

1. Second Time

What is mind? – no matter
What is matter? – never mind
Whately Carrington: 'Matter Mind and Meaning'

Amber was crawling, her nose inches from the musty carpet, when she sensed something ahead. She stopped, willing her eyes to slice through the darkness. Nothing: just a chasm of black. With one hand she reached out, then smashed into something hard. Stifling a yell, she explored with her fingers. It was a wall. Her breath came out in a long, relieved sigh and she shifted position to cram against the wall, drawing knees up to chin to make herself as small as possible. Good; she had made it this far without being caught.

She checked her watch which glowed a ghostly 2.35 am; still plenty of time before the guards did their next round. Then she peered into the gloom, waiting for her eyes to adjust and make sense of things. She had never been here before – yet she knew every inch of this place. The stolen map, with all of today's codes, was deep in her jeans pocket. From it she knew this was the laboratory on the fourth floor – the only place with access to Pitt's Playpen.

The blackness was lifting: vague shapes emerged, taking on familiar forms. Computer tables, chairs, and yes, if she strained her eyes, she could just make out a door on the opposite wall, with its faintly glowing code box. That must be it. Not far now. She stretched each leg in turn, then started crawling again, carefully avoiding tangles of cables behind each desk.

She was almost there. The door was closer.

Then something hit her, an electric kick to her whole body. She stopped moving, stopped breathing.

She must have brushed a bare wire – but it wasn't like that. It was more like her body

sensing something – something hard and dangerous.

Her eyes flicked to left and right, boring into dark corners, under tables, behind chairs. Nothing.

She moved again, but again the shock hit, like an invisible barrier directly in front.

She sat back on her heels, confused. There was nothing.... but maybe... there was *something*. Faint and small, a hint of rainbow colour, suspended in the air and swirling like oil on water.

It was then that she knew who it must be and what he was doing. She tried a timid whisper: “Khiza...?”

The rainbow colours burst briefly into life, spinning like a miniature Catherine wheel. For an instant she glimpsed his face behind the rainbow, tiny, as if down a long tunnel, his jaw set and determined as he fought to reach her. But the colours were already fading, like a distant receding galaxy, coiling him away beyond reach into a pinpoint of white light. The light blinked and was gone. *He* was gone.

As the light vanished her body was released and she could move again. She crawled to the patch of empty air where the rainbow had swirled. There was nothing to show that Khiza had ever been.

She was shaking so much she needed to sit. But as she carefully manoeuvred her legs into position, her left hand brushed something grainy and rough. It was a tiny spill of sand strewn over the carpet, right in front of the door. She bent low over it, breathing in the sun-seared smell of Africa, of Khiza, and her heart faltered; it was too much. He had nearly made it through. After all these months of loneliness and loss, he had come so close to reaching her.

But why had he tried to get through here, right inside the labs? And why had she felt his presence like a barrier?

Amber’s back prickled, an instinctive animal reaction, and she swivelled to face the

door to Pitt's Playpen. For an instant she knew the answer: evil lay behind that door and Khiza was trying to warn her.

Then common sense kicked in. That was stupid. There could be no evil in an English boarding school, only secrets.

She glanced around the lab at tiny red lights blinking rhythmically, giving away the positions of concealed cameras. And there were hidden microphones and motion sensors as well, an intricate security system supported by guards. Whatever this school was hiding, they were pretty big secrets to need all this.

Her fists clenched. This whole set up stank. She had to find out what was going on. No-one else had the guts; not even James who'd stolen the maps and codes. James was shit-scared, like the others, waiting in the dorm till she returned. But she wasn't scared, and Khiza wouldn't be either. If he'd got through he'd have been the first into that lab.

She gazed up at the door looming above her and guarding its secrets. This was the really tough bit. James hadn't been able to steal these codes. All he'd said was: *You'll get in. Just use the ability you have – I know you'll get in.*

Did he know? Did this clever kid really know about her 'ability'? How could he? No one but Khiza knew. Not her mum, not even her dad when he was alive... but James was right, she didn't need codes. With her 'ability' breaking in should be a pushover.

Shuffling to face the door, she sat cross-legged like at assembly, then swept her hair behind her ears in one quick, decisive movement. She put her hands together on her lap, closed her eyes, and relaxed with deep, slow breaths.

And as she breathed a vision splashed into her mind of the first time this had happened. How old was she then? About five, maybe, and playing alone in the alley behind her house, making patterns in the dust with her new necklace. An African boy, a kid about her own age, had suddenly appeared – from nowhere. It didn't matter: she was young enough to expect the

world to be surprising, and they had played together quite happily – until something made them both look up. A dog was bounding towards them, a monstrous black thing with slavering jaws and yellow eyes. The dog made a great leap and launched itself at Amber's throat.

But it never reached her.

Because time slowed down.

The dog was suddenly floating in mid air, like in a dream; even its growls were lengthened into low suspended moans. Amber remembered staring into its open jaws, only inches from her eyes, and watching as a globule of spit expanded in increments. The spit tipped over, ever so slowly, out of the dog's mouth, dangling like a greasy bubble on a string.

It was then that terror took over and she'd leapt to her feet. The strange boy disappeared back to his own world as Amber ran round the motionless, suspended dog, and charged for her house. Only as she slammed the back door, screaming for her mum, did time catch up with her again.

After that, everything changed. Her mum and dad hadn't believed her, not even about the boy. But this strange slowing down, this 'Second Time', occurred again, and then again. And these were the times when the boy she came to know as Khiza, appeared. And when Second Time happened, Amber knew their bodies really changed, their cells separating and sliding around the atoms of the world. Even solid objects became like liquid which she and Khiza could move through and beyond.

These memories vanished as Amber breathed in again, deeply. Khiza had tried to use Second Time just now. He had failed, but maybe she could do it, if only she could get into the right frame of mind.

She relaxed again and held her breath... concentrating... waiting...

At last her breath released and her body slumped. It was no use; it wouldn't come. She

felt a rising scream of anger and frustration. This poxy school had stripped away everything to do with her previous life. Second Time had gone; she had lost contact with Khiza. She had no home anymore, no dad, and her mum was....

Amber stopped herself consciously and with a violent effort from going down that road. It led nowhere. Just frustration. Then she glanced at the door again. It was impossible to break in now: her only hope was to get back undetected. And yet, she thought as she sat there pondering, this defeat could still appear like a victory. She smirked as a complicated and exciting story began to form in her mind. It could sound brilliant. It would be a cinch. She could tell James and the others about the guards she'd dodged, about their weapons and traps. And she could take something from this lab, to prove she'd got this far.

She turned, scanning the room for something to pinch, seeing on the edge of a table what looked like a code book, top secret. That would do. She started to move towards it – and then stopped. A faint sound was wafting through the door behind her, the sound of voices.

Amber shuffled back to the door and pressed an ear to it, hearing the voices getting louder as if the speakers were coming towards her. She recognised one; it was the Headmaster. What the hell was he doing in the labs at – she checked her watch – at 3.05 in the morning? She pressed closer, listening intently.

“I had expected better of you, Dr Cheung. This subject is a failure. You will have to change subjects.”

Change subjects? What did the Head mean? She knew Dr Cheung was an important scientist, but was that how you spoke to such a man, telling him to change subjects, like a pupil changing from History to French?

There was an indistinct mumbling from Dr Cheung, and then, louder still, the Headmaster continued: “I will hear no more of this.” He was clearly getting angry. “These results are poor. You will choose another subject.”

There was a fumbling at the door and a gentle hiss as an electronic bolt slid out of place. The door to Pitt's Playpen was about to open. With a start, Amber realised she must hide, and quickly.

She had just started moving when she heard, louder still, something totally unexpected: "No, Dr Cheung, you cannot have Amber Brigantia, not yet."

Amber froze.

The door opened and she looked up, full into the face of the Headmaster, Dr Lawrence Pitt.

The lights came on and from all around alarms blared.