

Chapter 5

'All aboard, hold on tight, next stop Bruinkilloch, said the voice.

'BRUINKILLOCH!', they shouted in unison...

* * * * *

They held their breath, and waited.

The bus was almost completely silent inside as it started moving away from their stop. Out of the tinted windows they could see the familiar sights of the house, the woods, the other houses move past them, but they could hear very little. But it was obvious that they were starting to accelerate very quickly.

'Whoah..!', murmured Wil, who was sitting in the middle, quietly. He had wanted to shout, but in the general silence of the bus, and in the absence of any noise from any of the other passengers, he had consciously kept his comment as quiet as possible. But the words had been forced out, as he had been gradually forced more and more back into his seat by the movement of the vehicle. The other two were equally pressed back.

'I don't know where Bruinkilloch is, but we're sure going to get there fast', struggled Freddy, as the G-forces on his face and chest got stronger. If he had wanted to get up he could not have done, the combined forces of gravity pulling him down into his seat, and the rapid forward motion and acceleration pushing him back into it, were too great for any other movement.

Clara just looked worried, her features flattened.

* * * * *

The screen in front of her glowed into life. An image appeared, faint at first, then clearer.

The screen was split into four parts. In the upper left part was the map they had seen at the bus stop; beside that was the time, ten zero one; in the bottom left of the screen was a series of numbers which changed constantly, currently the largest of them was reading nine hundred and twenty- three; and finally in the bottom right quadrant of the screen was a moving picture which appeared to be the view from the front of the bus.

This last image proved to them that they were not in an ordinary bus and that the new routes that had recently been introduced were quite out of the ordinary. Bruinkilloch, wherever it was, was a long way from home, and they were going there very quickly. The video they were watching showed houses, fields, trees, cars, all moving by at amazing speed. They seemed to be travelling along roads, but at the same time it felt like they were flying. And the number nine twenty-three on the bottom left of the screen had the letters '*kph*' written after them.

'Wow – that's six hundred miles an hour', Freddy spoke excitedly now, his fears forgotten. He tried to turn to Wil in the seat next to him but failed – his face was still pressed to the firm headrest behind him.

'Where are we going,' Clara asked this question with some concern now. They were going to

be a long way from home, and they knew nothing of how to get back.

* * * * *

Wil was staring at the screens. He had always been interested in technical things, and the screens diverted his concern into a fascination with the letters and numbers he saw on the big screen in front of him.

In the top left screen a small red dot had appeared on the map, and the name *Bruinkilloch* had been added to the map, just next to the dot. There was also a small picture of a bus (with a conical nose) which was moving rapidly towards the red dot.

The top right screen now read *10:10*

The bottom left was the screen full of statistics. There was the speed, now a bit less (down to two hundred kph), the distance travelled (four hundred kilometres), and several other numbers representing temperature, pressure, and other stuff he didn't quite understand.

The bottom right screen now showed recognisable objects as the speed declined to less than one hundred kilometres per hour, and Wil made out broad fields of scrubby vegetation, some rolling hills in the near distance and some bigger ones on the far horizon, some sheep, and a few small houses.

* * * * *

They came to a noiseless halt.

Almost every passenger on the bus immediately released their seat belts, and got up (because they now could), and started to roll their eyes, open their mouths wide (some started yawning). The chicken sneezed again. The lady sneezed too. Wil, Freddy and Clara moved across to the aisle and made their way to the front of the bus.

As they did, a small figure dressed entirely in black ran from the back of the bus, without a word, pushed past Clara (almost knocking her back into the seat), paused briefly, said 'Bless you' to the chicken, and scrambled down the steps onto the muddy ground outside. As he went, his black hood briefly blew away from his head, but his face was not revealed.

'That's the boy I saw trying to get out of the back of the bus on Monday', said Clara as he ran off, 'I'm sure of it'.

As they got down from the vehicle, they watched the small hooded figure who was now sprinting away across the rough ground where they had parked and into the hills beyond. They watched for a full minute until he was a tiny blur in the distance.

* * * * *

'Good morning', came a voice from behind the bus.

'Welcome to Bruinkilloch, it is great to see you here'. You've come to see a place of beauty, a place of madness, and a place of mystery.

When he said the word 'madness', he pointed at his chest. When he said the words 'beauty' and 'mystery' he pointed at the hills and landscape beyond.

* * * * *

The man appeared from behind the bus. To Wil and Freddy he looked strangely familiar. He was tall, had a long straggly beard, several layers of faintly dirty clothing, and huge brown boots, covered almost completely in mud.

'Oh, I almost forgot', he said, 'I'm Robbie', pleased to meet you'.

'Come inside and we can talk about what you would like to do. I've got something in there that I'd like you to look at. It's on the table.' The man appeared nervous as he talked, then added, even more strangely,

'Oh, I shouldn't have told you that'.

Freddy turned the others away from the man and whispered,

'I don't know about you, but I don't like the sound of this. First, I don't really like the look of the guy, secondly I'm not going into his little hut, and thirdly, this all sounds a little too familiar, and I want to move on. Let's go and explore.'

* * * * *