

*Meeting Hamish*

It all started one evening in February, soon after our thirteenth birthday.

We were in the den: me, my twin sister Donna, and Donna's best friend Emerald.

Our den is in an old railway carriage at the bottom of the garden. Don't ask me *why* we have a railway carriage in the garden. It's been there as long as I can remember. Dad took all the seats out and divided it in two. He turned half of it into a workshop for himself and gave the other half to us. It's where I keep my favourite possessions, like the collection of detective stories that I inherited from Granddad.

That day we were arguing about whether you can foresee the future.

"I don't believe in fortune-telling," I said. "I don't see how it could work. It's just not scientific."

Donna made a face at me. "That's typical of you, Alex. Anything you can't prove by doing a test in a lab is rubbish, What about intuition? What about the sixth sense? You tell him, Em. You're the expert."

"Yeah, go on, Em," I said, teasing her. "Tell us how it works."

Emerald's grandmother is a real Romany gypsy who tells fortunes in a booth at the fairground each summer, so if anyone understands how fortune-telling works, it should be Em. But she shook her head. "I don't know how it works. It's a gift. You either have it or you don't. Nanna has it, and she thinks I have it too. She's been teaching me how to read tarot cards."

"Has she really?" Donna looked impressed. "Could you do a reading for me?"

Em thought for a moment. “Well... I suppose so. But remember, I’m not as good as Nanna yet.” She delved into her school bag and brought out a dog-eared pack of cards. As she shuffled them carefully, she said to Donna, “Ask me a question you want answered.”

“I know! Will Dad ever earn any money?”

It was a good question. Our dad’s different from other people’s dads. He doesn’t work in an office or a shop or a factory. He’s an inventor. Sometimes when he’s working on a new idea, he’ll lock himself away in the workshop for days at a time. We stay well clear of him then. If things are going well, he’ll be in a really good mood when he resurfaces, singing opera in the bath and cracking endless jokes. But when things are going badly, he’ll mope around the house totally ignoring the rest of us and muttering to himself as if he’s talking to an invisible friend.

I once asked Nan why Dad’s the way he is. She sighed. “There’s often a very fine line between genius and madness, laddie, and sometimes even I can’t tell which side of the line your dad’s on.” I don’t get it. If Dad’s such a genius, how come nobody’s ever bought any of his inventions?

We watched as Emerald laid out six cards, face up on the old coffee table. When she’d finished, there were two cards in the centre, one laid across the other, and four more cards arranged around them in the form of a cross.

Em sat very still, staring at the cards and frowning slightly. “Come on!” Donna said after a few moments. “What do they say?”

Em jumped, as if she was coming out of a trance. She pointed to the two cards in the centre of the spread. “The card underneath shows the cause of your problem. It’s the Fool. He doesn’t want to have a boring job like everyone else and plan for the future. He’s not interested in money or appearances. He likes to do his own thing...”

Donna and I both shouted, “That’s Dad!” It was because Dad had never had a proper job that we had never owned things like expensive phones or designer trainers, but Em didn’t need cards to tell her that. She knew all about our dad.

Then Em pointed to the card lying on top of the Fool. It showed a woman in an old-fashioned dress carrying a bunch of keys. “That’s the Empress. She’s rich and powerful, like a queen bee. She could help you solve your problem if she wanted to.”

“Oh yes?” I said. “Where are we likely to meet a rich and powerful woman?” Nan’s the only woman in our lives at the moment. Because our mother died when we were born, it’s Nan who looks after us and pays the bills by working as a dinner lady at our school, Lea Green, and doing cleaning jobs on the side.

The next card, the one on the left, had the word ‘Death’ above the picture of a graveyard. I don’t believe in fate, but I shivered when I looked at it. “Is someone going to die?” I asked.

Em looked thoughtful. “Not necessarily. Most of the cards have more than one meaning. It could mean a big change in your life. Perhaps you’re going to come into some money. And Donna,” she giggled, “this card, the Chariot, shows how you let your heart rule your head. And that one there, the two of Wands, that’s Alex telling you to be less rash.”

I grinned. She was right, of course. Donna is the impulsive one, while I like to think things through before I act. Donna glared at Em. “Very funny. What about the last card?”

The last card had a picture of a tower with somebody falling through the air as if they’d either jumped or been pushed off the top. Em stared at it. For the first time she looked worried. “I think it’s linked to the Death card,” she said eventually. “I think it’s a warning about some form of danger.”

“What sort of danger?”

“I don’t know. It’s difficult to say. It can also mean you’re going to find out the truth about something.”

After Emerald had packed away her cards and gone home, we continued the argument. “I don’t care if she does have Romany blood,” I said. “I still think she made it all up. I mean, how likely is it that we’ll suddenly come into lots of money? It’s not as if Nan does the lottery. And when did Dad last earn anything? No, Em was just saying what fortune-tellers always say. It’s either *you’ll meet a tall dark handsome stranger*, or *you’re going to be rich*. It’s a load of rubbish.”

“You and Dad are just the same: you dismiss anything that’s not scientific. Maybe if he used his intuition more often, he’d be more successful.”

“And perhaps you two should have a bit more faith in your father,” said a voice from the doorway.

We both jumped. We’d been so busy arguing that we hadn’t heard him opening the door between the workshop and the den. Dad looked exhausted. His chin was sprouting stubble and his hair was standing up on end as if he’d been endlessly running his fingers through it, but his eyes were blazing with excitement.

“What is it, Dad?” said Donna.

He grinned at us. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet. Alex, Donna, this is Hamish...”

As Dad stepped back from the doorway we could see he was holding something like a TV remote control. There was a faint whirring noise, and a strange object started moving along the workroom floor towards us. It had a small domed body and six jointed metal legs. Two camera lenses took the place of eyes, and between the lenses were wiggly rubber arms with little pads on the ends like an insect’s antenna. It looked just like a mechanical tarantula.

Dad had built a robot!

At first we were both so stunned we couldn't speak. Then Donna said, "Wow! He's so cute!"

Dad looked disgusted. "For goodness's sake, girl, he's not a toy! He's a sophisticated search and rescue device. We're talking cutting-edge technology here!"

Donna looked sheepish. "Sorry, Dad, I didn't realise."

I wanted to know how the robot worked. "Why does he need antennae when he has camera lenses to see with?"

"Normally Hamish finds his way by touch using the antennae, which have sensors at their tips. However, the lenses can give advance warning of obstructions. They have infra-red thermal vision so they can see in the dark and through smoke. Look... I'll show you."

Dad drew us into his workroom and shut the door. He turned Hamish round so he was facing a large box that was standing in the middle of the floor. Then he switched off the lights. Apart from a faint red glow from the stove that heated the workroom, we were in total darkness.

We heard Dad tapping some buttons on the control and Hamish started to move forward again. Then the sounds of movement stopped and there was a loud BLEEP!

"Hear that? That's his way of saying that there's something blocking his path." He switched the light on again. Hamish had stopped half a metre from the box.

"Why didn't he go up to the box and touch it with his sensors?" Donna asked.

"I've programmed him to think any obstructions could be dangerous, so he stops before he reaches them."

"How long have you been working on Hamish?" I asked. We'd had no idea he was working on anything major, although considering how much time he'd spent in the workshop recently, we really should have guessed.

Dad sat back in his computer chair and folded his arms. “About two years, I suppose, although I got the idea when I was working on that robotic lawnmower some time ago.”

I remembered the robotic lawn mower. It kept going out of control and careering across the lawn at sixty miles an hour like some weapon of mass destruction. “Never mind, Dad,” Donna had said. “It’ll make a great bird scarer.” Dad had moped about the house for ages afterwards, depressed that yet another idea had gone wrong. Now it looked like he’d turned his failure into something positive after all.

Dad started to talk about all the situations where Hamish could be really useful. “He can go into places that would be dangerous for humans because of radiation or landmines. He can climb stairs and get into confined spaces, so he can help find people in collapsed buildings. There are so many applications. And this is just Mark 1. I’m hoping Mark 2 will be able to think for himself, at least in some instances.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Our dad, creating artificial intelligence? Maybe he *was* a genius after all.

There were so many more things I wanted to know. What sort of company would be interested in a robot like Hamish? How long would it take to give him some form of intelligence? Would he make Dad a lot of money? But before I could ask any more questions, Dad turned to us with a really serious look on his face and said, “Right, you two, I need your promise that you won’t talk about what you’ve seen to anyone outside the family, not even your best friends.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” said Donna promptly. Why does she always have to be so dramatic?

He raised an eyebrow at me. “Alex?”

“I swear.”

“Thank you. Now, I think Hamish deserves a rest, and so do I. A meal, a bath, and bed, in that order. I’m knackered.”

Dad put Hamish away carefully in a box under the workbench, then he ushered us out of the workshop and locked up for the night. As we followed him up the long winding path to the back door, I remembered all the times we’d been teased by the kids at Lea Green for having such a loopy dad. They think that because he’s weird, we must be too. If just one of Dad’s inventions could be a success, maybe people wouldn’t laugh at him anymore, or make fun of us when we stick up for him. Then I thought about Em’s predictions. I didn’t really believe you could foretell the future, but suppose she was right? I was so busy imagining a bright future for us that I forgot all about her warning of danger to come...