

## Excerpt Chapter 13

### THE FACILITY

I need to get back quickly, he thought: we've a lot of planning to do. Pushing himself into the shaft, he started to descend the ladder as fast as possible. Climbing rhythmically down gave him time to think. Plans, ideas, some mad, some sensible, charged round his head, making it fit to burst. So engrossed was he that he'd stopped thinking about the ladder and missed his footing on a rung, causing him to tip backwards into the air. Frantically clutching for the ladder, he started to fall. The floor hurtled towards him. Closing his eyes, he waited for the end. Everything had slowed down in his mind: all his adventures flashed by, but most of all the disappointment of letting his friends down. Suddenly, something clutched at the straps on his rucksack. His fall was stopped in such a bone jarring way that his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

It took a few seconds for what had happened to sink in. Eric looked around in amazement. He was facing the wall with the ladder behind him, hanging in the air, some fifty feet from the bottom of the shaft; something had caught in his rucksack. Struggling to turn around to free himself, he quickly realised it was impossible. Whatever he was caught on was beyond his reach. He was stuck there, with no hope of getting down. Dangling there helplessly, he considered his options: if he took his rucksack off the fall could kill him. Even if he survived, they were bound to hear the thump as he hit the ceiling. Worse still, he could go straight through the floor and be

captured. None were sensible options. If only he'd brought Nabi with him none of this would have happened. How stupid I've been, he thought. Helplessly hanging there, time dragged by. He worried about his friends. Anger coursed through his veins. Personal vanity had got in the way of common sense. He may be a leader but now he knew he couldn't do everything himself. Despair overcame him at the realisation that he'd learnt this lesson too late.

Falling into an uneasy sleep, strange dreams buffeted him. He seemed outside of himself, looking in. The head of the monstrous creature in the blue uniform towered above him, tongue forked like a serpent. The hideous spectre laughed at him as he cowered in the corner of the room, his coat shining colourfully one minute and turning a dull white the next. The more the monster laughed, the duller the white became. He dreamt of his friends, walking away into darkness as the vile vision flicked putrid balls of venom from its snake tongue at them. Upon hitting them, the colour immediately drained from their coats. Eric, powerless to intervene, watched helplessly as this horrible scene unfolded in front of him, repeating itself over and over.

Waking with a jump, Eric heard something beneath him. Hanging there helplessly, his spirits sank as the noise came ever nearer. Just short of the shaft the noise stopped. Now the only sound was his thumping heart.