

Ellexis

Ellexis slowed to catch her breath. She had been running fast through the empty streets. She looked down at her fitbit. It said 9:11. That was wrong. It was definitely earlier, more like 7:30 but the sky was already that amazing blue of a bright September morning. A yellow car passed. Then another. And a second later the ground gave way. There was no one else around, just Ellexis disappearing down the hole that had formed in the tarmac.

This is quite a nice sensation, I thought, as I floated down through the layers of the earth, past the sandy surface and into the dark masses of what could well be igneous rock. No school for me today, no physics, and no maths either. Just plain gravity, if that's what it is.

The walls of the hole were quite uneven, there were ledges that looked like shelves, and some fronds of ferny vegetation here and there. So there must be some water and some light coming from somewhere. I looked down at my feet to check that I wasn't dreaming. There were my shorts, my legs and finally my running shoes, 'New Balance', size 6, azure with a blaze of pink. It was all real.

Eventually I felt myself slowing down. I landed softly on some loose gravel – it might have been road chippings, hard to say. I looked about. It was definitely not as dark as it should be in the middle of the earth. But there was no sign of the shaft I had come down. I stood for a moment, wondering what to do.

I checked the GPS coordinates on my new fitbit – the 'super-tracker V301' that I'd got for my 13th birthday. The data flicked on the screen. Good, I thought, I am not that far from home, but what about the third dimension? How far have I fallen? My fitbit was no good for that.

As my eyes adjusted to the gloom I realized I was not in a cave, I was at the intersection of a mass of tunnels, leading off in every direction. Since the GPS was working and since I had stored the coordinates of my current location I decided to explore.

I could see the floor, still loose gravel, but as I went on further I saw something like steam swirling ahead, and there was a slightly acrid smell. I decided to turn back. I checked the fitbit again to check the direction. At first the screen was blank, then it said 'Adrian Approaching', in a type face I'd never seen before.

The next moment, he was there, right in front of me. He spoke in a deep voice. "You must be Ellexis. Welcome". It was hard to tell in the gloom but from what I could see he had a very soft thick fur coat. Adrian (that must be his name) opened a door just off the main tunnel.

There were dozens of computers and in a locked glass cabinet set in the rock, a collection of fitbits dating back to the very first 'Ultra'. He followed my gaze.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed your regular morning run Ellexis, and especially on a day when your mood was already amber 5.6, but as you can see I am a collector and I am missing the V301. If you would just hand me your fitbit, and your password, I can show you the way out and you'll be home before you know it".

"No way" I said, "This was my birthday present, I'm not giving it to anyone".

Adrian shrugged. "No rush.. I'll make some breakfast. I'll leave you to think it over". And with that he left, closing the door firmly behind him.

I sat on one of the swivel chairs and swung my legs around. The computer monitor to my left was on. The screen was full of details and data. I took a closer look. It was all about me!!!

Ellexis Ali. Age 13 and 2 months. Unique identifier: XE!/88*a2D, Address: 22 Dark Lane Drive. Model: 'super-tracker V301' Speed: top 10%. Heart rate: excellent. Sleep: 6.1 weekly average. Sociotemporal rhythm: regular.

Mood: amber 5.7; Stress level: rising. Location: 0.00/0.00; Life expectancy: data not available; Political affiliation: data not available. Favourite colour: data not available. Extended Social network: data not available; Weekly income and expenditure: data not available.

The dashboard on the computer showed more, including the path I had taken that very morning. I had been tracked by my own 'super-tracker V301'.

I tried the 'NEXT' button – what else was there to discover and who else was being tracked? It didn't work. The screen was frozen.

I swung around a few more times on the swivel chair. On the shelves there were some old Lever Arch files. I went across and pulled a red one off the shelf: it said 'PLANS' in big letters on the spine. I opened it up. Inside there were pages and pages of sketches of military installations, each carefully labelled with the fitbit unique identifiers of soldiers –the maps showed the routes of their runs! I checked the dates:2013-2017, I put the file back, and picked out the one next to it.

It was marked 'INVOICES'. One was to a company called 'Vitality: Life Insurance'; another was to Nike. They were all from an organization called 'Adrian's data services'. A few pages on, there was a query from MI5. Would Adrian be so kind as to reveal the location of nuclear facilities in the USA?

I was starting to put the pieces together. Adrian wasn't that organised – his filing system was a bit random and there were stacks of paper everywhere, including a pile of school exercise books. I opened one at random. It was full of figures, but of what? There were what looked like strips of heart rate data, sellotaped in here and there, and some equations.

I went back to the chair and swung around a bit more. The sink hole was no accident. I had been captured for my 'smart-tracker V301' and my password. But why? I looked back again at the glass cabinet. Where were the owners of those old fitbits now?

The knock on the door made me jump. It was Adrian. "Breakfast is ready..."

I always have rice krispies for breakfast, but not today. Adrian wheeled a trolley into the room. It was laden with cutlery, crockery, a stainless steel coffee pot and a large plate of what looked like spam on toast. He looked across: "I could scramble some eggs for you if you like, but I know you are not that keen on them."

How does he know that, I wondered, and I glanced at my fitbit. Was that the source? I sat in silence. I had been captured. I had to find a way out. I swung my legs back and forth. Had anyone else escaped before? Probably not. It would have been in the news, for sure. I gripped the edge of the swivel chair and spun it round again a few times.

Adrian busied himself: clearing a space on one of the desks, laying out the breakfast things. He sat down opposite and poured the coffee. It smelled good.

Adrian: "My I-C-U everywhere monitor tells me you have been looking through my files whilst I was out. You know it is not very polite to go through other people's belongings without them knowing. There is no point in trying to go behind my back, I can see you everywhere. Look, there is no escape." He held out his arm to show me a little device strapped to his wrist. On it, there was a grainy photo of me surrounded by a mass of indecipherable data.

I was aghast. I looked him straight in the eye. "I know exactly what you are up to. You are harvesting data from innocent people like me, you are invading our privacy, secretly stealing information and then selling it on. It is horrid.

And those experiments in the exercise books: you are trying to programme fitbits to make people run faster or slower. You want to control us. It is wrong and it is immoral.

And now I know why you trapped me. Its not me, its my V301 you want. At the moment you can only do the basics but when you get hold of a V301 and when you crack the super-tracker protocol, you will be able to collect and sell even more secrets. You will know all about my friends, you'll even know my favourite colour. That's wrong. You are not having my fitbit and I'm not going to tell you my password. Never. I am going to get out of here and I am going to tell everyone what you are doing. Then you'll be in trouble."

Adrian: "Come now, Ellexis. You've got the wrong end of the stick. It is you who are producing the data, not me. If you didn't go around wearing the fitbit, uploading your routes, your heart rate, your pace and your mood ratings on to your computer, if you just went out for a plain ordinary run, I'd know nothing about you. If everyone did the same I'd be out of business in a flash. You are just as much part of the system as me. You can't pretend otherwise.

And anyway, how do you know I'm not doing good. Just think about it. I need to keep up to date. The latest fitbits are generating an unrivalled source of information about the human condition, the aging process and the physiological-psychological interface. If I didn't gather all this data it would just go to waste. When it is combined and analysed it can tell us a lot about bodies and their moving parts, their patterns of sleep and what it means to be fit and well. What's wrong with that?"

Adrian paused for a moment and then tucked into his breakfast. "I hope you like the meat" he said "it is cooked to perfection".

I wasn't going to let the argument go. I put down my coffee.

"But that's not what you are doing" I replied. "I've seen the invoices from Vitality – that is a health insurance company, all they care about are actuarial rates and profits. And I've seen your other files as well. I know you are using fitbit data from soldiers to reveal the layout of military installations and underground bunkers. I don't care if you are dealing with M15 or the Kremlin. What you are doing is wrong. It is immoral. When I get out I am going to tell everyone, but everyone."

Adrian shrugs. His thick fur coat just covers his big belly. "More coffee?" he asks.

I have just developed a taste for coffee and this is some of the best I have ever had. I hesitated. Should I take coffee from such an evil creature? This was a moral and ethical dilemma, but one that I swiftly resolved. "Yes please" I said.

Adrian went out to fetch the coffee. I looked around. I had to get away, but how? I was in the middle of a maze of tunnels and Adrian was spying on my every move. I looked around again. There was an old fridge-freezer over on the right, covered in magnets. Four of them were holding a sketch in place. The paper was all crinkled but I could make out a series of intersecting lines. Exit was marked in faded red felt pen at the far end of one of the tracks. That's it, I thought, it's a plan.

If the map was right, if I was at 0.00/0.00, and if I ran really fast, maybe I could reach the exit before Adrian could do anything about it. But what if it wasn't really a map? What if it was out of date? What if the exit was blocked? I pushed these thoughts aside and memorised the route. It was my only chance. I checked my laces were tied, I took a deep breath and then I was off like a shot: left, right, third on the right.. soon I would be out.

Third left, second right... not far to go now. It was then that I heard something behind me, faint at first but then louder. I looked down at the fitbit. It said 'Adrian Approaching'. I began to panic. Was it second right or was it third right? And what if I got it wrong?

I could hear him closer now, panting hard and gasping for breath. I had to decide. There was no time to waste. I looked at the branching tunnels opening up in front of me, and there, right ahead I saw the faintest chink of light. That's it! That's the way to go.

A moment later there was loud thud. I glanced back. It was Adrian, flat on the ground his fur coat quivering a bit. I checked the fitbit. It was flashing red. ‘Adrian: danger! heart rate: 0.00’. I hesitated for a moment. Should I go back? What if it was a trap? I didn’t stop to find out more, I just ran.

The exit was easy. I parted the curtain of ivy and there I was, out by the edge of the canal. I blinked. It was still morning and the sky was still bright blue. For some reason my fitbit had reset itself: it said 7.30am. I was puzzled. Surely it must be later than that? I checked it again, and as I did so a couple of morning runners waved as they flashed by, innocently sending data to who knows where.

I had to tell everyone that all this information was being stolen and stored underground. I raced home.

My mother barely looked up as she let me in. “Breakfast is ready ...” she said.

The rice krispies were laid out on the table, as they always were. My father and younger brother were fiddling with their phones. I didn’t stop, not even to take off my shoes, I said:

“There is something terrible going on. I fell down this deep hole, and there were all these tunnels and computers and files and someone called Adrian who is a spy. He is gathering all sorts of private details and selling them on. He wanted to get hold of my fitbit. It is wrong. We’ve got to stop it.”

My brother turned from his phone and sneered. “I suppose this Adrian is a mole, is that right Ellexis?”

I paused.. “I suppose he might be. But I think he’s dead now. I don’t know. You see he was chasing me and he was quite fat and not in the least bit fit and then he collapsed. I didn’t go back to look”.

My mother interrupted: “Ellexis, eat up your krispies or you’ll be late.”

“But what about Adrian’s data services, we’ve got to stop him.”

My mother didn’t care. She said “I don’t know what you are talking about and anyway you said this mythical mole was dead. Don’t worry about it, go and get changed, you can’t go to school looking like that.”

Nobody, but nobody was listening to a word I said. I stared at them blankly – they just didn’t understand.

“Ellexis, get moving!” My mother was getting in a flap.

Back in my bedroom I unlaced my running shoes. It can’t have been a dream. I had seen all those files, and computers but how come it was 7.30am when I fell down the hole and the same time when I came out by the canal? Did Adrian and his data centre really exist? I wasn’t so sure now.

I waited at the school bus stop. “Hi Ellexis”. It was Jem. She tapped her smart watch. “Physics and Maths today, she said” and grimaced. I knew I could trust Jem, but should I tell her? What if she thought I was making it all up: an underground data centre, delicious coffee, a crinkled map and a narrow escape?

The bus arrived and we ran upstairs to the front seat at the top, as we always do. From there we get a good view of the digital advertising on the side of the bus stop: it is fun to watch it change from one topic to another. This time there was a boring advert for some sort of electricity company. At the bottom, in small print were the words: ‘customer details protected by Adrian’s data services’.

I turned to Jem and said, “Jem I’ve got something to tell you”. But Jem wasn’t listening. She was looking down at her smart watch. “What’s this?” she said. There on the screen was the familiar type face. “Adrian approaching”. I spun round. I heard the sound of heavy breathing as someone climbed slowly up the stairs.