

# STAY

All Is Not What It Seems

IAN NEWBEGIN



**Stay:**  
**All Is Not What It Seems**

Ian Newbegin



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Book 1 Stay: The Search Begins

Book 2 Stay: All is Not What it Seems

Book 3 Stay: Changes, Many Changes

## Dedication

To my wife Jane and my children and their partners, Darren and Jackie, Trudy, Kellie and Mark and Greg and Mihoko. Thanks for your patience.



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## Prologue

Frank Melton, a mind traveler for the Intergalactic Council, has just returned from England, where he visited a prison, disguised as an historian. For official purposes, he was collecting data about an old boiler system that used to operate within the prison. His real mission was to find and save an operative who had not eaten for three days, and who was hidden from the guards. He had no idea of the reason for the criminal's incarceration.

Andrew Southern, known to Frank as Tolok from a previous mission, had secreted himself behind a boiler to meditate, so that he could participate safely in the Intergalactic Council's operative program. Southern was imprisoned because he was a serial rapist, and once Frank discovered this fact, he began to have serious doubts about his role as an operative for the council.

Frank had participated in three operations for the council where he was mind transported to the planet Tishog in search of a component that was part of the original mind transport device. The original design had the added ability to control and manipulate the operative's mind.

Space travel was possible, even from primitive planets, such as Earth. However, mind travel was considered to be the safest mode of interplanetary travel while on a mission, since an operative's involvement could be safely terminated by a controller should the mission become dangerous, or if the host body was killed.

Frank didn't like the fact that he constantly lied to his wife to ensure that his involvement in the program remained a secret. Now, he felt deceived by the council, who didn't tell him why Andrew Southern had been jailed.

Could he trust them on future missions? Frank needed time to resolve these issues and wanted assurances from the council that his life was not at risk.

## A Time to Think

Frank climbed uneasily from the spacecraft and headed directly toward Howard, who was standing at the entrance of the loading bay to greet him.

Howard smiled his usual smile as Frank, still seething from the day's activities, approached.

"Why didn't you tell me that Tolok was a rapist and child molester? You and the Elders were only concerned about saving your precious operative. My safety was secondary." Frank clenched his fist in anger as he vented these words toward Howard.

"Would you have gone if you had known the facts?" Howard replied with an inflectionless tone of an android, shrugging a shoulder dismissively.

"You tricked me into saving a bloody rapist! He saw me and if he gets out of prison, he could track me down. You've placed my family's life in danger." Frank paced the floor of the receiving bay where three spacecraft were always ready for emergencies of just the kind he had been involved in, and for interplanetary travel.

"That bastard has caused untold damage to children and women. I bet he's been active in prison, too!" Frank's mind saw vivid images of Tolok, formally known as Andrew Southern, seeking young children and enticing them to his car by offering sweets, then driving them to a place where he could commit his hideous crime and cause severe trauma. He also saw women being raped in the car, begging for mercy while he forced himself on them without consideration for their wellbeing, just as long as his sexual appetite was quenched.

Yet Tolok, the agent he worked with on the planet Tishog, was a gentle and trustworthy individual. How could this be? Why let a criminal work as an operative? These questions he put to Howard.

"Frank, when your mind is transported to a recipient or host body, it is located within an error-free brain, one that has been programmed for particular behavioral traits, such as you experienced when you were sent to the asylum on Tishog. Sexual desires are repressed, as you know. Tolok was free of his compulsive sexual behavior then. If he had

been a violent and murdering criminal, he would have been free of that behavior too.” As always, Howard stared knowingly at Frank.

Frank hesitated, *This so-called Howard is just a machine*, he thought. *Why couldn't they have programmed him with some human feelings and emotion?*

“How many other operatives are in the same situation as that bastard in jail?” Frank blurted as he continued to pace the floor of the receiving bay.

“I don't know, Frank, but I will be honest and say that there is a high likelihood of criminals taking an active role in the program. Why, do you object to this?”

Frank turned and scowled at Howard, his heart still racing as he tried to maintain his anger. “Shit, Howard! Your bloody programming leaves you without any feeling of what might happen to an operative in the field during a mission. What if bloody Tolok gained control of his earthly, habitual ways while on a mission?”

Calmly, Howard replied, “Can't happen. You are not listening, Frank. When you are transported, your mind occupies a brain that has been pre-programmed and which is error free. Negative traits cannot possibly be transported.”

Howard stopped for a while, as if thinking, then continued. “Andrew Southern, whom you knew as Tolok while on the mission, has been an operative for twenty Earth years without a blemish and with many successful operations to his credit. He has deliberately allowed himself to be incarcerated so that he will not harm others.”

Still facing Howard, and with his hands on his hips, Frank nodded slowly in acknowledgement. He was confused. Was it the lie or the facts about Tolok's life on Earth that upset him?

Running his fingers through his hair and looking down, Frank continued, “I don't know, Howard. Look! You lied about Tolok and allowed me to participate in a dangerous situation, so how can I trust you? How can I trust the bloody Elders? Shit! They programmed you; are they concerned about my safety?”

Howard spoke with authority and with a hint of disappointment. “Frank, you have some serious thinking to do. If you do not trust the program with which you are involved, then you are free to leave. What is your decision on this matter?”

Frank took out his personal controller and gave it to Howard. “You have no idea how I feel, do you? Well you and your Elders can get stuffed. If I can’t question the program and get satisfactory answers, then I’ll be happy to relinquish all memory of my experience.”

Frank had no misgivings about this decision. There was nothing to lose.

Howard stood fumbling with Frank’s controller. He sighed deeply, surprising Frank. “Very well, I accept your decision to return the controller, but I will give you two months to think about where you want to be with regard to the program.”

Howard spoke now with passion, staring Frank in the eyes while gesturing with his hands. “Frank! Look ahead of you. You have the potential to make a difference to the universe. You can travel to places that science fiction writers only dream about. Think about that!”

“What the hell is the point of that if I can’t tell anyone? Not even my wife. Shit! The only person I can talk to is Tim, and he can’t talk back to me.” Frank laughed at the irony of the situation.

“All I ask is that you at least think about it.” Howard hesitated as if to calculate what he would say next. “If you truly want to leave the program, if you truly do not trust me and the Elders, then I will put a stop to it now. By the time you get to your office, you will have forgotten everything. You will only remember me as Mr. Jones, Head of Personnel Development.”

“Have it your way,” Frank replied in a nonchalant tone, “I’ll have no need to worry since I won’t remember a thing about this conversation.” With more vehemence in his voice, “Hell! You and the bloody Elders need to do some thinking too. If you want loyalty, show it to your operatives. After all, they’re the ones doing the work for the Intergalactic Council.”

Frank stormed out of the loading bay. He stood in the corridor seething about the situation before he pressed the button to call for the elevator, which he rode to the ground floor.

As the lift descended, he waited in anticipation for the moment when he would lose all memory of the operations he had undertaken. Laughing to himself, he thought, *Shit! What’s the point of waiting for the moment when I lose my memory? I wouldn’t recognize the moment anyway.*

The elevator came to a halt and the door slid slowly open, leaving him to stare into the empty foyer.

As he stepped out of the elevator, Dave called him to the guard station. "Hello, Frank. Still riding the elevator to fame? In the good books with the CEO, are we?"

He hesitated. After getting no response, he continued, "You know! Riding the elevator to the CEO's office." Still no response, but he could see that Frank was clearly distressed. Dave placed a consoling hand on Frank's shoulder. "Listen. You're wanted on the phone."

"Sorry, Dave, my mind was elsewhere." Frank walked slowly toward the guard station, thinking, *That's it. This is how they'll erase my memory. Howard'll send a signal down the telephone line. He knows I'm not in my office.*

Frank laughed at the prospect of having his memory erased of all operative functions. He picked up the receiver and gingerly placed it against his ear, wondering what sensation he might feel. "Hello."

"Frank. Two months I will give you. I want you to come to my office in two months. In the meantime, think through the issues and consequences very carefully." Howard didn't wait for Frank to reply and hung up, leaving him standing, bewildered.

"What's wrong? You look like you've just seen a ghost. Do you want to talk about it?" Dave asked as he looked quizzically into Frank's eyes.

"Nah! I'm alright. Just some decisions to make; that's all. Got time for a coffee, Dave?"

"Yeah, why not. I've been standing here all day without a break. Peter's sick and someone's coming to replace me. Look, Frank, give me twenty minutes to check on my replacement and I'll meet you in the caf." Dave picked up the phone as Frank made his way back to the elevator bay to return to his office.

Frank wondered whether Andrew Southern had given himself up to the guards, then quickly dismissed the idea since he didn't relish the thought of helping a rapist.

He sighed deeply in disgust, not at Andrew Southern, but at himself for being tricked into helping a criminal.

Feelings of self loathing and depression started to creep back into his mind when he thought, *Stop thinking like this. So you helped this*

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*stinking criminal! He's still in jail. With a bit of luck the authorities might flog the bastard.* Frank smiled to himself at this thought, and tried to take his mind off the incident.

Back in his office, he checked for email and upcoming appointments. His next project was to present a relaxation session the next morning for his old karate class, so he quickly rummaged through his notes.

Twenty minutes later, Frank and Dave were talking in the canteen.

Dave was fishing for reasons why Frank had gone to the CEO's office, but Frank was true to his word and said nothing of his experience.

"Ah, Jonesy wants me to take on extra responsibility," Frank said. He didn't name the responsibility but continued. "I don't want to get bogged down again, Dave. I can go home after work without a care about the organization. Why take on the extra burden?"

Frank took a sip from his cup when Dave asked the question for which he had no answer. "What does he want you to do?" then, continuing, he provided Frank with the solution. "Does he want you to be his second in charge or something?"

"Yeah, that's it, Dave. He wants me to take charge of the department, under his guidance of course, but no way, mate." Frank wanted desperately to end the discussion. "I wouldn't have time to have coffee with you, now, would I, Dave? I'd be flat out writing reports and organizing seminars." He placed his arm on Dave's shoulder and shook him a little.

The distraction worked. Dave laughed and the topic changed to that of Frank's next work session.

The two men chatted for the next fifteen minutes about the layout of the conference room when Frank looked at his watch and saw that it was after five in the afternoon.

"God, the time's passed quickly, Dave. I must fly. Look, come and have a break with the karate group tomorrow. If you're interested, speak to Paul about the club."

The two men shook hands and Frank was soon driving toward home.

Along the way, he felt a slight rumble and thought that another operative or Elder must have arrived, probably to discuss concerns

about the possibility that he would leave the program. *Ah well! They can think what they like. I don't have my controller so they'll never know what I'm thinking. They can wait the whole bloody two months for my decision.*

He turned the vehicle into the driveway where he was greeted excitedly by Kate and James.

“Dad, Dad; guess what!” James said as he raced Kate to tell him their news.

“We can pick the car up today,” Kate blurted out, to destroy James’ surprise.

“You didn’t have to say that. I wanted Dad to guess; jeeze, you can be a pain in the butt sometimes, Kate.”

“Well, you wanted to get in first,” Kate replied as Frank walked past, leaving them to argue about who had the right to tell him the news.

He and his wife had recently purchased a four-wheel drive to replace their old Ford sedan.

“Hello, honey. I see the kids have told you about the car,” Janet said as she greeted him at the front door, kissing him gently on the cheek.

Frank laughed as he looked at his children, who were still arguing. “Let’s go inside and close the door. I wonder how long it’ll take them to realize that I’m not standing there listening to them.”

Once inside, Frank showered and changed his clothes, then went to the kitchen where Janet was preparing the evening meal.

“So, when can we go get the car?” Frank asked as he nibbled at Janet’s ear; he’d forgotten all about the matter at work that day.

*Life is a lot better now*, Frank thought, with a brief flashback to old desperate times when his old employer had, in effect, stolen his work, the computer program he’d invested all his private time and all his money on. Oh well; he was out of bankruptcy now.

“Tonight, if you want. They’re preparing the car lot for a sale of demonstration models and will be open till eight p.m.”

James and Kate walked into the room at that moment. “Yeah. Let’s go pick it up now, Dad,” James said enthusiastically. “Mom can cook dinner while we go and get it. That way we’ll save time.”

“Good one, James,” said Kate. “Let’s leave Mom behind just so that you can ride in the car first,” then turning to her mother, “Can’t dinner wait for a while, Mum?”

“No, it can’t,” Janet replied as she turned the steak over on the grill. “Dinner will be ready in ten minutes, so get the table ready. If you’re that concerned, the sooner you set the table, the sooner we can leave to pick up the car.”

Frank leaned against the doorway, musing over what was happening in the kitchen, when his thoughts returned to the day’s activities. He was still upset about what had transpired and noted that his feelings were stronger after this operation than when he had returned from a mission after being mind transported. He knew he was more upset this time than for previous operations, and wondered if this was because, for once, he’d been in his own body. Perhaps the galactic technology was less effective in repressing his feelings because of that.

His thoughts shifted to a recent mission, where he’d managed to retrieve a sample of a sleeping potion, which could not be detected by the controllers, embedded in the host body. This lack of detection prevented an unsuspecting operative who may have ingested the potion from returning to his own body, which was located many light years away from the operation site. He noted that his thoughts were somewhat dull, lacking emotion and detail.

He recalled Howard telling him that memories of missions were masked and somewhat subdued, so that his earthly functions could continue unencumbered. There was no value in an operative dwelling on what may have transpired during a mission.

“Frank! Frank, honey; aren’t you listening?” Janet interrupted. “You were miles away. Dinner’s ready and if you don’t sit down now, Kate and James’ll be very upset.”

“Oh! Sorry, love, I was just thinking about my next project at work.” He shrugged off any residual thoughts about his position as an operative for the Intergalactic Council, and sat to eat dinner with his family.

“Hurry, Daddy; we’ve nearly finished,” Kate said as she left her chair to start clearing the table.

“Let Dad finish first, Kate. Clear your dirty dishes and leave the rest. Why don’t you and James start washing in the meantime, to save time?” Janet suggested as James took his dishes over to the kitchen sink.

“Good idea; I’ll wash. Get out of my way, Kate.” James replied enthusiastically as he nudged Kate to one side while he turned the tap on to fill the sink with water.

Janet and Frank finished their coffee while James and Kate put the cleaned dishes away.

“This is a first,” Frank said as he watched his two children. “Look at them, wiping the bench, putting the condiments away, and packing the dishes. I bet it won’t last longer than today.”

Janet laughed in agreement as she rose from the table to ready herself for the trip into the car lot.

“Come on, Dad; we haven’t got all day” James insisted as he helped his father from his chair.

“I wish you were this enthusiastic about studying, James; then I would be truly happy. Just think, my Einstein son.”

“Dream on, Dad,” James replied as he gave his father the keys to the old Ford.

When they reached the car lot, Frank parked the car out front, since he was going to have to drive it home again. They had decided to keep the Ford for their second car, which Frank would use, since he worked only a few short miles away from home.

The new car, a Toyota four-wheel drive, was sitting in the lot while a young man wiped it to maintain the shine. It was silver in color with an elevated exhaust and bull bar, a factor that had not gone unnoticed by James.

“Wow! Look at that, it’s got the exhaust above the cabin. Come on, Kate; let’s look inside. Did you bring a CD?”

Kate and James raced over to the vehicle and climbed inside. In the meantime, Frank and Janet went with the salesman to sign the ownership papers.

“Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Melton, you are now the proud owners of a Toyota. All that’s required of me now is to show you the controls.” Frank shook hands with Sam, the salesman, and walked with him to the car, grinning broadly.

Ten minutes later, the Meltons were driving out of the car lot joking happily about future adventures. Janet brought the company to a sudden stop. “Aren’t you forgetting something, Frank? We still have to take the Ford home.”

“Ah, jeeze, I forgot. Come on, James, you come with me and let Mom and Kate drive in the new car.”

“Why can’t Kate go with you? Isn’t it sexist to let Mom and Kate

drive in this car?” James argued, clearly not wanting to ride home in the old Ford.

“Don’t be stupid, James. You just don’t want to get out. Okay, I’ll go with Daddy; there’ll be plenty of opportunities to ride in this car.” Kate unbuckled her seat belt and climbed out of the car to go with her father. James didn’t argue.

Back at home, the Meltons were exploring their new vehicle. The old Ford, in the meantime, sat by the roadside, forgotten.

“Why don’t we take it to show Joe and Gabrielle?” Janet suggested. “It’s only seven thirty and I’m sure they’d be interested. What do you think?”

“Yeah, let’s go,” James agreed. He and Kate would have gone anywhere just to drive in the new vehicle, giving them the opportunity to explore it further.

“What’s this thing in the roof, Dad?” Kate pressed a button and the frame of the device revealed a screen. “Wow! A DVD player. This is the best car we’ve ever owned.”

James quickly ran inside to get a DVD to play on the way to Joe and Gabrielle’s house.

Frank and Janet took the opportunity to change their clothes before heading off to the Marcellis’ place. By the time they had dressed and regained the car, James and Kate were glued to the small screen in rapture, marveling at the clarity of the picture and sound.

“What have we here?” Joe said enthusiastically as Frank and Janet got out of the car. The two children were still glued to the DVD screen, acknowledging the Marcellis with a quick wave without as much as a brief look at their hosts.

“Well, come on, give us a tour.” Gabrielle said excitedly as she positioned herself behind the steering wheel. For the next fifteen minutes, Frank showed Joe and Gabrielle their new vehicle with the occasional “Shoosh up,” from Kate and James, who remained fixated on the DVD.

“Let’s go inside and leave these two to their movie,” Joe said as he ruffled James’ hair. “So when are we going camping, Frank?”

“Ah, boys and their toys,” Janet replied, laughing. She was pleased to see that Joe and Frank had fixed their relationship, which had soured when the Meltons went bankrupt.

The two men sat and talked about a trip to the gorge. Frank told Joe about a new camping site that was accessible by four-wheel drive vehicles or experienced bush walkers, and before long, the trip was planned for a weekend in two weeks' time.

Gabrielle and Janet talked about exercise programs, since Gabrielle had decided to join one of Janet's classes. "I've been feeling tired since my operation and have to get out of the rut I've gotten myself into. I've taken up meditation again, but my body needs physical exercise."

"How's Tim and his Mom 'n dad?" Frank asked.

"Good. We see Jacob and Fay regularly now. They wave every time they see us and insist that we have a drink with them." Joe laughed then said, "We've gone from virtual unknowns to best friends. They appreciate what we did for them, and Tim's always pleased to see visitors."

"Great! Look, I might slip in to see Tim, if it's alright with you?" Frank said to his wife and Marcellis.

They agreed and Janet reminded him that they needed to get James and Kate home because it was a weekday, and the children needed to be fresh for school.

Frank promised to be quick and hurried next door to see Tim, who was also an operative. Tim had been with Frank on the last mission, where they retrieved a sample of the sleeping potion that had no apparent antidote.

"Hi, Tim." He waited patiently while Tim's parents fussed around him before they left the two men alone. "I wanted to tell you first hand that I have left the program. I can't trust the Elders." Frank hesitated, then continued. "Did you know that Tolok was a serial rapist?"

"No, I didn't, Frank. But don't make a decision while you are full of emotion. The program has its merits, and you have the opportunity to perform acts which benefit the galaxy," Tim typed on his computer.

"The Elders have given me two months to think about it, but the way I feel, I think that we may know each other under different circumstances in the future." Frank hesitated, then laughed and continued. "In two months, if I decide to leave the program, my mind will be wiped of all memories related to the missions as an operative."

Thinking to himself so that he would not offend Tim, *I'll only remember Tim as the invalid I found in a caravan after his parents*

*neglected him because they couldn't cope. Shit! He was comatose because his parents removed his controller.*

Tim tapped a message on his computer with small movements of his head, aided by a series of connections to the computer. "I'm going back to Tishog for a short time. I feel for the plight of the underclass on that planet and want to contribute toward a better class system if I can. I know we're not supposed to interfere with life on other planets, but, as an individual, I might be able to organize something."

"Good for you, Tim." Some of the ire that had induced Frank to consider leaving the program returned. "I don't trust the Elders and I value my life. I've had many near misses, and saving Tolok was the last straw. Bloody hell; what if I was trapped like you were? What would happen to my family?"

Frank turned to Tim, looking a little despondent, "Look, I've gotta go now. I'll come and see you again soon. Take care." Frank placed a hand on Tim's shoulder as a gesture of friendship then left to return to the Marcellis' and to take his family home.

There was no need to call James and Kate; they were still watching the movie being played on the DVD player in the car.

When at last they had returned home, and after James and Kate were settled in their beds, Frank and Janet sat at the kitchen table, talking about their new car, when Janet noticed the light flashing on the telephone.

"Looks like someone called while we were out." She went to the phone to retrieve the message, which was from Frank's mother, asking them to visit his parents' on the next weekend.

"What do they want?" Frank said not too happily. "They haven't spoken to us since the court case, so why the sudden turn-around."

"I don't know, honey. Why don't you call and try to patch it up with your father?"

"What's to patch up? He made it quite clear that he didn't want to see me. He believes that I was developing the program during work time and showed no sympathy toward us going bankrupt," Frank replied angrily.

He paced the floor and with more vehemence. "I mean, why? Why the hell does he want to speak now? He didn't even concern himself about our predicament. I bet he knows I have a job, so all is forgiven in his eyes."

“Frank, you don’t know that. Let’s just go over on Saturday and see what happens. It’ll give Kate and James the opportunity to see their grandparents again. Forget about the past.”

“Alright, I’ll go, but if he brings up the incident, we’re leaving.”

Later, while lying in bed, Frank had mixed thoughts about Tim’s project, his next speaking engagement, and his father. These thoughts kept him awake until well after midnight and when he got up the next morning, his mood was sour.

“Good morning, Daddy,” Kate said with a ring in her voice. She hugged her father and sat down to breakfast. “Will you take James and me to school today in the new car?”

“I won’t be driving it. You’ll have to ask your mother, and why can’t you get up this early every day?” Frank answered in a not too happy tone. “Just because we’ve got a new car, it doesn’t mean we have to drive you everywhere.”

“Don’t get upset with Kate, Frank. It’s not her fault that you woke in a bad mood.” Then to Kate, Janet said, “I’ll take you to school, honey. Don’t rush your breakfast, and where is James?”

At that moment, James entered the kitchen, holding a CD. “Boy. Music CDs play good in the DVD, too. You should hear it, Kate; we have surround sound and it sounds fantastic.”

“How did you get into the car?” Frank snapped. “Leave the bloody thing alone. Don’t you know that you can flatten the battery if you sit in it playing DVDs? Now sit and eat your breakfast and not a word about the DVD player.”

“Boy, what’s gotten into your ear?” James replied non-apologetically.

“Never mind your talk, son. If you say another word, I’ll ban all DVDs in the car.”

“For god’s sake, Frank, give it up. What have Kate and James done? They’re excited about the car; they didn’t ask your parents to call.” Janet’s anger mounted, since Frank seemed to be returning to the depressed state he’d experienced after going bankrupt.

Frank climbed hurriedly out of his chair, spilling the milk as he knocked the table with his knees. The milk dripped over Kate’s school uniform, sending her into a crying frenzy.

“I’m off to work. See you all tonight.” Then, sarcastically, he said,

“Anyone want a lift?” Then he stormed out of the door with his briefcase and headed off to work.

James was flabbergasted. “What’s wrong with him?” he said as he turned to his mother for an answer.

“Oh nothing, honey. He got a call from Nanna who wants us to go over for a visit. Your father doesn’t forgive them for ignoring him during the bankruptcy.” Janet smiled at James and cleared the table in front of him. “He’ll be alright tonight once he thinks about what he’s done.”

“I thought he’d gone all moody again. I hope he doesn’t continue to take it out on Kate and me. If he keeps it up, he can stick his new car.” Then, getting out of his chair, he turned to Janet and continued, “I’m going to walk to school. Don’t worry about picking me up; I’ll get a lift with Freddy.”

Janet sighed, thinking that the magic of getting a new car had come to a premature end.

When Frank arrived at work, he read his emails, and then went to collect his seminar notes from Sarah, who had printed them in readiness.

After a small amount of obligatory small talk, he hastened to the seminar room to make ready for his guests, colleagues from his old karate club. An hour later, his guests began to arrive, greeting him warmly as they signed the registry book.

Once the participants had settled, Frank welcomed them to Solitude and spoke about meditation in the martial arts. Paul Smythe, his karate teacher, or sensei, encouraged the group to give Frank their full attention, suggesting that they might use the techniques in class when Frank returned to the club.

The first hour consisted of an electronic presentation that explained the various types of meditative techniques, followed by a quick demonstration of the sitting posture he planned to use during the session.

By the end of the first hour, Frank had mellowed a little and began to reflect on what he had said to James and Kate.

“I think it’s time for a short break,” he said to the group, who immediately agreed and followed him to where morning tea was being served.

When they returned to the seminar room, Frank asked the group to move the chairs to the side and to remain standing, giving them plenty of space for practice. Within a very short time, they stood, relaxed, listening to meditation music and moving slowly to the music while stretching their muscles.

Frank joked about the stretching exercises, knowing full well that Paul would have had them doing sit-ups, squats, and the like until they were exhausted. “No pain. No gain,” Paul would say as his students worked at improving their martial skills.

“Okay, guys; now, I want you to just stand relaxed, and concentrate on your breathing. Don’t turn and look at others around you; everyone is doing the same thing. Concentrate on bringing air into your lungs through your nose, slowly, to the count of five, then expel the air through your mouth slowly, again to the count of five. Don’t rush your breathing or you’ll hyperventilate.”

For the next fifteen minutes the group practiced what they had been shown while Frank walked around the room, correcting techniques as he saw fit.

While the participants practiced correct breathing techniques, Frank turned his thoughts to what he’d said to Howard earlier, about continuing with the operative program. Suddenly, the thought occurred to him that one of the participants might experience a small glimpse of mind travel while practicing here, during the seminar.

*Shit! What’ll I do?* He thought for a moment, then decided to introduce the class to guided recall, rather than taking them to an alpha level of meditation, which is required for mind transport.

Paul saw the concern on Frank’s face and approached him quietly. “Are you alright, Frank? Try not to let your family business get to you, mate.” Then, punching him on the shoulder, he said, “Get back into training and take your frustrations out on the students or punching bags.”

Frank laughed, feigning hurt, then turned to concentrate on the group.

For the rest of the day, the group practiced full body relaxation techniques and visualization. Frank constantly reminded them to breathe during the program, since this was integral to success. He spoke quietly and gently to the participants as he took them through

visualization exercises involving karate techniques, ensuring that nobody would ever get sufficiently relaxed to allow the mind to enter the alpha phase, thus preventing a possible mishap due to mind transport.

At the end of the day, everyone was pleased with the experience and promised to diligently practice what they had learned.

Paul thanked Frank on behalf of the group and invited him to return to training. Frank accepted the offer. He was going to train with his old teacher again within the week and both men looked forward to that time.

All the anger he had harbored earlier had now left him. He felt calm and decided to make amends by getting James and Kate a DVD to watch when they went to visit his parents on the weekend.

“You can stick your DVD where it fits,” James said when his father made his peace offering. “We were excited about the car but you know how to stop that, don’t you, Dad? You’ve had plenty of practice at making our life miserable.”

“Thanks, Daddy; I’ll watch it. James is just irritated because you didn’t get the latest movie.” Kate hugged her father then went to her room, followed by James, arguing about the movie and what his father should have gotten.

“Sorry about this morning, honey. I was mad about my parents and I didn’t sleep well last night. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you and the kids.” He hugged his wife then continued. “I called Mom and said we’d be over tomorrow. Either way, we’ll know whether or not we’re back on good terms again.”

The evening passed uneventfully. James had calmed down and was trying to talk his father into getting another DVD so that they could watch one on the way to Frank’s parents, and the other for the return trip. “After all, Dad, it’s about a two hour drive to Nan and Granddad’s; this way Kate ’n I won’t get bored.”

Frank gave in to his son’s con, then took his two children to select a second movie for the return trip.

The next day, Saturday, the Meltons rose early, planning to get a start on their journey by nine o’clock.

“Do we need fuel, honey?” Frank asked, realizing that they had not refueled the vehicle since its purchase.

During the journey, they stopped at the service station where Frank had met Joe on not too friendly terms when he had gone to Lumberg Gorge to sort out his meditation problems, which he later learned were associated with mind travel.

“This is where Joe was mugged,” Janet said as she alighted from the vehicle to pay for the fuel.

“Yeah. That was a while ago now. Thank god everything’s all patched up now. I bet Joe’s forgotten all about the event. Remember, it was when Gabrielle went into a coma after her operation?”

Janet lapsed into daydreaming, then quizzically said, “Frank, where’s your new watch? I haven’t seen it for a while; did you lose it?”

“It’s at work. I keep it on my desk so that I’m aware of the time. Look, I’ve got my old watch to remind me of you,” he replied, as he defused further discussion about the watch, which was also his personal controller.

It wasn’t long before the Meltons were parked in the driveway of Frank’s parents’ home.

“Now be nice, Frank, and don’t start any arguments. Your father’s been ill. There’s no need to drag up the past,” Janet said as she opened the car door to be greeted by Frank’s mother.

“Hi, Mum, it’s great to see you again. Where’s Dad?” then jokingly, Janet added, “Has he slowed down so much that he can’t keep up with you?”

Sarah, Frank’s mother, burst into tears, crying uncontrollably.

Frank rushed to console his mother, glancing at Janet as if to say, *Good one, Janet, now look what you’ve done.*

“There, Ma; let’s go inside. Don’t cry; everything’ll be okay.” Frank’s words of encouragement only fuelled the already fiery situation. He looked back at Janet for answers.

Janet shrugged her shoulders as she joined her husband in support of his mother.

James and Kate followed at a distance, confused by what was happening. They said nothing in case they added to the heartbreak being visibly demonstrated by their grandmother.

Frank and Janet continued to console and fuss over Sarah, but this soon turned to grief when they spotted Frank’s father, who sat in an armchair looking as if he were completely lost. His head turned rapidly

in all directions, his behavior suggesting that he had not seen his son and family enter the room.

Frank stared at his father, somewhat befuddled by what he saw. He reasoned that his father knew nothing of his family's visit and was at this moment oblivious to everything that was going on around him.

"He's been like this for days," Sarah said as she rushed to her husband's side to try and calm him. "He was relaxing, and after about ten minutes, he started rambling about seeing aliens."

Frank instantly understood what had happened.

While he had been resting, Frank's father had slipped into an alpha level of relaxation and his mind had been transported to Trellin, where he would have been assessed as a potential operative.

Given that his father had recently been diagnosed with early onset dementia, Frank reasoned that it would be very easy for his father to get upset about an event that would have appeared to him to be very real. It was more than likely that his father had experienced more than one visit, which would have been confusing to anybody in such a mental state.

*Bloody Elders. Surely they can tell that the old man is dementing,* Frank thought. He turned to face his father and said, "Hi, Dad; good to see you again," but knew that he would not get a response.

His father, Trevor, continued to look rapidly around the room. His eyes were glazed and the expression on his face was one of fear mixed with confusion. Frank noticed that his father was breathing rapidly, and surmised that he may have been suffering an anxiety attack.

"Is he like this all the time, Mum?" Frank asked as he knelt to calm his father.

"Only when he sits and closes his eyes to rest," his mother replied, "He's not sleeping too well because he's scared of seeing the aliens."

Kate and James stood rigid, staring at their grandfather. He had always been a strong man in their eyes, and what they saw now caused them to suffer immense pity and humiliation for their grandfather.

Kate wept silently and James comforted her by putting his arm around her shoulder.

Janet saw that her children were experiencing distress. "Let's go make some drinks," she suggested as she led them from the room.

"Mum, I know a man who may be able to help Dad. I'll call him now, if you want," Frank suggested.

Sarah smiled and pointed toward the phone while she continued to placate her husband.

“Beware,” Trevor shouted as if to warn everyone around him. “They aren’t what they appear to be.”

Frank stared at his father with a deep frown across his forehead, wondering what his father’s comment may have meant.

“He’s been saying this every day. He glares at me with intense hate in his eyes and raises his finger as a warning. ‘Mark my words,’ he says.” Sarah burst in to tears again, “What am I going to do?” she pleaded.

Frank placed a consoling hand on her shoulder and said, “I’ll call my friend. He’ll help put a stop to this. Don’t worry, Mum. Dad’ll be alright; just wait and see.”

Frank picked up the telephone to call Howard, moving first to the far end of the room for privacy.

“Hello, Frank. Have you reconsidered your options,” Howard asked once Frank had indicated who was calling.

“No.” Frank answered flatly. “Listen, Howard, your bloody Elders have put my father in a very confused state. It’s bad enough that he’s suffering dementia, but his mind has been transported to Trellin on more than one occasion, I suspect. Surely Klemon and the other controllers can tell that he’s not of sound mind.” Frank spoke firmly but quietly, so that Janet and his mother could not hear what he was saying.

He turned and smiled at his mother, offering gestures of reassurance as he listened to Howard’s response.

“I checked the data bank, Frank, and can assure you that he will not be picked up again. I will send a courier with a potion that will rid your father of any thoughts about his visits; it may take a couple of hours to get there.”

Howard stopped for a short time then continued. “Frank, we need your answer soon. You are a valuable operative so don’t make any rash decisions. What happened to your father was indeed unfortunate.”

Frank interrupted, saying, “Yeah, alright; cut the speech. I’ll get back to you soon. Thanks for your help in this situation; it is appreciated.”

*So they use a potion,* he thought to himself, then turned and

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embraced his mother, who was still crying, though this time, he surmised they were tears of joy.

“You’re a good son, Frank. Dad’s going to be okay because of you. Please thank your friend for me.”

Frank nodded and smiled, all the while thinking what his father had said. *They’re not what they appear to be.*

*Probably just a disturbed mind. God knows what he thinks in his state,* he thought, then, shrugging his shoulders, he took a deep breath and accepted a cup of coffee from his wife.

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