

## UK06

Reluctantly, Thomas flicked on the two-way holographic generator and prepared for the remote teaching session. In a few minutes, he would appear in the living rooms of two hundred thousand students.

He took his place in the centre of the Holograph stage as the machine came to life. Thousands of faces drifted past his eyes like ghostly apparitions. Images of his students. Their first lesson in his subject.

"Welcome to Environmental Physics. Today we will discuss why we're here. Can anyone explain what started it all? ... Yes ... Robert," he read the name under the face that stabilised in front of him.

"As far as I know," Robert began, "Carbon Dioxide increased too much and we got global warming. The earth is uninhabitable; either dry, arid deserts a hundred and twenty degrees centigrade or under a sea that's risen ten metres."

"Well done. Does anyone know how we feed all these people?"

"The World Council created the complexes we live in. Each has a central accommodation unit housing one million people surrounded by an 8 kilometre wide food production area covered with a clear roof. Blinds keep the worst of the sun off the crops," offered another student.

"That's right," confirmed Thomas, he continued to explain the basics of his subject, wondering whether it was all worth it, or was he part of the last futile act before mankind's final death throws.

The lesson lasted two hours during which a sense of despair slowly gripped him. He ended the session telling students the information they needed to research.

The holograph reset to the news channel he'd been watching last night. He slumped into the chair and stared blankly at the newsreader as she described the work of the tree-planters. In the cooler northern areas, forests were being replanted to reduce the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Thomas knew it would take hundreds of years before there would be any noticeable effect. He was destined to live out his life confined to these four walls.

His black mood turned to anger and frustration. He snatched a cup next to the chair and threw it at the newsreader. The cup slammed through her image and shattered against the wall. The holograph shimmered and corrected itself as the newsreader carried on completely oblivious to the angry attack, but the impact triggered a catch in a hidden panel which flicked open to reveal flashing lights and switches.

Curiosity aroused, he pushed himself upright and stepped into the hologram space. He examined the exposed mechanism with an educated curiosity. The newsreader's image swirled around him as she described the latest food yields.

He spotted a calibrated dial to one side. Noting its start position, he rotated the needle. The newsreader disappeared and was replaced by the image of a corridor. He recognised the door in the corridor as his own front door, decorated with the old twentieth century door knocker he had inherited from his father. He went and opened his front door and watched the image of his head appear on the HoloTV.

More turns of the dial revealed other views of the complex; different corridors, food production areas with people in the fields and then something quite unexpected. A stream meandered through green pastures, gently swaying trees, rabbits hopping, deer browsing, the corner of a community complex.

Thomas could clearly see their own complex number, UK06. How could this be? The camera must be mounted outside, but UK06 was in an arid, uninhabitable, hot area of the UK where no vegetation had existed for two hundred and fifty years!

Fingers shaking, he turned the dial again, a meeting room appeared with twenty or so people sitting around a table. He recognised members of the Complex Administration Council. An agitated discussion was in progress.

"We've run this complex for the last 300 years, how much longer are we going on with this subterfuge?" the President demanded.

"You know what'll happen if we reveal the truth. They'll want to leave. There's nowhere to go. The cities and towns have collapsed. There's no infrastructure. We'd have anarchy!" The Head of Security shouted.

"We've got ourselves in a corner. If we end it now, the worlds' problems will start again. We'll have learnt nothing. Now, we're able to control what happens. There are no wars, the population expansion has ended. We've even reduced disease because there's so little physical contact," someone Thomas doesn't recognise argued.

The President slumped down. "So this is the future?" ... The transmission ended.

Shaken, Thomas sank to the floor. Everything he believed had been blown away. It seemed they're all victims of an enormous hoax. He'd taught for years how the community must stay within the complex until the earth could heal. Why hadn't they been told?

He was still sitting on the floor when his wife Wendy returned from working in the crèche facility. She couldn't wait to start their family, but so far they'd put off having children, neither feeling that it was the right time.

She carried in the weekly food delivery from the corridor and set it on the floor. "Are you OK Tom? You look as if you've seen a ghost!"

"I've seen worse than that," Thomas snapped.

"Was it something on the news? Why are you sitting in the middle of the HoloTV?" Wendy was confused.

He struggled to his feet and threw himself into the chair and described what had happened.

"You must have misunderstood," Wendy exclaimed. "Surely we would know. We've seen the News, the work that's being done to prepare the planet for us."

"Well, it seems that the world *is* ready for us," Thomas shouted. "But they don't dare tell us ... What would you do if you were told?"

"I'd want to find a nice quiet place and bring our children up to respect the earth ... so we don't make the same mistakes again."

"Exactly, just like everyone else in here! Do you think that's practical? It would be anarchy. Nobody would trust the Government any more ... Maybe they're right to keep us in here." Thomas was getting more and more frustrated.

"There's a number of people who seem to have disappeared," Wendy recalled. "You remember I used to work with Jane in the Crèche. They said she'd moved to another part of the complex, but I'm sure she would have been in touch ... Perhaps they've gone outside ... ?"

"That's a bit of leap!" interrupted Thomas. "What makes you think that?"

"... I was just thinking back to something Jane had said. I didn't think much about it at the time. She said how nice it would be to feel grass under her feet. I thought it was a strange thing to say, but we got interrupted before we could finish. I didn't see her again after that."

"Well, I still think you're putting two and two together and making five!" he exclaimed.

"I'm sorry Tom, I don't want to stay here if there's another option. Why don't we leave and take a chance on our own?" she pleaded.

"I'm not sure you realise how difficult it would be; food, somewhere to live. There'd be no Health Care, no electricity. We'd need water ... " Thomas was frustrated. "I'm not sure we would be allowed to leave anyway."

"You said what you saw was beautiful, lush and healthy ... Yes, it would be hard at first, but it'd be better than living out our days in this sterile environment. People have lived for thousands of years off the land. Surely we could do the same." She was getting quite excited.

Thomas thought back to the images he had seen outside the complex. She had a point. The outside looked very inviting. The other option was to stay here for the rest of their lives. He hated that prospect. "This place is designed to keep us in, they're bound to try and stop us."

"Just like a Prison!" Wendy agreed.

"We'd need to find an exit." Thomas's anger was starting to subside.

"You've taken student parties around the food units. Did you see anything?" She recalled Thomas's annual task to take the hundred best students to visit the food production areas.

"I don't remember seeing anything. The outside of the units were solid walls to protect the crops against the weather ... and maybe to stop us seeing the outside!"

"When do you do your next tour?" asked Wendy.

"Next week. I'll ask some questions then." Thomas replied. "Let's start, make a list of everything we'll need. Let's try all of the images on the HoloTV. Maybe we can learn more from that." They flicked through the rest of the HoloTV channels. Wendy gasped as she saw the external views, strengthening her determination.

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The tour came around quicker than expected. Every spare minute of the intervening days had been spent planning, collecting useful items and then discarding some as they realised they'd have to carry everything.

Thomas managed to glean quite a bit of information from the Wardens in the food units. There were service tunnels under the outer walls through which streams had been diverted when the complex was built. He found out how to identify where the tunnels were, breeze-block cabins built against the walls gave maintenance access.

They decided to explore the complex at night. How easy would it be to move around? Are there any Security Guards patrolling? All questions for which, surprisingly, they had no answers.

Late one evening, Wendy and Thomas slipped out of their front door; the corridors were dimly lit to conserve energy, security cameras hung from the ceiling at each intersection. They walked in a square through the corridors near to their apartment. After about ten minutes, they turned a corner to see two Security Guards approaching them.

"Good evening ... what are you doing at this time of night?" challenged one of the guards,

"We're just taking a stroll to stretch our legs. Got fed-up of the HoloTV." Thomas went through their prepared response.

The second guard said, "the Gymnasium is the place to exercise. You

should know there's a curfew after twenty one hundred hours. You must return to your apartment .... Where is it? We'll escort you back."

"Oh, it's just around the corner, East C249." said Wendy.

Back in their apartment, Thomas remarked, "told you it wouldn't be easy. We need to think of a way to become invisible!"

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Two days later Thomas was wondering whether Wendy had gone off the idea. She'd been strangely quiet, spending a lot of time rooting through their cupboards and washing clothes.

Thomas was watching the HoloTV one evening when the door to their bedroom opened and Wendy emerged dressed from head to foot in black.

"What do you think of the latest fashion?" she remarked as she did a cat-walk display in front of him.

"So that's what you've been up to! Very chic, but do you think it will work?" he queried.

"The corridors are quite dark. When I got out of bed last night, I checked the corridor and the lights were even dimmer. I think if we're careful and can avoid the Security Guards, we can get out. What do you think?"

"I hope you've done an outfit for me!" Thomas smiled.

The following night they slipped out of their front door, minus it's knocker, and headed for the food production area.

They travelled as quietly as possible down the dimly lit corridors and kept to the shadows, fearful that they might attract attention from the security cameras. They had no idea what they'd say if they got spotted.

Fortunately, the Guards advertised their presence as they chatted to each other. Twice, they hid in doorways, daring not to breath as Guards walked past engrossed in conversation. Wendy's 'invisibility' suits seemed to do the trick.

The knowledge gained during the student trips, allowed them to head in the right direction through the maze of long corridors. It was late so everyone would be asleep or watching HoloTV. No one worked at night to save the energy required to illuminate the corridors and workplaces.

It took about an hour of fast walking to reach the edge of the complex. They opened the door to the food area and Wendy gasped. She hadn't seen the scale of it before. Thomas's descriptions couldn't do it justice. The outer wall was barely discernible, lit only by moonlight filtering through the transparent roof. Golden crops stood proud reaching for the sky.

A red light above the door started to flash, illuminating the doorway with an eerie glow. "Damn," said Thomas, "we've set off an alarm. We'd better make a run for it!"

He quickly scanned the walls with the binoculars they'd brought, another inheritance from his father, looking for the tell-tale breeze-block shed. "There it is." He pointed to a place further down the wall.

"We'd better get moving," said Wendy. "It's quite a way and I can hear voices approaching."

They ran through the myriad of paths that intersected the crop fields and kept low for fear of detection. Occasionally they heard voices shouting and saw the beams of torches flash across the fields and froze when they approached.

After two hours they reached the shed, panting and exhausted. The wooden door was locked. Thomas tried to force it, but it was too solid. He searched desperately for some tool to help and spotted a spade leaning against the wall. He thrust the blade into the gap in the door frame and pushed with all his might.

The door groaned, creaked, splintered and swung free. They both froze as the noise echoed across the crops. Distant voices shouted, now having a focus for their search.

As the dust settled, the sound of running water drifted up. Wendy switched on the torch and probed the darkness. A metal ladder glinted in the torchlight and disappeared down into the tunnel entrance.

"We'd better be quick. You still sure this is what you want?" Thomas asked.

"I've never been so sure about anything in my life," she smiled. "How about you?"

"I've never felt so alive ... let's go." With that Thomas stepped through the door and descended into the darkness. After a few metres, his feet touched water and then the bottom of the tunnel. "It's OK, come down."

Wendy reached the bottom almost slipping in her haste and shone the torch into the darkness. About three metres away, steel bars blocked the tunnel.

"Shit! Must be there to keep animals out. This is going to be tricky," Thomas exclaimed as he quickly pushed through the water. He grabbed one of the bars. "They're not fixed that solidly, bring the torch."

By the time Wendy reached him, Thomas had already removed one bar and was frantically working on the second. Occasionally, the doorway above would be lit by the flash of torch light as the Security Guards got nearer.

After a few minutes of frenzied pulling and shaking, he'd removed enough bars to allow them to squeeze through. Thomas replaced the bars, "might slow them down a little."

At the far end of the tunnel, water cascaded over a ledge above their heads. Another metal ladder led upwards. They climbed out just as voices echoed down below. Surprised rabbits scampered for cover. A gentle breeze fluffed the grass. They each took a deep breath and filled their lungs with natural, unconditioned air for the first time in their lives.

"Quick, lets find some cover, we'll follow this stream," whispered Thomas.

Wendy looked back at the high bleak walls of the complex and shuddered. They ran along the stream, hand in hand to stop each other slipping on the muddy bottom. The sky to the east started to change colour. An orange glow was edging the horizon. The stream gurgled and splashed, encouraging them to keep going and led them towards the edge of a wood.

They dived into the trees just as voices reached them from the edge of the complex. They hid behind a bush and watched as the Security Guards scanned the area with their torches. Luckily, the stream had left no traces for them to follow and after a brief discussion, they descended back into the tunnel.

"That was close!" said Thomas. "I wonder where this stream goes."

The stream meandered around young trees as they followed it deeper into the wood. After about an hour they emerged into a clearing. On the far side, next to the stream, was a small structure. A wisp of smoke rose from the top. They heard voices inside.

"Hello, is there someone there?" Thomas called, the voices stopped. A crack of light widened and a face appeared.

"Who are you?" A man, dressed in shabby jeans and thick woollen jumper, stepped out.

"We've left the complex," explained Thomas.

"We're from the complex ... been living here for a while ... living off the land ..." Thomas and Wendy exchanged a glance. "... There's quite a few of us scattered through the woods." The stranger smiled.

"How did you get here?" Wendy asked.

"I was in charge of Security and had access to the security cameras ... saw the outside. We escaped a few years ago. No one bothers us ... they don't know what to do. Take us back or what. So they just leave us alone. My name is Eddie by the way ... Would you like to meet my wife Jane and the family? ... Jane used to work in the Crèche."