

The Other Side of the Portal

A John Smith Short Story

by

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Published on behalf of the author by Bickering on Sea

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The Other Side of the Portal

It had been a week since John Smith had emerged, frightened, from the mercury surface of the portal. The dimensional key was in the thigh pocket of his hiking trousers, and he had set up camp near to the place where he had come out.

John had tried the key soon after, causing a portal shaped ripple to appear in the air where, he imagined, if Professor Bilman was to be believed, the portal in the shed had been constructed in his own dimension. He hadn't dared to use it. If he emerged into the shed once more, he would be in trouble. If he emerged into a different dimension, however, who knew what might be waiting for him?

He remembered the Professor talking about an infinite number of dimensions, and his inability to anchor the portal, so once it was closed there was almost no chance of returning to the same dimension. Therefore, as far as John could tell, he would almost certainly be unable to return to his home dimension, no matter how many attempts he made. He could keep trying to get home, for as long as the portal key had the power, until he was an old man, and never manage it.

That thought had hit him like a lead weight, causing bitter tears to run down his cheeks, as he grieved for the loss of his parents, home and friends. He'd even, unthinkingly, reached into his pocket for his phone, with some vague notion of calling them to tell them what had happened and how much he missed them, but there was no signal. In fact, none of the apps seemed to work as they were supposed to, and it didn't take him long to conclude that he might as well turn it off and preserve the power, in case he needed it for something else.

It was a good thing, however, as far as survival was concerned, that he was an Explorer Scout. John was able to set up camp, find edible roots, even go trapping and fishing for food. It was an even better thing that, when he had walked through the portal in an attempt to escape the Professor, he had been carrying his rucksack, ready to go on a camp with his friends. (One might even say that it had almost been planned by a higher power, or author).

John had then spent the entire week considering his predicament and scouting out the area where he was camped. As far as he could tell, there was no evidence of human habitation anywhere nearby. The bay and land where, in his dimension, Bickering on Sea was situated, was entirely unspoiled. Nature seemed to have had her way, and there was a multitude of small animals and birds without any sign of larger predators (for which he was grateful). The hills surrounding the bay, including where he expected the castle to be, were forested, with tall trees and sparse undergrowth. The place where he had, for want of a better description, ‘landed’, was meadowland, with tall grasses, which susurrated in the breeze and were interspersed with clumps of short trees, heavy with fruit and nuts. It was, he had to admit, a paradise.

When John unfolded his Ordinance Survey Map of Branchestershire, he found that, other than the area where Fisherman’s Quay had been, the geographical makeup of the area was almost identical to that of his home dimension. Even when he ranged farther up and down the coast, and inland, it was as if this dimension was more or less identical, only having removed all of the buildings and roads, leaving just pristine nature.

While there wasn’t a sign that any person had been in the area before, in the place where Beacran’s Ring was situated in his own dimension, there were no stones, but that precise area of forest was clear of trees and undergrowth. Instead, there was a circular space of lush grass with curious mounds which, if John’s memory served him correctly, were at the exact places of the stones he knew. He looked extra carefully for signs of life or habitation in that area, but still there were none. Just the curiosity that the small animal tracks avoided the grass circle completely. In this land of unfettered nature and wildlife, John found himself standing in the grass circle alone, filled with a terrible sense of foreboding and discomfort. He returned to his camp as quickly as he could and didn’t go back.

After a week alone, John was, as his dad would have said, being driven up the wall. Except there were no walls. He was talking to himself and itching to do something more than camping and foraging. He considered walking inland, to see if he could find some human inhabitants, but couldn’t shake the thought that it would do no good. This dimension was, he felt certain, uninhabited by people.

It was on a warm evening, while he was eating a meal of trout and greens, cooked over a campfire overlooking the bay of Bickering, that John formulated

his plan. He knew that the mild weather wouldn't last forever, and thought he was probably in the early autumn. If his memory of schoolwork was correct, before humans had messed with the world's ecosystem the winters in Britain were pretty severe. Therefore, if he was to survive, he would have, either to make a proper shelter and lay down stores to wait out the cold weather until spring, or move to another dimension where there were people and shelter. The thought of four or more months alone in a cold shelter, eating dried fruit and fish was not an idea he relished, so John concluded it was time to try and move through the dimensions, in an effort, no matter how small the chance, to find a way home.

If he was right, time was passing at the same speed in all of the dimensions, so it was unlikely the Professor would be expecting him to return after a week. And, since the chances of that happening were statistically almost non-existent, it had to be worth a try. After all, depressing as it might sound, the worst that could happen is that he would die on the journey. It was a reflection of the bleakness of his thoughts that he concluded death was inevitable for everyone at some point and, since it could just as easily happen during a hard winter in this dimension as on the journey to another dimension, he would rather take the chance to not die alone.

John made the best preparations he could. First, he prepared some supplies, in case he moved to a dimension without food; packing fruit, greens, and cooked meat and fish into packages. He packed the supplies in bits of cut up shirt and some food boxes he had had in his pack. He did the same with water, collecting as much fresh water from the nearby stream in his Camelbak and bottle as he could.

Next, John found a stick in the nearby wood that was heavy enough to use as a weapon. With his pocket-knife he smoothed a handle, before hefting it in practice, dispatching unknown attackers like a samurai. He had considered using the pocketknife as a weapon too, but decided it was too small and as liable to fold up and cut off his fingers as it was to hurt anything which might attack him.

Finally, he packed up his camp, folding away the tent and taking care to leave the area as undisturbed as possible. The dimension he was in, he considered, was so pristine that it seemed almost sacrilegious to leave it in a mess. Even if there was no one to see it.

He took his phone out of his pack and turned it on. No signal, as he knew

there wouldn't be, and an 87% charge. He also dug out his portable charger, to make sure it was in his pocket, together with his pocketknife.

When he felt as prepared as he could be, John flicked the switch on the portal key that he had taken from Professor Bilman and, in the middle of the meadow, in the same place from which he had emerged eight days before, watched as a silvery wall unfolded. It looked like a floating screen of rippling mercury. John walked all the way around it and wondered, just for a moment, how it worked without all the equipment he had seen in the shed. He concluded that he didn't have a clue, so he put the thought aside and, wearing his backpack and carrying everything he needed, stood in front of the shining, rippling wall.

John took several deep breaths to calm himself, and put aside the dread thoughts that were threatening to climb out of his head, before pushing his arm through the wall quickly with his phone and taking a photo. He withdrew it as rapidly as he could. Urgently, he dropped his phone back into his pocket and set himself, breathing hard, club at the ready, awaiting whatever might come out of the portal. He remembered the taloned arm in the Professor's shed, and tensed himself, but there was nothing. Just silence, which stretched out. Still, John stood there, breathing hard, unable to move. He almost had to shake himself free before he could move again and almost relax.

Lowering the club, John took his phone out and looked at the picture he had taken. It was dark on the other side of the portal, but that was about all he could make out. He'd moved so quickly that everything in the picture was nothing more than a blur. Taking another breath to steady himself, John tried again; more slowly pushing his hand through the portal, holding it as steady as he could, pressing the screen, and bringing it back to see what might be on the other side.

This time the picture showed that it was still dark, but there were clearly shapes of houses, just like the ones where he lived. The photo itself was taken from the end of a garden, where the shed had been, looking towards the houses. John surmised, however, that it wasn't the dimension he'd come from. Had it been, the photo would have been of the inside of Professor Bilman's shed. The garden he looked into, however, was completely sparse, with nothing growing in the dusty, moon illuminated earth.

John made a decision, put his phone in his pocket, hefted the club, took another deep breath, as if he were about to dive into cold water, and stepped through the portal.

He was shocked that, as he stepped out, it was utterly silent. All he could hear was his own heartbeat. He looked left and right in the gloomy pre-dawn light, but could see nothing other than bare earth and seemingly deserted buildings. He relaxed and sighed in relief... and instantly it was like his chest and throat were on fire. There was no air; just sandy, boiling pain that was so suddenly violent it nearly knocked him off his feet.

Resisting the temptation to fall to his knees gasping and clawing at his throat, John stepped backwards through the portal again, to land on the verdant grass of the virgin meadow, gulping lungfuls of clean, sweet air. Each one felt like cool, pure water on his parched, burning throat.

In time, the agony passed and his breathing returned to something more like normal. He wondered what on earth had happened. The dimension had looked so like home, but utterly silent and devoid of life. Not surprising, if the air was like that. What the hell could have happened?

John stayed where he was, collapsed on the grass, staring at the liquid doorway. He found his thoughts turning to a history lesson in school, when they had talked about miners using canaries to test the air in tunnels. There had been a heated debate about animal cruelty, but now he understood that if it was the canary or him, he would choose the canary every time. He also concluded that he needed some way to test the air of a dimension before walking through.

The dimension where he sat was teeming with small, harmless creatures, who were very curious about their strange visitor. So, John set about making two small cages from some of the things in his rucksack. Then, leaving his equipment in the meadow, he went in search of small animals, regretfully catching three field mice and putting them in. Then, using some dry roots and the elephant tape he kept in the rucksack, he constructed another small cage on the end of a sturdy stick. He didn't really want to hurt the animals he'd caught, but he didn't feel like he had a choice.

Knowing that the dimension beyond the portal had poisonous air, he tried his contraption out, by poking it through the doorway with one of the mice in it. John counted to 'ten elephants' before bringing the cage back through. Inside, the mouse was very dead, lying in the bottom with his little body contorted in the same pain John experienced barely an hour before. He felt sadness for the mouse, and then had another idea.

Setting off to hunt once more, John returned to his rucksack with several large cockroach-like insects and did the same experiment. For some

reason, it was easier to threaten the life of a cockroach, rather than a small furry mammal. But after another ten elephant time, the cockroach which came back were perfectly fine. Damn! Reluctantly, he released them and caught some more mice to make sure he had a supply, just in case.

Dusk was drawing in when John flicked the switch of the dimensional key to make the mercury-like wall fold out of existence, leaving only the beautiful grassy meadow. Then he flicked it again and the portal appeared once more, this time, he knew, into a different dimension.

John took a deep breath before cautiously taking a photo through the door once more. What he saw was quite frightening. A large cat-like creature was pictured on the other side, its hackles raised in surprise at the new thing that must have appeared next to it, eyes reflecting the glow and teeth bared in a terrible snarl. John fought the temptation to walk through and see it for real, hurriedly flicking the switch to close the portal. The last thing he wanted was something not unlike a lion attacking him, and being set free in such a peaceful dimension.

Clearly, he considered, dimensional travel was going to be more difficult than he had first imagined. So far in his short experience of the portal he had seen flailing arms, wild beasts and breathed poisonous air. Not the best of beginnings. But now that he had started, he couldn't stay separated forever from his family, even if he was in a sort of paradise. He just had to make the effort to get home, even if it was dangerous danger. John came to the conclusion, he would get home, or die trying.

He flicked the switch yet again, put his phone through, and looked at the picture he had taken. This time, there was another meadow beyond the portal, but it seemed to be simply long green grass. In the distance, there was a large building, seemingly constructed of steel, concrete, and shining glass. It dominated the surrounding area, mostly because there didn't seem to be any other buildings, and was situated on the coast, near to where the promenade was supposed to be. The sky through the portal was pink, with blue clouds, like the cover of one of his parent's CDs. This time, there were no vicious looking creatures and the area seemed to be deserted.

John pushed the cage through and withdrew it. The Mouse came back in the same lively state it had been before. So, John put his rucksack on his back, took a deep breath to prepare himself, and pushed through the portal.

On the other side, all was quiet, other than the song of a nightingale and a

pleasant sea breeze which smelled of saltwater. John smiled and looked around. There was no castle on the promontory and neither could he see through the wood to the place where the standing stones should have been. In fact, this place felt very like the place he had left, other than the nearby building, where there was a light on an upper floor which gave the impression that he was being watched.

As he stood there, drumming up the courage to approach the building, John heard an inverted vacuum sound and turned to see the portal disappear behind him. He pulled out his portal key, swearing and thinking he must have pressed it accidentally, but he hadn't. When he tried to open another door, no matter how many times he flicked the switch, nothing happened.

John looked around, fear bubbling up in his chest. Why couldn't he open the portal? Had the key run out of power already? No, the little red light was still on. What could he do? Nothing. John realised he was lost, alone and couldn't get away, since the only way home was through the portal.

He looked at the building again and saw another light appear. As he watched, it moved slowly towards him and, as it got still closer, he could see that it was bobbing, carried by a person. John looked around, trying not to panic, but he was too late to reach the cover of the trees, so he ran towards a nearby undulation in the meadow. Taking off his rucksack, John lay down on the cool, damp grass, hoping he was out of sight and keeping watch over the brow of the hillock.

He could now see that the light was being carried by a single, tall person. John gripped his club tightly, as if it would offer security in the event that the person was unfriendly. The figure was vaguely recognisable, as it walked directly to the place where John had first appeared. Although he was a hundred yards away, and it was getting dark, he could see that the tall man was wearing a long Barbour type coat and wearing a cowboy hat. He wasn't carrying anything that looked threatening, but John couldn't get over the thought that he recognised the man.

The man took something that looked like a mobile phone out of his pocket and, as if on cue, John's own phone started to vibrate in his pocket. It was still turned on, and the humming made John's heart skip a beat in surprise. He hadn't bothered checking the signal when he had crossed dimensions, but it was clearly working here. The screen said, "Caller Unknown".

John pressed the screen; "Yes?" he whispered.

“Hello, my young friend,” came the reply. “I know you’re around somewhere, watching me, but it would really be most beneficial to both of us if you would show yourself.”

John’s entire body went cold. He definitely recognised the voice. It was Professor Bilman.

“Professor Bilman?” he asked.

“Professor? Oh, no... not me. Just Richard. Richard Bilman.”

“How... I don’t understand.” John said.

“I’m sorry. It must be confusing, but I would like to talk to you, as would my friend. He apologises that he couldn’t come to meet you here himself, but sent me here to fetch you. He is in the building yonder.”

John didn’t know what to say. A week ago, as he counted time, this same man had tried to kill him. But there was something different about Bilman’s voice now. He was less condescending. More friendly. Warmer.

“If you think about it,” the voice of Richard Bilman continued on John’s phone, “you will realise that you don’t need to fear me. I don’t wish harm on you. I was able to use your... phone... number to find you and I didn’t really have to come to meet you myself.”

John remained silent. Bilman continued, “I know that you’re just behind that rise over there. My device triangulated your location and, if I really wanted to, I could come and force you to accompany me. But I want you to know that you can trust me.”

“You tried to kill me,” John accused.

“Did I? Ah, I see. That explains your reticence. I apologise for any misunderstanding, but I can assure you that I didn’t try and kill you. In fact, I have never met you.”

John still didn’t say a word.

“Our equipment could sense your entry to this dimension,” said the voice of Bilman, reassuring the young man by talking to him. “In fact, we are very relieved that you are here and we would very much like to talk...” He continued talking. “For what it’s worth, my young friend, I promise that you will be safe with me and that you’re free to leave at any time you wish. All I would ask is that you accompany me back to our home. However, while I’m happy to wait

for you to make a decision as to whether to follow me, it really would be better if we weren't outside in this dimension too late into the night."

"How do I know I can trust you?" John asked.

The voice of Bilman seemed relieved that John had replied at last, "I'm afraid that nothing is certain. All I can offer is my word. If you come with me you will receive, at the very least, a good meal, a hot shower, and an explanation. Isn't it a little pointless to stay here in the damp, cold, night air? You can't open another portal. Would you come with me, please?"

Making a decision, John stood up, swung his rucksack onto his back, picked up his cage contraption, hefted his club and walked slowly towards the figure of Richard Bilman. As he approached, John could see that there were differences between the Bilman who was standing, waiting for him and the one he had left behind. For a start, this one was more suntanned and somehow stronger looking. He was also smiling what seemed to be a genuine and welcoming smile.

"You won't be needing the stick. I can assure you of that," Bilman said.

John was uncertain. He'd already almost suffocated and been eaten, and the night wasn't over yet. "Why did you warn me about staying out too late?" he asked.

"There are certain... animals... which come out at night in this dimension. They're not hard to deal with, but they can be a little inconvenient. Better by far to be indoors. Besides, my friend would like to meet you and talk, and he has some sense of urgency."

"Who is your friend?"

"It'll be better if you see for yourself," Bilman replied. He set off, striding towards the structure, expecting John to follow. The building was now fully lit and glowed in the almost darkness, a stark contrast to the dark landscape surrounding it. John followed, his only weapon held loosely in his right hand, despite Bilman's assurances. There was little conversation, because John didn't want to say anything, despite Bilman's attempts at questions, about his age and the like. He gave up after a while and the two of them walked quickly over the soft, grassy meadow.

It wasn't long before they reached the structure, which turned out to be a significant, modernist building, which wouldn't have looked out of place in the centre of London or on Grand Designs. It looked almost as if it had been

dropped onto the site from nowhere, because there were no other buildings in sight, nor was there any sign of a road from which building materials could have been delivered. There were just the concrete paths and courtyard, which were a part of the design of the building.

Bilman led him to a doorway which opened automatically when they approached. Once inside, the temperature was comfortable and there was a sense of peace and security which John had almost forgotten could exist. He was led up some broad stairs, to a well-lit corridor leading to a pair of polished wooden doors. “Ready?” Bilman asked.

“For what?” John replied.

Bilman smiled in reply, and opened the doors, signaling that the young man should go first, which he did. John entered a clean, white room. Next to the doors were some leather seats and the outer wall was floor to ceiling glass, offering a view of the bluff where he would expect Bickering Castle to be. In this dimension, there was simply a high cliff and more meadowland where the Old Town should be.

In the centre of the room was an enormous bed, surrounded by medical machinery. John could hear the sound of a ventilator, and there were wires all over the polished marble floor. In the middle of the bed, propped up on pillows, face covered by an oxygen mask, was the frail form of a little old man. He was dressed in white pyjamas, covers neatly folded up to his stomach. He didn’t move, but even at a distance his eyes sparkled.

Richard Bilman turned to John. ‘Pop your stuff onto one of the chairs and come and meet him.’ They walked towards the fragile figure and Bilman addressed him, “It’s just as you suspected. He’s much younger, but seems to be quite intelligent. He’s survived at least.”

The old man on the bed reached laboriously up to his face, as if truly exhausted, and dragged the mask from his face. Without the mask, he looked even older, but there was something familiar about this man too. Despite everything, when he spoke his voice was youthful. “Thank goodness for that, Richard. We were running out of time. I told you, have faith, my friend.”

“He hasn’t agreed yet.”

“How old is he?”

“He wouldn’t tell me. I don’t think he trusts me. He’s met another of me in

a different dimension. It seems, I tried to kill him,” Richard replied ironically.

“Such are the dimensions, eh?” The old man smiled and looked at John, who found that, for just a second, he recognised a much older version of himself. John couldn’t help but gasp, even more shocked than he had been when he’d first seen this Richard Bilman.

“You’re me!” said the boy in wonder.

“Actually,” the old man replied, “ it’s probably more accurate to say that you’re me, since I’m so very much older.” The smile on his face was, for a moment, wistful.

“How?” John asked.

“Well, that is the most pertinent of questions, isn’t it? What’s your name, young man?”

“John.”

“Ah, another John. I see. Let me introduce myself... I’m Ivan Smith. As you have deduced, I am a version of you... only from another dimension. In my dimension, I’m clearly older, but there will be many other differences too... but the common thread is the dimensional portal.” The old man paused to catch his breath. The longer he talked, the more he sounded as if he had been running a marathon. “I invented the dimensional portal... when I was 63 and... have been travelling through the dimensions... ever since... and, as you can see,... quite ill.... How old are you, John?”

“Sixteen,” John replied.

“That’s impressive... To have invented the portal at such a young age... I can see that my faith has been rewarded... in a way that is far greater than... I could ever have hoped.”

“I didn’t invent it,” John corrected, and pointed at Bilman, “he did. He lives next door to me and tried to kill me when I found out about it, but I escaped through the portal.”

Ivan raised his eyebrows in surprise, and looked at Bilman, an acknowledgement passing between them. The old man continued. “That is... a surprising turn... We have been travelling across... the dimensions for many years,... but you are the first Ivan Smith... we have encountered... who did not invent the portal.”

“You mean there are more of us?” John asked. The old man was so out of breath that he raised his hand to Bilman, before dragging his oxygen mask into place once more.

Richard Bilman continued the explanation. “There are infinite dimensions, John, so there are infinite versions of you, and me, and Bickering on Sea. For nearly 40 years, Ivan has travelled the dimensions, more recently we have done so together, studying the phenomenon and finding ways to navigate through the infinity of dimensions.

“We’ve visited many versions of Bickering. Some uninhabited by humanity at all, like this one, or inhabited by other species. Others containing alternative versions of ourselves, some of whom shared our names and others who didn’t. I have met other John Smiths named Juan, Ivan, Jenny, Johan, Johannas, both male and female. In some dimensions, my doppelgangers have been dead, some were never born, some have not been human at all. But in every dimension we have found where the portal has been invented, Ivan Smith, or a version of him, has been the inventor... until now.” Richard Bilman looked towards the old man for some response, “If what you say is correct, John, and I don’t see why it shouldn’t be, you come from a dimension where Richard Bilman is the inventor of the portal, a version of me.”

“Of course, it is possible,” the old man interjected, through his mask and between breaths. “Even though we haven’t encountered it before... there must be a whole raft of possible dimensions... where our roles are reversed... My research has shown... we are less likely to intersect... with the dimensions most dissimilar to our own... But it is not impossible... As we have found... In meeting you, John... we may well have come across a version of me... who could open up a plethora of new... possible dimensions for study.” He almost gasped for breath, before saying, “You are a gift indeed, John... A gift.”

John felt flattered, “Thank you.”

Ivan caught his breath, “Tell me, John... Would you be willing to help us in our studies?”

John didn’t know what to say. The old man he was looking at was, to all intents and purposes, him. Only a genius version of him who had invented dimensional travel in his own dimension and was cleverer than, and in charge of, Professor Richard Bilman. And this genius version of himself was still asking for help. The old man was watching him intently, waiting for an answer, while Bilman, he noticed, wasn’t looking at him at all. Even here,

John considered, Bilman didn't like him, but the old version of himself needed him. John answered, "If you think I can help, of course I will. I'm only helping myself, after all."

Ivan Smith removed his mask and smiled, "Thank you, John. Thank you so much... Your help will be... invaluable. Now... would you go with Richard here... and get cleaned up... eat something... sleep... prepare yourself."

John felt a wave of gratefulness flood through him, "Thank you, Ivan."

Richard Bilman led him out of the large room and, as the doors closed, John heard a loud whirring noise, followed by a hum. "What was that?" he asked.

"The automatons will prepare the Professor for... your help. it will take a while"

"You're the Professor," John replied.

"Not in this dimension. Here, I'm just Richard Bilman. Very much like you, I stumbled across the Professor's work, only he took me with him."

"What are, automatons, did you call them?"

"You'd probably call them robots. They keep us travelling, care for the Professor, and carry out his experiments with him."

"So, what do you do?"

"I help the Professor too, and look after the house. And I've travelled the dimensions with him and seen him at work."

Richard led John to a dining room, where a white table was set with hot food. John tucked in to sausages, mashed potato, veg and gravy. He had spent a week eating nuts and wild animals, so he was very hungry. While he ate, Richard told him more about himself.

He had met Professor Ivan Smith when Richard and his parents had moved from London, into the house next door, in Bickering Regis, as it was called in his home dimension. The Professor had been conducting experiments in a laboratory at the end of his garden and, over a number of months, Richard had gotten to know Ivan. He would help out after school and at weekends, working with him on his invention and experiments. Richard had always been interested in science, but the Professor was a genius and the young man had thought he was in heaven.

After several years, the portal had been successful and the Professor approached the government in their dimension to gain extra funding for his work. He had been laughed out of the office of the Scientist Royal. So, Ivan had continued to develop it himself and, after some time, they had begun to travel between dimensions. At first, Richard told him, they had been unable to navigate in any real way, and it had been quite dangerous. A great many of the dimensions had been uninhabitable. But the Professor had developed a method of tagging safe dimensions, so they could return to them at will and, in time, build up a network of investigated dimensions, using them as bases for their work. Eventually, they had opened this dimension and been able to transport materials to build their lab, from which they explored the multiverse.

They had even come across dimensions where the technology of the portal was even more advanced, and Professor Smith had made use of that too, developing automated assistants and pushing the boundaries of his work ever forward. “The only difficulty,” Bilman told John, “is that we left our dimension behind long ago and I have been unable to find my way back.” He looked sad, but John was fascinated by the story.

“There’s quite a lot about us that’s similar then,” he said, and explained his own journey.

“You are lucky,” Bilman told the young man. “You have not been travelling dimensionally for long. You didn’t have a chance to make a fatal error.”

“I nearly walked into one with poisonous air,” John replied.

“Yes, there are several like that. Mostly, they seem to be the dimensions where humanity has managed to wipe itself out. You were lucky, you know.”

John looked at his new companion; “You’re very different to the Richard Bilman I know. Not just because he’s the Professor, but because you’re nice. He never talked to me, just tried to kill me.”

“It sounds more like my Professor,” Bilman commented. “Professor Ivan is very focused. Nothing stands in the way of his work. Not even terminal illness. All he cares about is finding a way to navigate the dimensions.”

“That must be hard for him,” John said sympathetically. “It’s terminal then? He looks like my grandad did, before he died..”

“Don’t feel sorry for him,” Richard said shortly. “He’s found a way to keep going. I’ll show you to your room. You’ll need to rest. It’ll be a busy day

tomorrow.”

John enjoyed a hot shower and laying down on the king size bed in the room he'd been given. It was simply decorated with a screen on the wall, which John thought must be a flat screen TV, but he couldn't get it to work. But he was so tired, that he gave up, turned the light off and tried to sleep. He only managed a few hours. After a week of camping, and in a strange room, his sleep was fitful. After only a few hours, John found that he was fully awake, so he turned the light on and decided to look around.

His rucksack was perched on a chair next to the door. He got out of bed to look for some clothes, but it was empty. For a moment, John panicked, until he looked in the drawers nearby and found his things, clean and neatly stowed away. The only things that he couldn't find were the dimensional key and his mobile phone. John wondered where they might be.

Getting dressed in nice clean clothes was an unexpected pleasure. John looked out of his door, into a corridor of polished concrete and thick grey carpets. The corridor had several doors like his own and at the end was a staircase leading up to the entrance lobby.

John's feet made no sound on the thick carpet and he quickly found that all of the other doors were locked. He walked up the stairs to the entrance hall where he had arrived earlier that night. It was now pitch-black outside, but the building itself was lit by low lights, which allowed him to see where he was going. John followed the route he had been led through by Bilman, and ended up outside the double doors to what he thought of as Ivan's room.

John Smith had always been a curious young man, some might say nosy. It was, he realised, even as he listened at the door, the thing that had got him into trouble in the first place. But old habits die hard. Much to his surprise, he heard Richard Bilman's voice on the other side, raised and forceful. He couldn't make out the precise words, but there were clearly strong feelings being expressed. The pauses in Bilman's dialogue, he assumed, were the quieter replies from the Professor.

John stood there for several minutes, unsuccessfully trying to discern what was being said. Suddenly, Richard Bilman burst through the doors and stood there, breathing hard through his nose, clearly trying to get hold of his temper. At first the tall man was oblivious to the fact that John was standing next to him, having been listening at the door, but with jump of surprise he registered the uninvited spy. He looked angry for a moment, and then froze.

Without a word, Bilman grabbed John by the upper arm and almost dragged the young man down the corridor, away from the doors, and down the stairs. It wasn't until they were walking through the entrance hall that he spoke, quietly, and with authority. "Go back to your room, pack your bag and meet me here in three minutes."

"I'm sorry I was listening..." John started to say.

But Bilman raised his finger for silence and said, again, very deliberately, "Go back to your room, pack your bag and meet me here in three minutes. Do you understand? Don't waste time. Do it."

John nodded once and did as he was told.

By the time he'd returned to the entrance Hall, his backpack hastily filled and on his back, Richard Bilman was waiting for him with a shoulder bag of his own. He handed the younger man another bag, in which was his water bottle and several boxes. The man nodded in satisfaction, used a keycard to open the door and led John out into the cold, dark night.

"Where are we going?" John asked when they had walked for about 200 meters without a word.

"To the portal," was the reply.

"Why?"

"You're in danger. We're both in danger." Bilman's reply was clipped.

"But I thought the Professor needed my help?"

"That's why you're in danger," Richard said. "The Professor is dying," Richard was striding forward, so quickly that John was struggling to keep up. "He said you could give him a way to carry on, and in a way he is telling the truth. He's obsessed with the dimensions, but he can't study them like he is. He needs a healthy body. He wants yours.

"He's developed a way to transplant his consciousness into a suitable host body, and put the subjects mind into his old one."

John was gob-smacked. "Really? But how can that even work?"

"It hasn't yet. He attempted first with an automaton, but the memory simply wasn't big enough, although he can use them remotely while he lies in his bed. Then he tried it with a version of me from another dimension, but the synapses were too dissimilar. No matter what he tried, he couldn't synthesise

enough stable, new pathways sympathetic to the mechanisms of his mind. You see, we all think differently.”

“You mean he wants to do that with me?” John was shocked.

Bilman said urgently, “Come on. Hurry... Yes. His time’s running out and not even he can cure death... yet. He was about to send me into another dimension to find another him, but then you turned up, perfect timing and host. Not only are you another version of the Professor, but you’re young and fit. He could use your body for years to come and, from what you told us about your dimension, open up a whole new set of possible dimensions to investigate and exploit.”

“Stop a minute!” John almost shouted, dragging Biman’s arm back to make him so as he asked.

Bilman looked back towards the building, “We don’t have time for this. Talk as we walk.” He set off again, and John practically had to run to keep up. Bilman continued, “We were in the room arguing, the one you were outside of. I told him it wasn’t fair, because you were so young. You hadn’t lived yet and, besides, you are a good lad. But he ordered me to do what he wanted or he would simply get his automatons to do it. I agreed, but I just want to get you away from here. Hopefully, he won’t notice I was lying until we have already gone.”

“Where are we going?” John asked. Out of breath.

“To the portal, to get you away from here. Get you to safety.”

They reached the site of the portal and Bilman looked around, checking the route they had taken, before handing John something. “This is a Portal Key. It’s similar to the one you had, but this one will allow you to tag dimensions and return to them. I’ve had to reset it, so the Professor can’t find us, but it has the coordinates of the place you came from. I’ve wiped them off of the computer in the lab.

“Use this screen to scroll through the dimensions you’ve already travelled to, and choose them by pressing the screen. You’ll need to name them too.”

“Like files on a computer?” John asked.

“Exactly. Make sure they’re logical so you can remember them. If you want to go to a new dimension, use this button, the portal key will scan through the portal to let you know what the environment is like on the other side,

especially for breathing, and you can see an image here. Just like on your phone. The Professor has probes he can send through, but we don't have the space to carry them. If you want to return to the dimension, tag it with this button here.

“Don't tag dimensions where it's unsafe or uninhabitable. The portal key technology isn't perfect and it has a habit of returning portals unexpectedly to previous dimensions, so you want to make sure you only tag places you don't mind returning to. Otherwise you might get a nasty surprise.”

“What about power?” John asked, looking in wonder at the device he'd been handed.

“Don't worry, it uses so little, the battery will last several of your lifetimes.” Bilman then handed John his mobile phone, saying, “And here's your communication device. I've upgraded the battery so it too will go on for centuries without the need for a charge. And be careful not to leave either of these in a dimension where they don't have similar technology. Not only will it will cause chaos if it's found, but we're not the only ones who travel the dimensions. If the people from one of the more primitive dimensions suddenly starts travelling the multiverse, the others will take notice and they might trace it back to you. Then we'll all be in real trouble. Do you understand?”

“I think so. Why are you explaining all of this now?” John asked. “Aren't you coming with me?”

“I hope so, but there's something I have to do first, and it might be dangerous. As long as you're careful, you'll be ok. Just remember, don't trust anyone just because they look like you. You never know what their dimension is like. I'll meet you, when I can, near the standing stones in your last dimension. It's the only feature that's always consistent in every dimension. The Professor has a theory... but that's something else.”

In the distance, at the laboratory, there was a huge roaring sound and John saw something shoot out of the top of the building, high into the air. “Go now!” Bilman said, “that button there!”

John pressed the button and the silvery doorway opened above the ground, just as the flying object shot in their direction with a roar of jet engines. John took a breath and stepped through the door. As he stepped through, he looked back at Richard Bilman who was ignoring him completely and watching the object rocket towards him.

John stepped through the portal and turned back, unsure what to do. It was

a strange feeling, to step from roaring chaos into peace on the meadow. He half expected to hear what was happening, but suddenly, another Portal Key flew through the silvery doorway, landing on the soft turf near John's feet. Then, just as the portal closed with a reverse vacuum sound, another object shot through after it, and rolled end over end as it hit the ground.

John picked up the Portal Key by his feet and pulled the club from the side of his rucksack, where it had been stowed. He ran to the place where the object had come to rest. It was a silvery disk, like a flying saucer, about 40 cm in diameter. As he approached it, there was a whirring sound as it sprung back to life and bobbed up from the ground to hover in front of John. There was a camera like lens on what he assumed was the front of the saucer, and a thin, shiny arm extended from the side.

A calm version of Professor Smith's voice emanated from the saucer, "Please return the Portal Key immediately, or face the consequences."

John replied, "You were going to steal my body!" but there was no response from the saucer. Instead, it repeated, "Please return the Portal Key immediately, or face the consequences. This is your final warning."

John stood his ground, "No! Leave me alone!"

From the silver arm at the side of the saucer, a bolt of electricity shot towards John, but the heavy contact with the ground as it tumbled through the portal had clearly affected the stability of the saucer; it dipped down when it fired at John, causing it to miss.

Without thinking, John brought his club down hard on top of the saucer. He was rewarded with a crunch and the saucer smashed into the turf, bolts of electricity crawling over the fuselage. It tried to float back up again, but John hit it again. And again. And again. Smashing the strange little flying saucer into the ground, causing bits and pieces to fall off. There was a buzz, and whirr, and the saucer lay still.

John hit it one more time to make sure.

He took the second Portal Key out of his pocket and looked at it. It had clearly been Bilman's and the man must have tossed it through the portal as he closed it, choosing to protect John, even at his own expense. The saucer, John imagined, was one of Ivan Smith's probes, which had followed him into this dimension in order to take him back to the Professor, or to tag the dimension so the Professor could find him again and steal his body.

John hoped that the Richard Bilman he'd met would be OK, but knew what he had to do. If Ivan had managed to tag this dimension, he would be able to find him, so John had to travel to another dimension and close the door, so he couldn't be found. He really wanted to wait, to see if Richard would follow him, but knew it was too late. If he was found, Richard's sacrifice would be in vain.

He pressed the button on the Portal Key, watched the silvery door sweep open, and looked at the screen. It told him that the atmosphere in the new dimension was breathable and, to his surprise, the picture he saw was of houses very like the ones he had left behind in his original dimension.

John took a deep breath to calm himself, and stepped through. As the doorway closed behind him, the saucer on the ground moved.
