HE IS BEHIND YOU

'Well, at least we know where it is!' Sam screamed.

'Put your foot down,' Phil said. 'We'll lose him easy.'

'I intend to,' Sam said. 'That or die trying.'

'Well, if it helps, I heard there's no cooler way to die than in a 1275GT.'

'When Bolan died, he was in T. Rex, not in *a* T. rex.'

'Sam, it's on top-'

There was a crash, and a very pointy letter v tore a hole in the roof behind Phil. The engine raced as the front wheels were lifted off the ground.

'Abandon car!' Phil shouted.

'What?'

'Get out!' Phil unbuckled and opened the door. 'Now!'

Reluctantly, Sam followed suit, jumping to the ground as a hideous dinosaur-shaped jumble of blocks and letters lifted her most prized possession into the air.

'Run!' Phil shouted. 'I think it's stuck on its teeth!'

'My car!'

'Is still keeping us alive,' Phil said. 'Now let's get back to the hub, try and find the others before Rex there finds a toothpick the size of an apple tree.'

## D

From inside a 30-something year old Dodge Spacevan inside a weirdly pixelated garage, the sounds of a stomping, growling, most probably acid-drooling Tyrannosaurus rex were somewhat muted, but they still made a point. A loud, unpleasant point.

‘They need our help,’ Charlotte said. ‘We have to get out of here and find them!’

‘In this?’ Nectarine gave her a distasteful look.

‘Well there’s a ride on lawnmower in the corner if you think that will be better suited to the job,’ Charlotte said sarcastically.

Somewhat to his credit, Nectarine glanced across at it, said, ‘I’ll go look for the keys,’ and sloped off towards the corner.

‘He’s mad,’ Charlotte said to no one in particular.

‘Hey, where are you going!’ Grell (or was it Fella? Charlotte had lost track) shouted after him, getting out to follow him.

As soon as their guard was a good distance from the van, Benny pulled the spare key from his pocket and climbed over into the front seat.

Charlotte jumped out of the back, ran over to the door and hit the ASCII art button which set the roller shutter creaking and rattling up over the Ambivalence, which was now advancing on it. Charlotte was just about to make a return jump toward the open front door when Fella grabbed her.

Benny stopped the van, and was about to try something hugely heroic, but Charlotte shouted ‘No! Go and find Dad and Sam, before they get turned into dino snacks.’

Benny hesitated for a moment.

'Go! Please!' Charlotte shouted before she was silenced by Fella's multi-purpose duct tape.

Benny did his best to look anguished as Fella dragged Charlotte away, but as soon as the shutter had rolled up far enough, the Ambivalence stuttered majestically out into the open.

Phil and Sam scrambled to their feet, hurrying away from the dentally impaired lizard behind them.

'Listen!' Sam said, suddenly stopping mid-sprint.

'What?'

'It's the Ambivalence,' Sam said. 'I'd recognise that engine note anywhere.'

Phil could barely hear anything over the clamouring of his heart trying to climb up his oesophagus.

'This way,' Sam said.

Phil shrugged, and followed, if only because the alternative was ten tons of pixels with toothache.

A low boom echoed through the maze, and the ground vibrated beneath them. 'He's moving again,' Phil said.

'Not far now,' Sam panted as she led him around yet another anonymous right angle.

RUN HE IS BEHIND YOU

'Oh, do shut up,' Phil said, and threw the phone behind him, where it hit an already miffed monster square in the eye.

A roar filled the air which didn't so much chill his spine as soak it in liquid nitrogen and plant it in the Antarctic.

'Oh crap,' Phil said, suddenly too afraid to run any further.

Just then the Ambivalence lurched around the corner, almost flattening Sam before coming to a halt right in front of the Tyrannosaurus.

Benny backed away from the startled monster, stopped briefly for Sam and Phil to climb in, then reversed away as quickly as he could.

‘Nice timing, cowboy,’ Sam said.

Phil looked over his shoulder into the back of the van. ‘Where’s Charlie?’

‘Back at the garage.’

‘You’ll never find your way through this maze,’ Phil said.

‘Course I will.’ Benny grinned at him. ‘I left a trail of bread-crumbs.’

As Benny reversed around a corner, Phil spotted a trail of black marks stretching out along the road in front of them.

‘What... How did you do that?’

‘She’s not just a pretty face, you know,’ Benny grinned smugly.

‘It’s engine oil,’ Sam muttered. ‘The old thing leaks so much, it’s left a trail.’

‘Hey, don’t knock it!’

‘Wouldn’t dare,’ Sam said.

‘If it works, I’ll take it,’ Phil said.

The Ambivalence was a little unsteady around the sharp corners that made up the maze, but luckily no more so than the monster that patrolled it, which slipped two or three times as they fled back towards the garage in the hope it would provide them with enough shelter from the oncoming storm.

Before Benny had stopped the Ambivalence, Phil had slid open the front door and jumped out to accost Viktor Wendig.

‘Alright Wendig, you win,’ he said. ‘What do you want? Wait... where the hell has he gone?’

‘He stole my idea.’ Doc Nectarine’s disguised voice came from a doorway at the side of the garage. ‘And the lawnmower. They’ve all run for it, left that monster to run free.’

Right on cue, a blood curdling roar ripped through the air again, and the monster poked its blocky head out of the entrance to the maze.

Benny hit the button and the roller shutter door rolled shut behind them.

‘Somehow, I don’t think that will be enough,’ Sam said solemnly.

‘Where’s Charlie?’ Phil said.

Sam wandered over to the window and looked out at the patiently advancing dinosaur. ‘Wait a minute...’ she said to herself.

‘What are you doing?’ Phil asked.

‘You might want to look away,’ she replied, reaching across the bench.

There was a thump, and everything went black.

After a few moments, lights began to flicker on again inside the garage. Outside, night had fallen, and the abandoned theme park was once again lit only by stars and moon. Everyone was silent, listening intently for the dulcet tones of a digitised dinosaur.

There was a mighty crash, and a small purple vehicle stood, momentarily, on its nose, dropped from the too small jaw of a fibre glass tyrannosaur, and then fell back onto its wheels, broken and very, very sad.

‘My car!’ Sam, it seemed, had also opened her eyes, tentatively, but all the tentativity in the world wouldn’t stop a Mini owner getting incredibly upset at such blatant abuse of her beloved.

'I've had that car for ten years,' she said quietly. 'I was only its third owner.'

'Um,' Phil said, thinking he should say something, but with no idea what. 'Sorry for your loss.'

Sam grunted something in reply and then turned away, not wanting to look.

'What did you just do?' Phil asked.

Sam pointed to the bench, where the ancient black and white TV was just warming up again to show the simple K that indicated the ZX81 was powered up and awaiting instructions.

Phil stepped toward it; next to the ZX81 was a hefty four ring binder, bearing upon its cover the words "Commer PB Workshop Manual."

'Oops,' Sam said, affecting an air of innocence. 'Butterfingers!'

Phil chuckled. 'Brilliant,' he said. 'Drop a two thousand page hardback on the same bench and crash the system. I can't believe I didn't think of it myself!'

A single, slow clap echoed from the shadowy far corner of the building.

Phil turned to see Viktor Wendig getting out of what he now saw was a black Volkswagen van parked up in the shadows, Grell and Fella once again taking up positions at his sides.

'Oh great,' Sam said. 'Captain Cliché is back.'

'I thought you lot had gone to mow the lawns?' Benny said.

'In the dark?' Wendig paced evenly across the garage. 'No, merely waiting for the first test to reach its conclusion.'

'Sorry, I might have interrupted that,' Sam said.

'Not at all,' Wendig said. 'The test was 100% successful. I thank you for participating.'

## E

Wendig made a subtle gesture to his henchpersons, and Fella shrunk back into the darkness behind them.

When she emerged a moment later, she was shoving before her a pale, black clad young woman with her hands and mouth adorned with duct tape.

‘Charlie!’

‘Mmmm-mmmmm!’ Charlotte scowled at him from behind the duct tape.

‘Charlotte, sorry,’ Phil said. ‘Are you ok? Have they hurt you?’

‘Mm mmmm mmmm mmm mmmm mmmm mmmm mm.’ Charlotte held out her taped up wrists, just in case her point needed any further emphasis.

‘Let her go,’ Benny said, his voice bearing an undertone of being hacked off with Wendig’s shenanigans.

‘I’m not sure I can do that,’ Wendig said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Phil sighed. ‘What do you want?’

‘I’ll take that ZX81 for a start.’ Wendig nodded, and Grell started toward it.

‘You don’t need that.’ Benny stepped in front of the big man.

‘Maybe not,’ Wendig said, ‘but I believe the, um, RAM pack is mine.’

‘I’ll get it for you,’ Benny said, without taking his eyes off Grell.

‘Make sure you-’ Phil started.

‘Switch the power off first,’ Benny said. ‘I have used a ZX81 before.’

‘Sorry,’ Phil muttered.

Benny duly switched off the ZX81 and carefully removed the so-called memory expansion, reading the label - K-Tech Real Time - as he did so.

‘Not your average RAM pack,’ he muttered as he passed Phil.

‘Let her go,’ Phil said to Wendig, ‘and you can have your little accessory back.’

‘You’re not in a strong bargaining position,’ Wendig said, pointing subtly at Charlie.

Much as he hated the idea, Phil had to admit he sort of had a point.

‘Let the girl go,’ Benny said. ‘Take me instead.’

‘What?’ Sam said.

‘What?’ Phil agreed.

‘Mmmm?’ Charlotte said.

‘You can’t go with them,’ Phil whispered. ‘You’re the...’ Rather than say it aloud, he tried to eye mime the word, almost making himself permanently cross eyed.

‘I know what I am,’ Benny said to put him out of his misery.

‘Then you know we need you away from the Assembly.’

‘No,’ he whispered, ‘there is another.’

Wendig cleared his throat in an obvious manner.

‘Me and your peripheral here, in exchange for the girl,’ Benny said. ‘Do we have a deal?’

‘Very well,’ Wendig agreed, giving Charlotte a nudge toward the middle of the room.

Benny pulled a bunch of keys on a Lego spaceman keyring from his pocket and handed them to Phil. 'Look after the Ambivalence.'

'Um... ok...'

'And make sure the Zeddy works.'

'Sure,' Phil said, slightly baffled by Benny's last requests.

Benny nodded at Phil, then strode purposefully across the room.

Fella shoved Charlotte forward, and grabbed Benny roughly by the elbow in exchange.

Phil caught Charlotte in his arms as Benny was escorted over to the other van, lurking in the shadows like the Ambivalence's evil twin.

'Sam, get the Zeddy,' Phil said. 'Hook it up inside the van. Benny seemed to think it was important.'

'Maybe it still has the Hex?'

Phil ushered Charlotte into the van, and started gently extricating her from the duct tape while Sam set up the ZX81.

'Is it supposed to do that?' she asked.

Phil glanced up. 'Well, not unless you told it to.'

'I didn't.'

Phil stared closer at the single word on the screen in front of them: GREETINGS.

'Mmmmm!'

'Oh, sorry Charlie.'

'Mmmm-mmmmm!'

'Charlotte, sorry.'

'Phil!'

'What!?'

'It wants to play a game,' Sam said.

'I'm kinda tied-' Charlotte glared at him. 'Busy,' he finished. 'Let me untie Charlotte; your computer is freaking me out.' Charlotte nodded eagerly.

'Alright,' Phil said, trading places with Sam.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO PLAY A GAME?

'You seriously didn't do anything?' Phil asked.

'Just plugged it in like you asked,' Sam said from behind Charlotte.

'Well, just don't start playing Global Thermonuclear War.'

HOW ABOUT 3D MONSTER MAZE?

The words appeared on the screen as if typed by unseen hands.

'I've played enough of that to last a lifetime, buddy,' Phil said. 'Wouldn't you prefer a nice game of chess?' Phil typed the question as he spoke it.

FINE, the computer replied. 1K OR 16K CHESS?

'Who is this?' Phil asked, peering closely at the innocent looking little computer on the bench.

I AM DEXY, YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURHOOD ZX81.

'Wait, you can hear me?' Phil exclaimed. 'Now I'm getting freaked out!'

Sam had freed Charlotte's hands and was looking at the screen, while Charlotte removed the unpleasantly effective tape from across her face.

'Did the Entelechus do that?' Sam asked.

'A force directing growth and life,' Phil nodded. 'It actualised a ZX81.'

'Right,' Charlotte said once she was able to make full use of her vocal chords again. 'I'm gonna make that cockfoster regret doing that!'

And before Phil could react, Charlotte was stomping toward the Assembly's van.

'Charlie!'

'Charlotte!'

'Both of you, come back here before you get taped up again!'

Phil and Sam chased Charlotte across the garage, but she was yanking open the van's back door as they reached her.

'How rude!' Wendig said, staring at them.

Grell and Fella started to rise, but Wendig seated them with a gesture.

'It doesn't matter now,' he said. 'The program is running.'

'What program?' even as Phil spoke, he noticed a ZX81 set up in the back of Wendig's van, much like his own, but this one now had the K-Tech Real Time device plugged into it. It was also starting to spark, then lightning surrounded the tiny keyboard like an 80s film effect.

'Never mind,' Phil said. 'I think we'll just let bygones be bygones and leave you to it...'

Phil grabbed Charlotte and dragged her back toward the Ambivalence in the hope it would offer some protection from whatever sorcery Wendig was working in his van.

Doc Nectarine had helped himself to a seat in the Ambivalence, but at least had the decency to help Sam and Charlotte up into the van when they ran over. Phil followed, glaring at Nectarine as he closed the doors behind them until the 80s lightning effect in the far corner of the garage, now completely covering the Assembly's van, distracted him.

Then it exploded.

## F

The explosion - Phil was reminded of the sonic booms and trails of flame in the Back to the Future movies, in that this was nothing at all like that - was followed by a sudden, all-encompassing silence. An eerie silence that seemed to stretch into eternity, moments passing that way, as the world anticipated the inevitable...

In reality, it could only have been a second, if that; but the world slowed, time froze, and then... the world juddered to a halt, time snapped back into place, the ground shivered beneath them, and everything - like, everything, the sky, the Ambivalence, their clothes, the whole nine yards - turned the clearest, most pure and pristine white Phil had ever seen, except of course he still hadn't seen it because he had to close his eyes against the brightness.

Along with his travelling companions, Phil huddled in the back of the Ambivalence, not bearing to look, until he heard a gentle 'crump', as of a Commer PB going over a speed bump as it travelled through time and reality, and felt the bump of the Ambivalence hitting something akin to the real world once again.

Phil slowly opened his eyes, waited for the heavily pixelated spots to clear, and carefully reached up to peer out of the window.

'Where are we?' asked Charlotte.

'Exactly where we were, I think,' Phil said, looking around at the dinosaurs that roamed the area.

Actually, now he came to think about it, the dinosaurs didn't really roam; they more sort of stood stock still, statue-like; it was

the people that roamed, cameras in hands, ice cream in other hands, candy floss or balloons in others.

And the screaming - Phil suddenly became aware that there was, in fact, screaming, off in the background somewhere, now the silence had cleared - was not the abject terror and fear for life and limb that sharing an acre with a herd of velociraptors should, logically, produce; it was more of an adrenaline fuelled form of excitement, as if dinosaur hunting were some kind of extreme sport, or...

'A roller coaster,' he said.

'What?'

'We're on a roller coaster,' Phil explained.

'Well that's just silly,' Charlotte said, in her usual derogatory way, the way teenagers instinctively have with their parents.

'That's as may be,' Phil said, 'but nevertheless, we are on a roller coaster.'

As if to prove his point, he allowed the Ambivalence to be rammed from behind by a stegosaurus themed roller coaster train at just that moment.

'Should we, perhaps, get off?' Sam suggested.

'I'm working on it,' Phil said, climbing over the front seats, fumbling the unfamiliar keys, and failing to get the Ambivalence into gear. 'This thing weighs an absolute ton, we'll never get around that loop!'

Eventually, he did get it into something approaching a useful gear, and managed to pull away before the roller coaster train shoved them unceremoniously along the track to who knew where.

Driving the Ambivalence was something of a roller coaster at the best of times; taking such a wallowing and unpredictable

vehicle along the twisting, turning track they were now following seemed somewhat of an unnecessary extension of what was already an unnecessary adrenaline rush.

Nonetheless, they found themselves being chased along the tracks, a cheerful looking stegosaurus pulling a train full of entertained, but slightly terrified, passengers along close behind them.

'Phil?' Sam whispered as the track ahead of them took a sudden turn for the upward. 'We have to get off the tracks. Are your eyes closed?' she added.

'I'm praying,' Phil said, as if that answered everything.

Someone shouted his name. Several someones, in fact. Actually, all the someones. Not just his name, either; they were shouting at him to look what he was bloody well doing and get the van off the sodding roller coaster.

Suddenly snapped back to whatever variant of reality this was, Phil opened his eyes, tried to take in his increasingly bizarre surroundings in a fraction of a second, failed, and yanked the steering wheel to the right anyway, in sheer blind hopefulness.

There was a crash, some bumping, much screaming, and no death.

'STOP!!!' yelled all the someones.

Phil rammed his foot back to the floor again, this time on the other pedal.

It was similarly ineffective, but eventually momentum gave up and found something else to do, and the Ambivalence came to an uncomfortable halt.

'Are we nearly there yet?' Charlotte wisecracked.

Phil finally opened his eyes and looked around. 'Oh crap,' he said, for they were now stuck on the inside of the roller coaster, in a place where only qualified roller coaster engineers had any

right to be, and certainly one from which extricating a large retired ambulance, once used for carrying large retired people to and from fun days out quite unlike that which was being had by many at Palaeozoic Park, was going to be an epic task.

‘We’re going to have to knock another fence out,’ Sam said.

‘I was afraid that might be the case,’ Phil said, looking around for an alternative. ‘Unfortunately, this time we may have an audience.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Sam said. ‘We can outrun them.’

‘We can’t run,’ Phil said. ‘We need the Ambivalence.’

‘Good point,’ Sam said. ‘Well made.’

‘So what are we going to do?’ Charlotte asked.

‘Well,’ Phil said, starting the engine. ‘We certainly can’t sit here all day. Somebody is bound to notice a high-top Dodge Spacevan suddenly having appeared in the middle of their roller coaster.’

‘You would think so,’ Sam said, ‘but nobody seemed that bothered when it literally appeared on the roller coaster.’

‘Minds on other things, I imagine,’ Phil said.

‘Could be,’ Sam said. ‘Takes a lot of concentration to queue that dedicatedly.’

‘Why don’t we just hide until it’s dark?’ Charlotte asked.

‘Maybe you missed the part where we have this high-top Dodge Spacevan to discreetly hide away as well as ourselves?’ Phil said. ‘You can’t just put a Commer in your pocket and hope the security guards think you’re pleased to see them, you know.’

‘How about over there?’ Doc Nectarine pointed to a gap in a bramble thicket about the size, and indeed shape, of a Commer PB, under one of the inner rail loops.

‘Worth a look,’ Phil said, and started to pick a route through the various bits of scrub and litter and associated debris that lurked in the less accessible bits of under a roller coaster.

When they reached the aforementioned thicket, they found there was, in fact, a nice Dodge width gap between two bushes, almost made to measure, and they parked there, out of sight from the park, and decided to wait until closing time, after which they could probably make something of a run for freedom. Or even a drive for it, if they felt brave enough.

Dark was still in the process of falling when they discovered exactly why their little hiding place had appeared to be so perfectly made to measure.

‘What’s that?’ Charlotte said suddenly.

‘That,’ Phil said, ‘is the reason these paths are almost perfectly Dodge width.’

‘What?’ Charlotte said.

‘It’s a Commer PB,’ Sam said.

The van was coming along the bumpy, grass strewn concrete lane which led, rather conveniently, from a gate in the ride’s outer fence to... well, plainly to their current hiding place, and beyond. ‘Get in the van,’ he said. ‘We need to get moving.’

They all ran for the Ambivalence, Phil the only one not to trip over someone else on his way in. He had the Ambivalence stumbling along the uneven semi-overgrown road before he noticed Sam was still clambering in through the back doors, and braked again, causing her to tumble in and thump into the back of the front seats.

Doc Nectarine, who was just about to jump in through the open front door, instead jumped into the A-pillar and staggered back, cursing and holding a bloodied nose.

'Doppig or goig, bake up your bloody bide!' he said, stepping up into the front seat.

'Is everyone in?' Phil asked once the doors had all closed around them, and the maintenance van was closing in behind them.

'I am,' somebody groaned from the back somewhere.

In the absence of any further response, Phil put the Ambivalence back into gear and put his foot heavily to the floor - which, the Ambivalence being a slightly past its best example of 1970s engineering, had little discernible effect.

'Doppig or goig, bake up your bloody bide!' Doc Nectarine said again.

'Shut up until you can speak English again,' Phil said, keeping his foot planted on the floor until, eventually, the Ambivalence began to shuffle forward again, regretfully not quite as quickly as the maintenance van was approaching from behind, but its slowness was counteracted by Phil's lack of giving a monkeys about the surroundings, the ride under which they were hiding, and indeed his vehicle in comparison to the maintenance team behind him.

'Hold on to something,' he said. 'This could get a little rough.'

'For a change,' Charlotte mumbled.

'Preferably hold onto something other than me,' Phil added, looking pointedly at Doc Nectarine.

'Sorry,' he said, letting go of Phil's arm just in time for him to steer and swerve out of the way of a large and rather sturdy looking pillar, holding up a large and rather scary looking curve on the rollercoaster.

Behind them there was a bang and a creak, as the maintenance van didn't quite miss the same pillar, giving Phil a chance to accelerate away. Well, it would have done if accelerate had been in the Dodge Spacevan handbook.

The Ambivalence continued to rattle ahead, bursting through pointless shrubbery, bouncing over the edges of the paths that criss-crossed the space beneath the roller coaster, until eventually it spilled out onto the main road through the park, and Phil accelerated away from the maintenance van behind them.

'We can't outrun them forever,' Sam pointed out.

Phil had no intention of slowing down even slightly, despite the fact that the Ambivalence was swaying around insanely and making many of its passengers a trifle seasick.

'Those guys have a job to do,' he said, 'but hopefully, once we're out of the park, we're not part of it.'

'There's an exit!' Sam said suddenly.

'Crap!' Phil said, missing the turn and knocking over a plaster Archaeopteryx.

After reversing back over the poor dead dinobird, he stopped the engine to listen for any sign of the other van coming their way.

'I think we're alone now,' Phil whispered. 'Let's see if we can get out this way.'

It seemed they had found a staff entrance so obscure that the gate didn't even have a padlock; Doc Nectarine graciously held it open as Phil drove through, and closed it again behind them.

'So what do we do now?' Sam asked, once they were cruising sedately along the main road.

'I don't know,' Phil admitted. 'But I suspect we need to find another chip whisperer.'

'What's a chip whisperer?' Nectarine asked.

'I was hoping you might be able to tell us,' Phil said. 'Benny said there was another.'

'I bet he meant you!' Charlotte said, looking up at Nectarine.

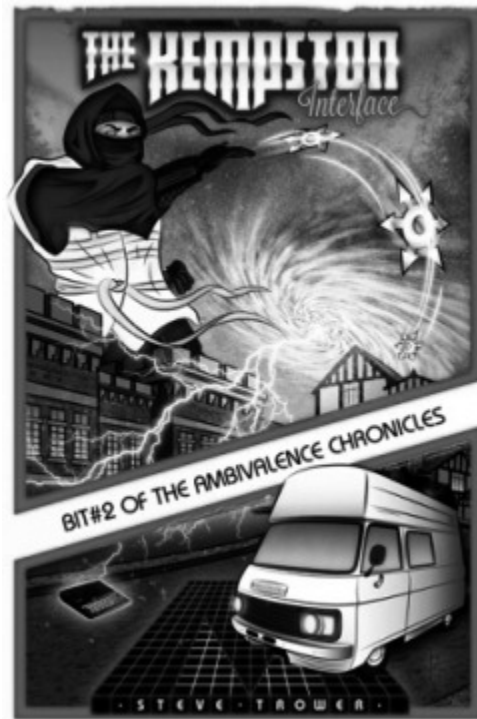
'Maybe we should be asking Dexy,' Sam suggested.

'Dexy?' Nectarine looked around, in case he had missed a member of the Ambivalence crew.

Sam pointed at the little Sinclair mounted on the bench. 'We also have a sentient ZX81.'

Doc Nectarine looked at the tiny computer, to which Phil had recently connected a chain of three mismatched peripherals. 'I am way out of my depth here.'

The Ambivalence will return in  
Bit#2: The Kempston Interface<sup>1</sup>



Also by the same author:  
The Ballad of Matthew Smith<sup>2</sup>  
Countless as the Stars<sup>3</sup>

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## Author's Note

Until recently I have been referring to *The Ambivalence Chronicle* as 'a comic fantasy in 8 bits', mainly because comic fantasy is a recognised sub-genre; however, now the overall arc has started to take shape, it is much more about computers and time travel than it is about magic, so it has become 'a sci-fi comedy in 8 bits' instead.

There is, however, a definite underpinning of magic; I had to have this because ZX81s don't work the way the story needs them to. They are also not rare in real life, and anyone with a genuine interest in retro computers would be unlikely to pay £100 for one, but because the ZX81 is part of popular history in the UK, and the (spoilers!) idea of a sentient ZX81 seemed fun to write about, I took some artistic licence and rolled with it. I hope fellow retrogamers will enjoy the story for what it is.

*The Ambivalence Chronicles* has been quietly marinating in the author's brain since 2009. The main reason it has taken so long to get this far is that at some stage I realised I was writing the bits out of sequence: the story I wrote for NaNoWriMo 2009 will probably end up as Bit 7 or 8, and what should have been the first part, first written two years ago, subsequently got bumped down to Bit#3.

What all this means, however, is that Bits 2 and 3 followed along fairly quickly after this one - I hope you'll stay along for the ride.

# The Big Easter Egg Hunt

The Chip Whisperer takes its inspiration from a multitude of sources, from the ZX81's killer app to classic 80s movies by way of popular music; retrogaming and pop culture aficionados will, I hope, have fun looking for the various Easter eggs scattered through the story - some are more obscure than others! To add to the challenge we've made a monthly competition of it, so get your Lateral Thinking Cap on and start hunting!

Some Rules:

1. A prizewinner will be selected on the first day of each month from August 2017, from entries received during the previous month.
2. References will be checked against the author's master list. References not on the list are accidental, or purely in your imagination.
3. The master list contains 43 references; in the likely event of no-one correctly identifying them all, the entrant finding the highest number will be declared the winner.
4. In the event no-one identifying more than half (22), there will be no winner for that month.
5. Non-winning entrants may resubmit for the following month(s) until they get lucky.
6. If there is more than one winning entry in any month, a random selection will be made, and the draw posted online for fairness.
7. Physical prizes may vary if the winner is outside the

UK.

8. Email your list of references, along with the chapter/ebook location, and what you think it refers to, to [gunter@stevetrower.co.uk](mailto:gunter@stevetrower.co.uk).
9. Entrants will be added to a mailing list; but we use it so infrequently you probably won't even notice.

About the Easter Eggs:

1. The Easter Eggs are references to films, TV, music and computer games hidden within The Chip Whisperer.
2. Specific references to games, films etc as themselves (e.g. Phil's pristine copy of Yie-Ar Kung Fu) do not count as Easter Eggs.
3. References may be a name, a single word quote, a scene-long homage, or anything in between.
4. Basically, if you think I'm making a nod towards some other form of media, I probably am.

To give an example (which doesn't count - you're getting no clues!):

The Big Easter Egg Hunt/Location 83; email address [gunter@stevetrower.co.uk](mailto:gunter@stevetrower.co.uk); refers to the gunters in Ernest Cline's Ready Player One.

In reverse order of awesomeness, the prizes will be:

Bragging rights.

Something cocoa-based and ovoid in nature.

A limited edition paperback of one of Steve Trower's books.

## Original Soundtrack

As with all of my books, there is a soundtrack of tracks which inspired or helped me along the way during the writing of this story. As you might expect, it leans heavily towards chiptunes and 8-bit style music, along with a few tracks from films which also inspired certain scenes. If you want to listen, you can find it at <https://open.spotify.com/user/jetsetwonko/playlist/1eneqr-Ll3N25XGGPjy7sEp>

The wonder of ebooks should make all this a lot easier and more integrated, but the legal and technical difficulties surrounding it are beyond the scope of this indie author.

## About the Author

Steve Trower is a Christian, geek dad, and part-time creator of parallel universes. He lives in the once and future capital of Mercia (known in this reality as central England) with two daughters, one wife, and a Mini that thinks it's a Ghostbuster. In between – and frequently at – a series of menial jobs he managed to write non-fiction pieces for Mini Magazine, Model Collector and Best of British magazines, as well as practicing the dark art of novel writing.

Having decided that making stuff up was a lot more fun than being bound by those 'fact' thingies magazine editors seem so keen on, he chose to concentrate on that, and now has two completely fictitious universes to take care of.

Readers of more serious science fiction with a spiritual twist can find out about Countless as the Stars at [www.stevetrower.com](http://www.stevetrower.com)<sup>1</sup>.

For more humour with an 80s gaming twist, The Ballad of Matthew Smith is freely available from all ebook vendors, and The Ambivalence Chronicles will continue in 2017.

Steve Trower lives on the internet at [stevetrower.co.uk](http://stevetrower.co.uk)<sup>2</sup> and tweets infrequently as [@SPTrowerEsq](https://twitter.com/SPTrowerEsq)<sup>3</sup>.

[Sign up here for updates on future projects and the chance to get a Bit of The Ambivalence Chronicles for free!](#)<sup>4</sup>

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1. <http://www.stevetrower.com>

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