

Mission Improbable

Carrie Hatchett, Space Adventurer #1

J.J. Green

This novel uses British spellings.

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Prologue

On caterpillar tracks, the mechanical alien trundled to the ocean’s edge, where a sluggish liquid flopped onto the sand, withdrew and flopped again, under a deep violet sky. The alien inserted a tube beneath the ripples. Suction commenced, accompanied by a low vibration. As the extracted liquid gurgled and slurped, the mechanical alien transmitted a message to central command: Operation progressing satisfactorily.

Unnoticed, in the glimmering darkness beyond the shoreline, a wave appeared. Unnoticed, the wave approached slowly, silently, stealthily. Unnoticed, it loomed like a predatory beast. With a dreadful, dull splash, the wave fell. When it withdrew, the sand was bare.

Central command’s communications went unanswered. It never heard from the mechanical alien again.

Chapter One – Through The Glowing Green Mist

Carrie Hatchett's interviewer, Ms. Bass, had no eyebrows. Or, rather, she had pretend eyebrows. About halfway between the naked ridges where her natural eyebrows once grew and her hairline were two thinly drawn, semi-circular lines. A cloud of bouffant grey hair circled her head.

Carrie watched the pretend eyebrows to see if they moved along with the rest of Ms. Bass' face, but they did not. No expression seemed to register on them. They were independent, only supervising the action going on below. Carrie was sure of it because she watched for several minutes while Ms. Bass' voice droned in her ears.

But then a sharp frown drew the eyebrows down until they were almost within a natural distance of her eyes.

"Ms. Hatchett? Ms. Hatchett? Did you hear what I just said? Are you listening?"

Carrie, startled, forced her gaze down to Ms. Bass' face, and flinched at her stony look. "What? I'm sorry? What did you say?"

"I said, your CV doesn't mention any call centre experience."

"That's right, I've never worked in a call centre." Carrie fidgeted. The rent on her new flat was expensive. She needed this job. And she wanted it. For once in her life, she was going to be a success. She was determined.

Ms. Bass lowered Carrie's CV to the table. "You are aware the position you're interviewing for is *supervisor* of a call centre?"

"Yes."

"But you've never worked in a call centre before?"

"No."

"Ms. Hatchett, do you even know what goes on in call centres?"

"People..." Carrie recalled the office cubicles she had passed when she came in, which had been full of people wearing headsets, speaking into microphones, and watching computer screens. "...take calls?" She twisted a ring around her middle finger. She should have done some research before coming to the interview, but she had been busy unpacking and getting Toodles and Rogue settled into their new home.

Ms. Bass sighed and leafed through Carrie's CV. She frowned. "What's Bagua Zhang?"

"It's a martial art. I'm a—"

Waving a hand to silence her, the woman cleared her throat. "So, you've worked in a florist's, been a professional dog walker, spent a summer selling ice-cream and worked as a..." She removed her glasses and squinted, moving the paper away from her face. "A birthday telegram girl?"

"Yes, but the clean kind. You know, teddy bears, rabbits, Disney princesses, that kind of thing. Not the..." Carrie swallowed. "...the other kind." She pulled her skirt closer to her knees.

Ms. Bass locked eyes with Carrie for a silent moment, then placed the CV on her desk. She picked up a checklist and began ticking boxes.

“You don’t suffer any chronic illnesses, do you?”

“No.”

“Mental illness? Depression?”

“No.”

“Good. That’s very good.” Ms. Bass nodded. “We have enough of that around here as it is.”

She ticked a few more boxes. Carrie leaned forward to read the list, but Ms. Bass curled the paper up and away from her, smiling tightly. “Excuse me a moment.” She got up from her desk, taking the checklist with her, and went to her office door. She peered down the corridor towards the chairs where Carrie had sat, alone, while waiting to be called in. She left, leaving the door ajar, and a moment later her shrill voice echoed up the corridor. “No one else applied at all? Not even a phone call?”

Carrie couldn’t make out the reply but she soon heard footsteps thumping closer. Ms. Bass entered, sat and put on her glasses. Gathering up the papers on her desk, she fixed Carrie with a glare.

“When can you start?”

Carrie’s mouth fell open. “You mean I’ve—?”

“Yes, yes. What’s the earliest you can start? Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? Yes, I think I can start tomorrow.”

“Good. Nine o’clock. I’ll put you on the day shift, but we’re open twenty-four hours and at other times you might have to do the evening or graveyard shift. Okay?” It was more of a challenge than a question.

Carrie opened her mouth.

“We can sort out the details tomorrow. See you then, Ms...Ms...” Ms. Bass stood and held out her hand.

“Hatchett.” Carrie shook the offered hand.

“Ms. Hatchett. Welcome to the team.”

As she finished unpacking that evening, Carrie could see Toodles and Rogue were as excited about her new job as she was. Toodles was, admittedly, hiding under the bed and throwing out her claws to scratch Carrie whenever she walked too close, and Rogue was sitting in the corner of the living room staring gloomily at the wall, his normally waggy tail motionless, but Carrie could tell that, deep down, they shared her happiness.

She removed newspaper wrappings from some glasses and put them away in a kitchen cupboard before starting on her mugs, bowls and plates. The kitchen in her new flat was a little poky and the door of the cupboard under the sink was stuck, but the flat would have to do for now. Maybe after a while working as a...what was it?...call centre supervisor, she would get a raise or a promotion and she would be able to afford a better place.

She tried the cupboard under the sink again, but the door would not budge. She would have to speak to her landlady about it.

A fresh start in a new area and, within a week, a new job. It was more than she could have hoped for. Just a couple of weeks ago, when Barry had dumped her, she’d never imagined she would get back

on her feet again so quickly. *Huh, Barry! What a loser.* She was better off without him. She would email him tonight and tell him her good news; then he would see what a mistake he had made.

It'd been a such a shock when he said he wanted to split up. Everything had been fine between them, then suddenly, goodbye Carrie. She never listened to him, he'd said. Never took any notice of anything he told her. It was like living with a brick wall. Carrie shook her head. *What a load of rubbish.* She might lose track of the conversation sometimes, but everyone did that.

Carrie put her saucepans, frying pans and baking trays in a cupboard and flattened the empty cardboard box. She nodded to herself. Yes, Barry was an idiot. She would soon find someone new. There was that employee at the call centre who'd given her a wink when she walked past. He was gorgeous, and friendly. Maybe he was single. She would have to find out more about him tomorrow.

All the cardboard boxes in the kitchen were empty so Carrie went to check the rest of the flat. She saw a small unopened box in the bedroom. Toodles' claws flashed out as she passed the bed, but she sidestepped just in time.

"Toodles, sweetiepie, did you miss Mummy?"

Carrie opened the box. Inside were a bottle of washing up liquid, scourers, a plunger, washing up brushes, spray cleaner and cloths. Everything that should go under the kitchen sink. She would have to force that door open.

On the way back past the bed Toodles caught her, raking three long scratches through her tights.

"Ow! Toodles, that really hurt. Don't be cheeky." Carrie squatted and peered under the bed. Baleful orange eyes glowed in the shadows. "You're a very naughty girl sometimes, did you know that?" As Carrie reached towards the cat, her claws made another lightning-fast appearance, and Carrie snatched her hand away. A hiss was followed by a guttural, whining growl.

Squinting into the darkness Carrie said, "Okay, so you want to be alone for a little while. I can see that. It's a new place and you're feeling vulnerable. I get it." She stood and picked up the box. "Barry doesn't know what he's talking about. I do listen. I do hear what people have to say."

After returning to the kitchen, Carrie pulled with all her might at the stubborn cupboard door, but it would not budge. She opened the other cupboards, but they were all full. She frowned at the box of kitchen stuff. It was so annoying. It was the last box, and if she could just put the contents away she would be finished.

Rogue clattered into the kitchen, barking, his paws slipping on the tiles. Carrie smiled. Her lovely handsome dog was feeling better already. Then she noticed what he was barking at. The cupboard door under the sink was glowing, a green pulsating light. Her hand went to her mouth. "Oh no. Rogue, what is it?"

Toodles' catty whine from the bedroom joined Rogue's deep-throated woofs, creating an escalating cacophony until, with a bang, the door flew open. Carrie jumped. Rogue whimpered and fled, his tail between his legs. Toodles' whine stopped. A vivid green glow shone from the cupboard, bathing the kitchen in an eerie light.

Her heart in her mouth, Carrie stumbled back towards the kitchen door, intending to follow Rogue's hasty retreat, but after a moment she hesitated. Her breathing slowed, and her head tilted to one side. She took a step towards the cupboard, and another. Bending down, she peeped inside.

Green mist swirling in a lazy spiral filled the space. She crouched closer, gazing at the mist. It

looked like an emerald Milky Way set in motion, its centre disappearing into infinity. Carrie couldn't figure out what it was. A gas leak? Something supernatural? She stuck out her nose and sniffed. The mist had no smell. A sudden thought occurred—maybe she could ask for a rent reduction? Swirling green substances in cupboards were definitely an inconvenience, especially when they frightened her pets.

As her hair began to lift and pull towards the open cupboard, Carrie wondered briefly what it might mean, before she was sucked, head first, under her kitchen sink.

Chapter Two – Nature Calls

Carrie slid face downward across a smooth floor until the top of her head encountered a wall, bringing her to an abrupt halt. “Owww!” She pulled herself into a sitting position and rubbed her nose and head while she blinked and looked about.

She could remember Rogue barking, Toodles yowling and a glowing green mist that sucked her into a cupboard and... She looked around again. The creamy white ceramic floor she had slid along rose seamlessly into walls and a ceiling, as though she were inside a roofed coffee cup. Behind her, the place she had entered through was now smooth and whole. She searched the area, running her fingertips over the surface. There was no sign of an entrance, and the green mist had completely disappeared. Stepping back, she peered left and right. The corridor was curved like a tunnel and led away on either side of her, lit by a soft glow which seemed to have no source.

Carrie smiled and nodded confidently. “I get it. This is a dream. I must have fallen asleep. Shouldn’t have had that half bottle of wine after dinner.” She shrugged. “Oh well, might as well follow it through.” She pointed at the either end of the tunnel alternately, mouthing an old nursery rhyme, before settling on one and striding away.

Curved recesses that Carrie assumed were doors of some kind lined the tunnel walls, apparently randomly along the sides, floor, and ceiling. Bordering each recessed section were long lines of symbols, some black, some raised, and some flashing intermittently. Pressing on the recessed areas and the symbols caused no reaction, Carrie discovered. She frowned, wondering when she would wake up.

Walking farther, she found that new corridors opened in the tunnel walls, and she followed them randomly. They all seemed identical but for the symbols along the edges of the recesses. She examined them closely and found that no two sets of symbols were the same. The only factors linking them were their positioning in the corridors and their utter lack of any apparent meaning. There was nothing she remotely recognised. She began to take a dim view of her subconscious for coming up with this stuff.

As she wandered along, a nagging ache in her lower regions alerted her to another reason she needed to wake up. The after-dinner wine she had drunk had made its way through her body and was now asking to be released. Carrie stopped and closed her eyes before quickly opening them wide. “Damn. Why can’t I wake up?” She began marching in small steps. “Come on, dream, be over.” She increased her pace, hoping her dreaming mind would supply an exit.

She stopped. There it was, unmistakable, the symbol to answer her prayers. Towards the top of a recess was a black circle above a triangle with a rectangle below. She had found the women’s toilets. Her sleeping mind must have put the symbol there as a way to leave her dream.

Reaching up, Carrie thumped the symbol and stood back expectantly. The recess didn’t open nor move even slightly. “Oh, come on.” She scanned the rest of the meaningless signs and pressed them up and down the line randomly, then in sequence, then in patterns. She tried hitting them hard and pressing them gently. “Open up! I want to wake up now. I need to spend a penny.” The motionless face of the recess seemed to mock her. “Now you’re being really annoying.”

She drummed on the symbols, the walls, the recess, and the floor until, an uncomfortably long time

later, she gave up. Up and down the corridor all was still and silent. This dream was crazy. She vowed never to drink after dinner again. And maybe even before dinner. Or while eating.

Wondering what to do next, she rested her hand against the recess. As her palm made contact the barrier disappeared, sending her tumbling through an open entrance.

Her knees struck the floor and she threw her hands out while screwing her eyes shut against a glaring white light, much brighter than the soft glow of the corridor. She opened her eyes a slit, then immediately closed them again. Her dream had turned into a nightmare. Her brief glimpse had told her she was in a cream ceramic room, and at its centre squatted a large, bronze, hard-shelled, many jointed, bug-eyed *thing*. Carrie swallowed and, with a sense of inevitability, looked over her shoulder towards the opening she had fallen through. It was no longer there.

“Wake up now, please,” she squeaked. Squinting ahead once more, a faint hope formed in her. Maybe the creature wasn’t alive? Maybe it was a statue?

Ten pairs of legs started simultaneously into motion. The thing scuttled towards her, and Carrie scuttled backwards on hands and feet, never taking her eyes from the monster, until she reached the corner of the room. “Dream be over, dream be over.” She pasted herself into the unyielding wall. The huge bug approached, dripping mucus from its jaws as they opened, the claws at the ends of its legs tapping against the ceramic floor. When its head was a short distance from Carrie’s face, the creature stopped. She was entertaining a fleeting thought that there was a tiny, remote chance she wouldn’t be eaten, when another set of jaws, smaller, sharper and infinitely more vicious, appeared from the gaping maw.

Carrie closed her eyes and waited for the end, wondering if it was possible to feel pain in dreams.

“Thank you for coming. Would you please take a seat?”

Chapter Three – The Bug

Carrie's eyes snapped open. Knife-edged mini-jaws were inches from her face. Her terrified expression was reflected in each of the creature's hundred eyes. Drips of mucus spattered on the floor, and steamed.

"I—I'm sorry?" asked Carrie.

"Would you like to sit down?"

She peered to either side of the bug. There didn't seem to be anyone or anything else there. There was only one conclusion possible: It had to be the ravening monster of her dream speaking.

Carrie took a shaky breath. "But...I am sitting down."

"Are you?" The bug blinked, a tiny transparent membrane flashing over the surface of each of its eyes. "I always get humans confused with squashpumps. I suppose my proximity is making you uncomfortable, too?"

"Y—Yes, it is, actually. And if you wanted me to take a seat, I'd need a chair."

The creature scuttled backwards to the centre of the room. Carrie's rigid muscles eased and she exhaled through pursed lips.

"I apologise," said the bug. "I am new to this. I would appreciate it if you do not mention anything to my superiors."

"Umm...no, I won't. Don't worry." She checked around quickly for signs of more massive insects.

"Thank you." The bug squatted on its ten pairs of legs, their joints rising higher than its body. Its head twisted until it was perpendicular to the floor. "I understand you are here to interview for the position of Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer."

"No." Carrie wedged her back into the corner, which seemed the safest place in the circumstances.

"No?" the creature emitted an intricate, musical clicking. "That is incorrect. See, your application is here."

"Where?"

"Whoops, there I go again. I forgot humans cannot see in that wavelength. I will read it out to you."

"*W4M Carrie, 23 YO.*" It paused, clicked, and continued, "*New in town, AL, PIS, GSOH, SD, NM, NS, WLTM S VGL man with SI (martial arts and pub quizzes) for FTA poss. LTR.*"

Carrie's flush reached the roots of her hair. "That's my—my ad on a dating website. How did you get hold of it?"

"You are mistaken. This is not an advertisement. This is an application in transgalactic code. Translated into English it says, *I would like to apply for the position of—*"

"No it doesn't." Carrie leapt to her feet, her fists clenched at her sides. "It doesn't say anything like that. It's a lonely hearts ad, and you've no business—"

"But how did you correctly find and identify this interview room?"

"I didn't know it was an interview room. I wasn't even looking for an interview room. I needed to...I

thought it was the—”

“And you bear the wounds of previous encounters in this line of duty.”

“No, I don’t, I..what?” Carrie glanced down at her body, and back at the creature. A hundred bug eyes were swivelled in the direction of her lower leg. She turned her foot to see what the bug was looking at. Toodles’ scratch marks ran down her calf to her ankle. “That was my cat!”

“Cat. A cat is another Earth animal. Am I correct? So you were not engaged in resolving a conflict between species, you were fighting with this animal—”

“No, I wasn’t fighting with her. She’s my pet.”

“Pet. A pet is an animal that lives with a human. So you were fighting with your pet...Why are you living with an animal that attacks you?”

“I told you, I wasn’t fighting with her. You’ve got it completely wrong. Oh...” Carrie grabbed her head in both hands and slumped down to the floor.

The creature made its clicking noise. “I believe you are expressing signs of agitation. Have I done something incorrect or inappropriate? Please do not tell my superiors. This is the third duty I have been assigned to. If I fail in the proper execution of my tasks in this position I will be terminated.” The thing retracted its internal jaws as its head returned to a horizontal position, and drooped.

“But...” Carrie sighed and rolled her eyes. “Oh, all right. Let’s get it over with.” This dream was becoming weirder and weirder. She wondered if the wine she had drunk had been off. “Let’s do the interview, then.”

The razor jaws popped out again, and Carrie sat upright, but the creature began talking about boring, political stuff and places and warring factions she had never heard of. She relaxed and lay on her side. Resting her elbow on the floor and her head in her hand, she soon zoned out. Occasionally, the bug would ask a question and she would answer yes or no, as the mood took her.

“Are you familiar with the cultural customs of the Inner Sect of Mantrikees?”

“Yes.” Carrie yawned.

“Would you mind undertaking missions that may expose you to threats to your personal safety?”

“No.”

As the interview continued the ache in her bladder grew and she tried again to figure out a way to wake up. Her arm began to twinge, and she adjusted her position. She could now see behind the giant bug’s shining bronze carapace. There was something there. It was a handbag, sitting in the middle of the floor. A gorgeous designer handbag. She sat up. “Excuse me, what’s that?”

The creature’s monotonous drone ceased, and its ten pairs of legs scuttled as it turned round to the bag. It hooked a leg through the strap, lifting the bag, and turning back, tossed it so that it landed with a thunk and a jingle at Carrie’s feet. Inside the open bag were strange devices, some of which blinked with tiny electronic lights.

“This is a Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer’s toolbox.”

“*Toolbox?*”

“Disguised as a portable Earth receptacle so that it may be carried around at all times in case you are assigned to assist in a transgalactic intercultural community crisis when you are not at home.”

Grabbing the handbag in both hands, Carrie lifted it to eye level and gazed at it. The material was thick and expensive and the design was finely stitched. “It’s beautiful. What is it, Louis Vuitton, Dior,

Ralph Lauren?” If only she were not dreaming.

The creature clicked, seemingly unsure what to answer.

“So,” said Carrie, “if I do this transgalactic liaison thingy, I get to keep the bag?” There was no harm in asking. She began to hope, crazily, this was not a dream after all.

“The bag’s contents are indispensable to the performance of your duties in the role—”

“I’ll do it.”

“But the interview is not yet concluded.”

“I know, but I really need to...” She crossed her legs and riffled through the strange implements inside the bag. “Anyway, you know, I’d be really good at...whatever it was you were talking about. And...wait a minute, shouldn’t there be a screwdriver thingy?”

“I am unfamiliar with the English vocabulary item, screwdriverthingy.”

“It opens and locks things. Turns stuff on and off. Does whatever you need it for, really.”

“There is an articulated transmitting infrared—”

“Never mind. If I can have the bag, I’ll do it.” The creature’s inner jaws were paused open. “Or,” continued Carrie, wagging a finger, “I might have to have a word with your superiors.”

The bug’s jaws clicked shut. “You also need a uniform.”

“Uniform? Oh, you mean like a costume? Cool.” Carrie imagined herself in something black, with a mask and a cape; a long, flowing cape that billowed out behind her as she flew— “What are *they*?”

A section of wall had opened behind the bug, revealing a long rack of fluorescent orange jumpsuits ranging from toddler size to what looked like collapsed parachutes. “These are Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer uniforms.”

“But they’re, they’re...Why are they that horrible colour?”

“Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officers—”

“Don’t you have a shorter way of saying that?”

“No. Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officers must stand out in conflict zones to avoid...”

But Carrie wasn’t listening. She strode over to the jumpsuits and hastily pulled two or three out to hold up against herself. Her bladder nagged. She found a uniform that was about her size. It was a bit small but she was on a diet so she should be thin enough to fit into it within a couple of weeks. She shook her head. What was she thinking? This was a dream, for goodness sake. “Now, where’s the way out?”

“But...” said the bug.

“Or,” said Carrie, drawing her brows into what she hoped was a stern frown, “should I speak to someone about how you began the interview by frightening the life out of me?”

Behind the huge insect, a circle of swirling green mist appeared. Carrie pushed the orange jumpsuit in with the weird devices, put the bag on her shoulder and went towards the mist. The bag felt solid and heavy, as though it were real. “Thank you very much.” The coiling mist began to lift her hair. “What do I have to do in this job?”

“As a neutral, independent, disinterested member of an alien race, it will be your duty to mediate between disaffected populations to solve political and territorial disputes—”

“Like a space detective? Great.”

“No, not remotely like a space—”

“Okay, bye, thanks,” Carrie called as the mist took her.

Chapter Four – Dave

Carrie rubbed her eyes and yawned as she entered her kitchen the following morning. Though she had taken Rogue for his morning walk, the fresh air hadn't fully woken her. Toodles wound herself around Carrie's legs, meowing. Rogue thumped his tail on the floor and drooled.

"All right, all right, wait a minute." She went to the cupboard that held Toodles' and Rogue's food, but stopped midway across the room. Something was out of place. She pivoted on one foot to look more closely at her kitchen table. After pushing her knuckles into her eyes again, she blinked hard. On the table sat a gorgeous designer handbag, half open. A bright orange jumpsuit trailed from it and there were strange, electronic devices visible inside.

Carrie staggered a few steps and gripped the counter top. Her dream. It was the bag from her dream. But if it was really here, then...? Her eyes turned to her under-sink cupboard. She squatted and tugged the handle. The door was still stuck fast. No green glow, no mist, but the handbag was here, and there was no other explanation for it nor for the weird objects it contained.

Standing and looking through her kitchen window, she saw that outside the world seemed pretty much as she remembered it. The sky was grey and the day drizzly. Three floors below, cars and buses were passing and children were trudging to school. Two huge dogs were taking their owner for a walk. Could there really be inhabited planets and alien races and spaceships and all that stuff?

She shivered and rubbed her arms. If that giant bug and everything it talked about did exist *she* was not going to have anything to do with it. What was it the creature had said the job was? Space detective, that was it. She would probably have to go among aliens like that insect. No way. She was going to start work today as a...a call centre...thingy, and be normal. She was also bent on making a success of her new job. She was nearly twenty, and much too old to be drifting from one temporary position to another. This time, she was going to forge a career.

She gasped. She had forgotten she was starting work today. She looked at the clock. It was half past eight and she had to be there by nine. Grabbing tins of pet food, she hastily opened them and spooned the contents into Toodles' and Rogue's bowls. After rinsing the tins she threw them in her recycling box and turned to leave, but on the tabletop the gorgeous bag seemed to be tempting her. *Why not?* She thought. She doubted the alien bug could come after her for it. The space under her sink was far too small. It would never fit through, and she had travelled through the mist to reach the bug. Aliens were probably forbidden by some galactic treaty from coming to Earth and scaring people.

Tipping the bag's strange contents onto the table, she quickly transferred the essentials from her old handbag into it. "Bye, Toodles, bye, Rogue," she called as she closed the door to her flat.

"Nice bag."

Carrie was passing through the cubicles on her way to her new desk when the good-looking guy spoke to her. He was sitting in the same place, headphone and mic on. Carrie grinned at him and hoisted the bag higher up her shoulder. He was right. It was a nice bag. A very nice bag. She smiled at the other workers, but they ignored her. Her smile fell. Oh well, it would take time to get to know everyone.

“So, this is where you sit.” Ms. Bass motioned towards a clean, bare cubicle at the back of the room. It looked fresh and new, as if no one had stayed in it very long or made it into a personal space. Carrie sat down and was unable to resist swiveling her chair right around, catching hold of her desk to stop herself as she completed her circle.

Ms. Bass’ eyebrows rose higher. She plonked down the large file she was carrying. “Your main responsibility is to deal with customer issues and complaints. All the procedures are in here.” She tapped the file with a long, French-manicured fingernail. “You must become thoroughly acquainted with them. Luckily for you, Friday mornings are usually quiet, so you should have time to familiarise yourself a little with the necessary information before the first complaint comes in.”

Carrie looked from the thick file to Ms. Bass. “That’s all I have to do? Deal with complaints?”

“You must address the customers’ issues according to the manual. To the letter. Do you understand?”

Carrie frowned. “Do you get a lot of complaints?”

Ms. Bass rolled her eyes, and left.

Swivelling her chair around again, Carrie noticed a young woman watching her as she spoke into a mic. Carrie smiled and waved, but the woman turned to her screen. Carrie sighed and pulled herself closer to her desk. She opened the file. The contents page was all but incomprehensible. She flicked through the thick wad of paper. *In the event of a faulty T-flange*, one page read, *complete form 167F. Include the date of purchase and the date the customer first noticed the fault. Tick the relevant boxes.* Listed below were a range of noises a faulty T-flange might make, including whining, grinding, squeaking, and clunking. Carrie’s shoulders sagged as she turned more pages. They were all similar: extremely long, detailed forms to complete and complex procedures to follow. What on Earth did this company sell?

Carrie gradually became aware of someone standing on the edge of her vision. The young woman who had caught her eye earlier was nearby, her jaws working on a piece of chewing gum.

Holding out her hand, Carrie said, “Hi, I’m—”

“Complaint, line five.” The woman turned on her heel and walked away. Carrie’s hand flopped to her side. A complaint? She had to get on it right away and make a good impression on her first day at work. She scanned her desk, but she had no telephone or headset and mic like everyone else. How was she supposed to...? She saw the woman had returned to her desk and was idly holding up a receiver while chatting with her colleague in the next cubicle. Hefting the complaints procedures file into her arms, Carrie went over.

“So I said to her,” the woman said to her colleague in the next cubicle as Carrie took the receiver from her, “do all the teachers get fined when they go on strike, then, and I have to take time off work to look after Eddie because he can’t go to school?”

Carrie held the receiver to her ear. Handel’s Messiah was cut short as the woman pressed a button on her keyboard.

“Hello?” said Carrie. A stream of loud curses spewed from the receiver, and she jerked her head away. When the stream slowed to a trickle, she tried again. “Can I help—?” More curses followed, some of which were new to Carrie. She attempted to make eye contact with her work colleague in hope of some information or advice, but the woman was deep in conversation about the pros and cons of taking children out of school during term time. Cradling the receiver between her shoulder and neck, Carrie opened her file and scanned the pages while listening for a mention of something even vaguely familiar in the customer’s rant, but she couldn’t recognise anything. She tried once more to interrupt, but the man was so irate she couldn’t break into the flow of words.

Carrie’s heart sank. She wanted to do a good job, but how was she supposed to help if the customers wouldn’t listen to her? And the instructions in the file were complete gobbledygook. It didn’t take long for her to grow frustrated and bored. “Thank you, sir. We’ll deal with that at the earliest opportunity,” she said, and slammed the receiver down.

Her colleague paused in her conversation. “I don’t think you’re supposed to—” But Carrie was already returning to her desk.

By ten, Carrie had dealt with four complaints in a similar way. Maybe she was not *exactly* following procedure, but when she had more time to learn the ropes she would improve, she was sure. *This job is a piece of cake*, she thought, and as she had that thought, she noticed that cake was being shared around the office. Everyone had put their customers on hold and they were all chatting and eating.

No one had brought her any cake. Carrie swivelled her chair round to face her desk and buried her head in her file, trying to pretend she hadn’t noticed what was happening.

“It’s Jerry’s birthday today,” said a male voice. “I thought you might like some cake.” Carrie looked up. It was Mr. Handsome, plate and fork in hand, smiling at her.

“I’d love some,” said Carrie, accepting the plate and immediately forking a piece of rich chocolate cake into her mouth. “Oh, this is delicious,” she said, spitting crumbs.

“Yes, Mary made it. She does a lot of baking.”

“It’s wonderful.” *That was so nice of him to bring me some cake*, she thought. *He must have seen I was left out*. The man propped himself on her desk, and her heart lifted.

“How are you getting on?” he asked.

“Oh, fine.” Carrie paused. She chewed and swallowed. “Well, actually, I tell the customers we’ll do something soon and hang up.”

The man laughed. “That’s one way of dealing with complaints, I suppose.”

“I’m trying my best, but what else can I do? I’ve no idea where all those forms are that are mentioned in my file, and I don’t know what most of this stuff means. In fact, I don’t know what *any* of this stuff means.”

The man waved dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. No one from higher up ever said as much, but I think the idea is to frustrate the customers so much they give up complaining. The last person who took the job didn’t last more than an hour. He’s the reason you don’t have your own phone.” He nodded at a dent in the wall.

Carrie's eyes widened. "He threw it at the wall?"

"Maintenance haven't got around to supplying a new one. It might take a while."

"Doesn't matter. I can use all of yours. It isn't like I'm on the phone for long." She shoved another large piece of cake into her mouth. It was delectable.

"I'm Dave, by the way."

"Carrie."

"Nice to meet you, Carrie." He stood to leave.

"Hey, Dave, I'm new in town. I don't suppose, tonight, maybe...?"

"Oh, you're having a housewarming?"

Carrie closed her eyes as she ate the last mouthful of sweet, moist, crumbly cake. She nodded absently.

"Sure, I'll come over. About seven?"

"Mmmm..." Carrie sighed in satisfaction and sucked chocolate cream from her teeth. As Dave left, she realised he had agreed to a date. Her first day at her new job was getting better and better.

A few minutes later the gum-chewing woman arrived to take her plate.

"Thanks," said Carrie. "Wait a minute. Can I ask you something?"

The woman paused, holding the plate in midair.

"That guy, Dave, is he, you know, attached?"

"Don't know. Don't think so."

"Oh good. He's gorgeous, don't you think? And he's got great taste in clothes."

The woman smirked. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but thought better of it, and walked away laughing.

Chapter Five – Date With Disaster

Three large glasses of wine supplied Carrie with plenty of Dutch courage by seven o'clock that evening. She'd been very forward in inviting Dave to her place almost as soon as she met him, but why waste time? A guy like that wouldn't be single for long. You had to take your opportunities when they appeared or miss out.

It was also silly of her to invite an almost complete stranger into her home, but she didn't think the kind of men her mother warned her about offered you cake at work.

She was pouring herself a fourth glass of wine when the doorbell sounded. Swaying slightly, Carrie held the door open for Dave. He was carrying a bottle and had changed from his work clothes into a casual jacket, black T-shirt and close-fitting jeans.

"Hi, Dave." Carrie piped. She cleared her throat. "Hi, Dave, come in."

He handed Carrie the bottle and looked around as he entered the hallway. "Am I the first to arrive?" He took off his jacket and hung it on the hat stand.

Closing the door, Carrie thanked him as she took the bottle, then said, "I beg your pardon?"

"Am I the first arrival? To your party?"

"Party?"

"You said you were having a housewarming."

"Did I?" Carrie thought back. Her mind was a little foggy, but she was quite sure she hadn't said that. Why would she invite other people to come between her and this handsome hunk? "Err..." She didn't know what to say.

"Oh, it looks like there's been a misunderstanding," said Dave. There was a pause. "Maybe I should—"

"Oh, don't go," exclaimed Carrie as Dave took his jacket. "You've only just got here. I'm sorry, I probably wasn't clear at work. First day nerves or something."

Dave grimaced. "Sorry, Carrie, but I think maybe you've got—"

"Can't you stay a little while? I'm new in this area and I don't know anyone." Carrie winced at the whiny tone in her voice.

Hesitating, Dave said, "What's that scratching?" The noise was coming from Carrie's living room door.

"Oh, that's Rogue. He wants to say hello."

"You've got a dog? Great! Can I meet him?"

Carrie opened the door, and Rogue bounded out, leapt up and began licking Dave's face as though he were a long lost friend.

"Get down, Rogue," said Carrie. "Dave's a guest. Be good." The dog dropped onto his hind quarters and wagged his tail furiously.

Dave was looking closely at the dog's face. He swallowed hard. "Wow, he's..."

"I know! He's so handsome, isn't he?"

"Well, I'm not sure...I'd go quite that far. I mean, he's very...what I mean is..." Dave was watching

Carrie's expression. "You could say he's kind of unusual-looking."

"What do you mean?" Carrie's heart sank. Was Dave going to be like Barry and hate her pets? Unusual-looking? Rogue was the best-looking dog in the world. Okay, his eyes bulged out a bit and the left side of his face didn't match the right, but when she first got him from the rescue centre, she couldn't believe he'd waited for months to be picked. She'd snapped him up right away and felt a little guilty for not choosing a less attractive dog who might struggle to find a home.

Dave was patting Rogue and looking towards the door.

"So you like dogs, do you?" asked Carrie. "Why don't you stay and get to know Rogue a bit better?" She grinned hopefully.

"Hmmm, okay."

"Yes!" Carrie clapped her hands.

"But there's a Leonardo DiCaprio biopic on tonight. Do you mind if we watch it? I'm recording it, but I never seem to get a chance to watch anything these days, and I really wanted to see it."

"Leonardo DiCaprio?" Carrie shrugged. "Okay." She went to the kitchen for another glass while Dave went into the living room and turned on the television. The bright orange jumpsuit and pile of strange equipment was still on her kitchen table. Carrie had been ignoring it since she came home, uncertain of what she should do with it all. The Government would definitely be interested, but they would have also have a lot of difficult questions she couldn't answer without them locking her up. She wondered if she could put the stuff out for recycling. Most of it seemed kind of metallic.

"It's starting," called Dave.

He was sitting in a corner of the sofa. Carrie plonked herself down in the middle. Dave eased closer to the edge. She handed him a glass of wine, and leaned back, resting her head on the cushions. Photographs of Leonardo DiCaprio as a baby were scrolling across the TV screen.

"Born the eleventh of November, 1974," said Carrie, simultaneously with the narrator.

"Well done," said Dave. "You're a fan, too?"

"Oh no," said Carrie. "I read it somewhere. I remember stuff like that. I'm a mine of useless information, but it comes in handy for doing pub quizzes."

"I like pub quizzes too. What else do you like doing?"

"Bagua Zhang, an ancient Chinese martial art. It's so cool. I've been doing it since I was thirteen. Do you want me show you some moves?"

"Er, no, that's okay. I'm a bit of a film buff myself."

Carrie nodded. "Makes sense." Leonardo DiCaprio's role in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* was being discussed in the documentary.

"He's a great actor," said Dave.

Carrie shrugged. "I suppose."

Rogue was lying across her feet, and Toodles was in hiding somewhere, waiting for her to walk past unsuspectingly, no doubt. Such a sweet cat. Carrie was very, very relaxed, and the wine was making her head swim. She stole a look at Dave's profile from the corner of her eye. He was so good-looking. *Almost as handsome as Rogue.*

Dave caught her looking at him, and she quickly looked away. He went back to watching the TV.

Carrie was sleepy. She yawned and stretched out her arms. Her right arm just happened to rest

across the back of the sofa, behind Dave. He edged away. Carrie's arm began a slow descent down the sofa back. As it touched Dave's shoulders he scooted forward so that her arm fell onto the cushions.

He turned. "What are you doing?"

"What? I'm not doing anything." Carrie's cheeks flushed.

"You've had quite a lot to drink, haven't you?"

"N-no..." She didn't think so, anyway.

Dave took the remote control and turned down the volume on the TV. His expression became kind but serious. Carrie blinked. The evening didn't seem to be going as planned.

"Carrie, it's okay, I don't mind. But I'm gay. I don't make a secret of it, so I was a bit surprised at your behaviour. You only met me today, so of course you didn't know."

"You're...oh." Carrie's head was suddenly painfully clear. "Sorry," she said in a small voice.

"No, really, it's okay. You don't have anything to apologise for. It's just a misunderstanding." Dave turned up the TV volume and settled back. Carrie shifted to the middle of the sofa and wondered if she should move farther away, just to make clear how well she understood. The sound of the biopic commentary seemed to echo in the growing silence.

She couldn't bear it any longer. "I suppose that happens to you a lot," she blurted. "I mean, women..." She couldn't think how to complete the sentence without drawing more attention to her terrible faux pas.

Without taking his eyes from the TV, Dave replied, "No, actually."

Carrie wished the sofa cushions beneath her would slide apart so she could slip smoothly between them and down into the dark recess beneath, from which she would never, ever emerge.

Another silence stretched out. Carrie was acutely aware of Dave's presence next to her, heavy and still. Shots of Leonardo DiCaprio flashed across the TV screen, but she couldn't make sense of what the narrator was saying. He seemed to be speaking through cotton wool.

Dave stretched and let out a long, fake yawn. "You know, I'm really tired. I think I'll catch the rest of this at home."

"Don't you want to see the rest of the programme?"

"No, like I said, I'm recording it. I'll show myself out."

Carrie's face burned. "Okay, then."

"See you at work on Monday."

"Yes, see you." As Dave left the room Carrie buried her head in her hands. "You stupid, stupid woman," she mumbled. "You stupid—" Her head jerked up. The direction Dave left the living room had registered. He'd gone into the kitchen, probably to put his glass away. The kitchen, where a fluorescent orange jumpsuit and those weird, inexplicable objects were. She jumped up. "Dave," she called.

A green glow appeared in the open doorway, and Rogue began to bark. "Dave!" From a high shelf behind her came Toodles' yowl. Carrie ran into the kitchen. The under-sink cupboard door was open, and a glowing green mist was spilling from it. She was too late. Dave was nowhere to be seen. He must have been sucked through the mist and into that place with the terrible bug alien. She would have to go after him.

Hesitating, she looked from the open cupboard door to the table and back again. Should she take all

that stuff the creature had given her? The bag to hold it all was in her bedroom, and the mist was beginning to fade. As the green glow dwindled, the cupboard door began to swing closed.

“Dave,” shouted Carrie, as she dove through the remaining gap.

Chapter Six – Bombardment

“Ow,” cried Carrie as the top of her head struck a hard surface. “I’ve got to stop doing this.” Sitting up, the first thing she noticed was that she wasn’t in the ceramic building where she had encountered the insect alien. The second thing she noticed was the sound of whimpering.

The hard object her head had struck was a massive boulder, and the whimpering was coming from Dave, who was crouched next to it. He was curled in a fetal position, his arms over his head.

“C—C—Carrie, what’s happening? Where are we?”

Surrounding the boulder was an empty, dusty plain. To their left, in the distance, was what looked like a forest of single, massive, red leaves, stiffly arched. Behind them, a pale yellow sea lapped sluggishly at the shore. The boulder, which was the same off-grey colour as the plain, rose twenty feet high, and above it a light mauve sky softly glowed.

“Err...to be honest, I don’t actually know.”

“I remember looking at some tools that were on your kitchen table, when the cupboard door under your sink opened. There was this green light and I—I...”

“Got sucked in? Yes, weird, isn’t it? It happened to me yesterday.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“No, I went somewhere else before. It was a job interview.”

Dave straightened and sat up. He wrapped his arms round his knees and swivelled his head, blinking and squinting at the alien landscape. “A job interview?”

“Yeah.” Carrie looked around. They seemed to be alone, and their entry point had, predictably, disappeared.

“What job were you interviewing for?”

How on Earth will we get back? Carrie thought.

“Carrie.”

“What?”

“What job were you interviewing for?”

“Oh...” She waved her hand in a vague gesture. “Space detective, I think it was.”

Dave shook his head. “Space detective? This is insane. I must be dreaming.”

Carrie grimaced. “Yeah, I thought that, too. But, no, it’s real. Sorry.”

His head in his hands, Dave began to moan and rock. “This isn’t happening. It can’t be happening.” He lifted his head and stared at Carrie, his face white. “How do we get back? We have to go back. Now. We have to.” His eyes widened and he pointed a shaking finger at her. “That’s where you got all the stuff on your kitchen table.”

She nodded.

“I thought it looked strange. So those were, like, made by aliens?”

Carrie shrugged. “I suppose so.”

“What do you do with them? I mean, what are they for?”

“To help me do the job.”

“But...”

“They’re back there, and we’re here. Yep, that had already occurred to me.” Carrie wondered if one of the tools was to open a passage back to her kitchen. She thought it wiser not to mention the possibility.

Dave began to moan and rock again.

“Okay, okay, calm down.” Carrie tried to look calm and confident. Inside, her chest was tight and her stomach churned. She stood. “Well, first we can—”

She was thrown to the ground as a massive boom filled the air and the boulder shuddered. She yelled and grabbed Dave as he grabbed her.

“What was th—” he said as another boom came. This time it was from the sea, and a towering plume of pale yellow, gloopy liquid rose into the air.

“I don’t kn—” The boulder shuddered again, and a crack appeared, running from the top to the base.

“Are those b—b—bombs?” Dave asked. “Carrie, are we in a war zone?”

Carrie wrung her hands, trying to remember what the insect had said. She was sure it had been talking about...something. She pressed her hands to her head. Two huge explosions created a spray of the liquid that rained down on them.

“Carrie!” The next explosion widened the crack in the boulder. “Quick, let’s go there.” Dave indicated the forest of huge, single leaves. “Whoever’s attacking, they don’t seem to be attacking that.”

The two of them sped over the plain towards the leaves. A memory flashed into Carrie’s mind. Something about the orange jumpsuit. Yes, that was it. The colour was so she would stand out in...her heart sank. In conflict zones. Conflict zones like the one they were in right now. And the jumpsuit was back on Earth.

The forest drew nearer. Behind them the deafening sounds of explosions continued, the ground vibrating at each one. Dave was ahead, but Carrie was gaining on him. When she drew abreast, he was red-faced and gasping.

“Come on,” she called. “Not much farther.” She silently thanked her Bagua Zhang instructor for pushing her to train outside of class time. The first leaves of the forest were only a couple of hundred feet away. As she reached the first leaf, Carrie stopped and turned. A second later Dave caught up and sank, gasping, to his knees.

“Oh, it wasn’t that far,” Carrie said.

Dave feebly waved his hand by way of reply as he drew in large lungfuls of air. “Haven’t...” pant “run like...” pant “that since I was...” pant “at school.”

In a few minutes Dave’s breathing eased, and they set off through the leaf trees. Each was nearly identical to the next. Wide, with a central rib and radiating veins, they looked like beech leaves, except several thousand times larger and a deep, unsettling red. All were facing the same way, irregularly spaced and casting a maroon shadow.

As they drew farther from the explosions, the ground vibrated less. Carrie squinted up at the cloudless sky where a small, intensely bright sun shone. A sun quite unlike the one Earth orbited. Though the temperature was balmy, Carrie shivered.

She glanced at Dave. His face had regained its colour after their run, but it was still rigid and his eyes were wide.

“Carrie,” he said, after they had walked a little farther, “what are we doing? Where are we going?”

“We’re getting away from those bombs or whatever they are.”

“But we’re far away now. We aren’t in any immediate danger. I was wondering if you’re taking us somewhere we can get back to Earth.”

“Er, I’m not sure.”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“I haven’t been here before.”

“You said you’d been for a job interview. To become a space detective.”

“Yes...but they didn’t say anything about this place.” At least, she didn’t remember anything, though she hadn’t been paying much attention at the time. Who pays attention in a dream? She decided against telling Dave about her giant bug interviewer with the razor-sharp, dripping fangs.

“So you have absolutely no idea where we are, or where we’re going.”

“Erm...” Carrie disliked the implications of what she was about to say, but couldn’t think of a way to avoid saying it. “No.”

“Carrie.” Dave grabbed her shoulders and spun her round. His hair, which had been perfectly, stylishly groomed only an hour or so previously was now a tussled mess. *Though quite attractively tussled*, Carrie thought. His skin shone with sweat. “Carrie. What are we going to do? How are we going to get back? We can’t wander through this forest forever. We don’t have anything to eat, or drink, or, or...what’s wrong?”

She hadn’t noticed it at first, distracted as she was by Dave’s dishevelled good looks, but even she couldn’t fail to see the giant metallic object that was behind him. How it had got there she didn’t know. Maybe it had been following them silently, or it had appeared out of nowhere. But there it undeniably was. A huge, grey length of metallic tubing that was folded—overlapping at the beginning and end—into a rectangle with curved corners. Through the hollow centre Carrie could see the giant leaves that led back the way they had come.

Reading Carrie’s expression, Dave slowly turned around and looked behind him. He grabbed her arm and leaned in close to her ear.

“Does that look like what I think it looks like?” he whispered.

Carrie nodded. “A gigantic paperclip.”

Chapter Seven – Out of This World

A sound like ten thousand six year olds having their first violin lesson split the air. Carrie bent double and clasped her hands to her ears. She grimaced as the noise winkled its way between her fingers and penetrated her eardrums. She pressed her upper arms to her ears, but still the sound reverberated around her skull. Opening one eye a tiny slit, she found she was looking at Dave's neatly brushed suede boots. She squinted upward. He was standing, hands on hips, nodding thoughtfully at the massive mechanical alien. His lips moved, but Carrie couldn't make out his words above the off-key screeching.

She nudged him with her elbow, and he looked down at her. He raised his eyebrows. She read his lips. *What's wrong with you?*

"What's wrong with me?" she shouted. "What's wrong with *you*? Can't you hear that terrible noise?"

"What..." Dave's attention was drawn back to the alien. He shook his head and said something, spread his hands wide and shrugged.

"Dave," called Carrie. "What's going on? Are you..."

He was shaking his head vehemently. The discordant sound stopped, and in its place a low vibration hummed. The ground throbbed. Dave raised his arms as if to ward off a blow and began to rise into the air. His feet kicked uselessly. An invisible force gripped Carrie and began to lift her, too. As she left the ground, she spun round and tried to grip the pale, dusty sand, but her fingers snatched at air. She was carried inexorably upward.

Dave was rising with her, his arms and legs windmilling as he fought to free himself from the invisible force that gripped them. They floated towards the empty centre of the alien, where they hung suspended in midair. Open-mouthed, they stared at each other. The low vibration grew more intense, and the metal tubing surrounding them began to blur. The ground drew slowly away. The alien was lifting off and taking them with it.

Carrie closed her eyes as she bobbed gently between the two long lines of metal tubing. After a while, when nothing else seemed to be happening, she opened them again. Below her were the forest of red leaves, the grey plain, and the yellow ocean, all three receding at a steady pace. Above, the mauve sky deepened in colour. She gulped. "I hope this thing's safe," she said. "I wouldn't like to fall from this height."

Dave was swaying lazily next to her, his arms and legs akimbo, like a marionette whose puppet master had forgotten what he was supposed to be doing. He set his lips and glared.

"What?" said Carrie. "What have I done?"

"What have you done? What have you done? You invited me to your house for a housewarming party, only *I* was the only one invited. I decided to stay because you seemed lonely and I felt sorry for you, and as a reward for my kindness I was vacuumed underneath your sink and onto another planet." He paused for breath. "Now I'm flying through the air inside an overgrown item of office stationery

towards interrogation and probable execution on an alien spaceship. That's what you've done, Carrie. That's what you've done. If I hadn't gone to your housewarming—" he raised two fingers of each hand to signal quote marks "—I'd be sitting at home right now with a cup of hot chocolate watching the closing credits of a very interesting biopic on Leonardo DiCaprio. The next time someone's stupid enough to take the job of supervisor at my call centre, remind me to not to give them cake!"

Carrie's mouth opened and shut and opened again. "What was that you said about interrogation and probable execution?"

"What? Didn't you hear what the paperclip said?"

"No, all I could hear was a terrible noise pretending to be music."

"What are you talking about? It was speaking English, clear as day."

"No, it wasn't."

"Yes, it..." Dave grasped his hair before throwing his hands up. "Oh, never mind. It was asking us what we were and where we were from. When I answered, it got really angry. Then it said we were an unauthorised presence on a colonial planet, and if we couldn't explain ourselves to its commander we would be subject to the highest penalty. And if this alien and its friends were responsible for the bombing, I think we can both imagine what that might be."

As Carrie digested this latest piece of information, the sky turned a deeper mauve and the horizon became curved. The yellow ocean stretched over the planet surface as far as she could see. A small patch of red signalled the forest they had left what seemed only a short time ago. The forest sat at the edge of a large, grey, roughly crescent-shaped island.

Carrie thought back over the last twenty-four hours. It had been an eventful day for sure, what with her interview with the bug, her first day at the call centre, finding herself in a war zone, and now zooming up and away from an alien planet while being held within an invisible force field. Through all those events, though, in all that time, at no point had she thought this might be her last day alive.

She gasped. Toodles and Rogue. Who was going to feed them? Who was going to take care of them? Her lower lip trembled, and she began to cry.

Dave grimaced. "Look, it probably won't come to that. Maybe I misunderstood."

Carrie was shaking her head, the force making her sway gently. "It isn't that," she said. "I'm sorry—" A fresh wail escaped her, and she couldn't finish her sentence.

Dave sighed. "You don't have to apologise. I didn't mean what I said earlier. It isn't your fault. All this..." He gestured at the deep mauve sky filled with stars and yellow planet below. "It could have happened to anyone."

"No, I didn't mean that. I meant I'm sorry for Toodles and Rogue. Who's going to look after them when I'm gone? They'll be all alooone." Her final word dissolved into fresh sobs.

Dave rolled his eyes. "Oh well, don't mind about me, will you? I mean, I'm only another human being, practically a stranger, who you dragged into this mess."

But Carrie didn't hear him. She was howling, her head buried in her hands. Tears dribbled from between her fingers and hung suspended in midair. Dave batted them irritably.

A light from above distracted Carrie from her misery. Looking up, she closed her eyes to slits as the light grew more intensely bright. It was surrounded by pitch blackness. As they drew closer, the blackness was revealed to be a massive spaceship. Its outline was edged with stars, but they were faint

in comparison to the brilliant light shining from the ship. The alien headed towards the light, which grew larger and larger until finally they flew right into it.

As they were carried into the spaceship, Carrie's faint hope that it might be the place she had been interviewed was dashed. The interior was bright, shining silver, and the lighting was so intense that at first it dazzled her. The alien released them, and they hit the floor with a clunk. The surface was cold and smooth, and the ship was completely different from the place where Carrie's interview had taken place. Her giant insect interviewer—who might have been able to get them out of their predicament—was unlikely to be found here.

They seemed to be in a large holding bay or warehouse of some kind. All around machinery moved, transporting and stacking matte black boxes. Carrie edged away from the open hatchway, where the yellow planet was visible far below. She rubbed her knees, which had taken the full force of her fall. The moment it had deposited them, the paperclip had zoomed away. Dave was standing, watching the metal machines. Carrie also watched them, and after a few moments of observing the wide range of shapes and sizes, realised they all looked familiar.

She stood, joining Dave, who was frowning.

“Are you thinking what I'm thinking?” he asked.

In answer, she pointed to a long, cylindrical object that narrowed to a point at its top end and had a spring-loaded protuberance at the lower end, on which it bounced along. “It's like a pen,” she said.

Dave pointed at another machine that consisted of two levers, hinged in the middle and bearing fangs at each end. “And that looks like a staple remover.” The machine ran on caterpillar tracks.

Something else had a wide handle, a square base and two round poles that moved up and down caught Carrie's attention. She pointed at it and looked at Dave with a frown.

“Hole punch,” he said.

The two stood without speaking for several moments as the machines moved around them, taking no notice of the humans within their midst as they stacked the matte black boxes. It was Dave who finally gave voice to the inevitable conclusion. “It's like we're in a gigantic office stationery shop.”

Carrie gripped his arm. Their alien guard was returning through a wide doorway. Before it even came close, the screeching began. She squinted as she watched the conversation between it and Dave, the terrible sound digging channels through her brain. The conversation was very brief. The alien glided away and Dave followed. Carrie trotted along after. “How come you can hear that thing and I can't?”

“I don't know,” replied Dave, but Carrie noticed he avoided her eyes as he spoke.

“So, did it say where we're going?”

“We have to follow it to the ship's commander.”

The passages they went down were wide, square and metallic, so that Carrie felt as if she were walking through air vents. Their footsteps echoed as they walked quickly to keep pace with the zooming paperclip. *What was the commander like?* Carrie wondered, rubbing her arms as a couple of horrible possibilities crossing her mind. *Maybe it looked like a letter opener, or a pencil sharpener?*

As it turned out, the creature that awaited them was even worse than she had imagined. It was a massive rectangular box, lying longest side down, the narrow end facing them. Running right across the front of the machine, from the top to the bottom, was a row of tall, metal teeth.

Dave and Carrie exchanged glances. Carrie gulped. "Shredder," she said.

Chapter Eight – In the Hold

Carrie and Dave stood before the glinting steel maw. To one side of them their mechanical guard hovered. Carrie clamped her hands over her ears, anticipating the noise the shredder commander might make. A deep, reverberating bass shuddered through her. Dave seemed, as usual, to have no problem dealing with the sound, so she left him to the conversation and hoped he could save both their lives.

In an effort to distract herself from her probable imminent death, Carrie concentrated on happy thoughts. She thought about Toodles and Rogue, her animal best friends. Then she remembered they were alone in her flat on Earth, and that she might not be coming back. She decided to think about something else.

Her interview with the giant bug sprang next to mind. She scrambled for any information that might be useful in their current predicament, but she couldn't recall anything useful. The job didn't even seem to be detective work like the creature had said. It was all very odd. But maybe she'd got something wrong.

Carrie reflected instead on her job at the call centre. Her first day had seemed to go quite well, but as she went over the day's events she developed a strong suspicion that in fact she hadn't done a good job. She hadn't even read, let alone followed, the work manual. It was far too boring, and she could hardly understand a word of what the customers were complaining about. Now, the people she'd told she would help were not going to receive any service, and when the complaints started coming in again, this time they would be complaining about her. Carrie groaned. Another job she had failed at.

Dave's conversation with the shredder seemed to be going on forever. She took a peek. He was gesticulating wildly and seemed upset. She groaned again and shut her eyes.

Silence. Carrie looked at Dave. He had his hands on his hips and seemed thoughtful. "What happened? What did it say?"

Their guard began to leave, and Dave spread an arm wide, inviting Carrie to follow it with him. "Well," he said as they walked, "the commander knew all about us, which was surprising."

"Really? How on Earth did it know who we are?"

"Not us as in you and me, Carrie. Us as in human beings. It knew we were humans."

"Oh. Was that a good thing?"

"Only in the sense that recognising a species that has subjected your own to slavery, persecution, and destruction is a good thing."

"So...not a good thing at all, really."

"No. I tried to explain that the office stationery on Earth probably wasn't its long-lost cousins, but it wasn't having any of it."

"But how does it know? I mean, that's so weird. Those things haven't been to Earth, surely?"

Dave shrugged. "I'm only reporting what it said. I wasn't the one asking the questions. It was quite aggressive, let me tell you."

Carrie stepped to one side as a huge mechanical alien travelling in the opposite direction zoomed past. “So what’s going to happen now?”

“That part I wasn’t too clear on. It was reeling off chemicals and percentages.” He frowned. “What were they? Oxygen, sixty-five per cent; carbon, eighteen point five per cent; hydrogen, nine point five per cent. It mentioned nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus and a few others. I can’t remember the percentages for those, though. What could that be about, do you think?”

Oxygen, carbon, hydrogen? The elements and their percentages were tantalisingly familiar, and the others chemicals, too. “I know,” she exclaimed, “there was a question on that in The Horse and Hounds Pub Quiz Championship last year. They’re the amounts of the main elements in the human body, I’m sure of it.” She grinned triumphantly, then her smile faded. As the implications of her realisation sunk in, they were silent for a while.

“Now I know what it meant by atomise,” said Dave.

The guard drew to a halt, and a hole opened in the floor of the passageway. From a brief burst of discordant violin music Carrie understood they were to jump in. She peered down. It was a simple metal box. There was no sign of anything that might atomise them as they entered it. She landed safely at the bottom, and Dave followed. The air in the hole was humid and smelled faintly sweet.

“I wonder what they normally keep in here?” asked Carrie.

Dave slumped down in a corner. “Who knows? Printer ink? Glue? After today, I’d believe anything.”

Carrie watched him for a moment. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Sorry for inviting you to my house. Sorry for getting you involved in all of this.”

“It’s okay. It isn’t like you did it on purpose. And if we’re going to be giving apologies, I have one of my own.” He looked down.

“What? I don’t understand. You haven’t got anything to apologise for.”

Dave took a deep breath. “I have, actually. It’s this.” He stood and pulled something from his pocket before holding it out to her. The object was blue, cylindrical and about the length of his palm. It squirmed like a snake. Carrie recognised it immediately as one of the weird instruments in her space detective bag.

“It was wriggling like it wanted to be picked up,” said Dave. “I felt sorry for it.”

“Oh,” said Carrie. “I see. Well, that’s still no reason to apologise. I mean…” Her brows knit. “Hold on, if you were just picking it up, how did it end up in your pocket?”

“I should explain a bit more. You see, I have this condition where—”

Carrie gasped. “You took it. You *stole* it from me. Dave, that’s despicable.”

“Like I said, I have a condition. I’m sorry, I do try to control myself, but sometimes I can’t help it.”

“You came to my house as a guest, then you went into my kitchen pretending to put your glass away, and you took something that didn’t belong to you. You—you—”

“Now that’s not strictly true. I really was putting my glass away. But I saw all that amazing stuff you had, and there was this thing separate from the rest. It was at the edge of the table, like it was about to fall off. I didn’t think you’d miss it—”

Carrie crossed her arms. “Hmphhh.”

“Look, I said sorry didn’t I? And I’m giving it back. Here, you can have it.”

Carrie snatched the device from his hand.

“Maybe you’ll understand them now,” he said. “I think it must be a translator or something, and it was working for me because I had it on me. If you carry it, maybe you’ll understand what the aliens are saying.”

“Oh, great. A fat lot of good it’ll do me now. I’ll be able to understand them give the order to atomise me. Thanks a lot, Dave.”

Carrie plonked herself down at the opposite end of the cell and put the translator in her pocket. She glared at Dave, whose eyes roamed the cell. Whenever his gaze met Carrie’s he looked quickly away. Pulling out his phone he checked it, but he didn’t, apparently, have any new messages. He put his phone away and looked round the cell again.

Shifting herself to a more comfortable position on the floor, Carrie’s thoughts wandered from Dave’s misdemeanour to how many minutes or hours they would have to wait until they were broken down to their constituent elements, and whether it would be painful.

A scuttling sound came from above, unlike anything Carrie had heard up until then on the spaceship. The sound wasn’t metallic or mechanical, but it was familiar. It was the sound of many pairs of legs on the floor above them. Ten pairs of legs, in fact. Insect legs with claws at their ends. Carrie stood and looked up at the hatch in the ceiling. It opened, and a large, fanged, bug-eyed head peered in. The jaws stretched wide, and a smaller set of razor-sharp jaws protruded, dripping mucus.

Dave whimpered.

Carrie said, “Boy am I pleased to see you.”

Chapter Nine – Saved by the Bug

“You have an elevated heart rate and adrenaline levels, according to your translator, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett, and you appear to have been placed under arrest. Is there a problem?”

“Yes, there’s a big, big problem. Thanks so much for coming. Can you get us out of here?”

“Possibly, but we must follow the protocols, which I do not believe you have been doing, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett. I have diplomatic immunity and free access to the placktoid vessel, but it seems you have not declared your status. Until we can establish that the placktoids are perfectly entitled to imprison you.”

“They weren’t just going to imprison us, they were going to kill us,” said Carrie.

Dave was pressing his knuckles to his mouth.

The bug paused. Its head disappeared and ten pairs of insect legs extended through the hatch. With a clatter, it landed next to Carrie “We must discuss this matter further,” it said.

“So, you get signals from this thing?” Carrie held up the translator.

“All your devices transmit your status while you are in your probationary period. It appears you neglected to read that section of your instruction manual. At first, I was receiving signals from an unknown human, and I thought perhaps you had discarded the device or it had been stolen.”

Carrie narrowed her eyes at Dave, who was squashing himself into a corner.

“I was about to recall it,” the creature continued, “when signals arrived that indicated the translator had re-entered your possession. It was then I perceived your biological status, which indicated you were experiencing extreme difficulties and possibly danger.”

“You can say that again, er...um...what’s your name?” asked Carrie.

“Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Manager...well, humans cannot express my name, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett. It is a series of pheromones. It is a very distinct and, though I say it myself, beautiful series of odours selected by the queen of my—”

“All right, all right. Is there something else I can call you?”

“The closest rendition of my name in English is, I believe, Gavin.”

“Gavin?”

“That is the—”

“Okay, okay. Gavin, can you get them to release us?”

“Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett—”

“Call me Carrie. *Please.*”

“I will attempt to have you released, but the matter is rather delicate. It is unfortunate that this particular conflict was your first assignment. Humans are not well regarded among this species, due to some coincidental resemblances between its various forms and certain Earth artifacts.”

“We found out about that,” said Carrie.

“If you had been wearing your Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer

uniform, the matter would be completely different, of course. The plackto ids would have accepted your diplomatic immunity. May I ask why you are not wearing your Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer uniform?”

“I...er—”

“Carrie,” whispered Dave. “That th-thing...”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t introduce you. Dave, Gavin, Gavin, Dave.” Carrie pulled on an ear lobe. “I didn’t bring my uniform, Gavin. I didn’t have time.”

“And where is your toolbox?”

“I couldn’t bring that, either.”

Gavin chittered. “Transgalactic Intercultural...Carrie. This is not good. This is not good at all. How can you expect to perform your duties without the necessary equipment? And let us not forget you have also brought along an unauthorised companion.”

“Now, wait a minute. That isn’t fair. I didn’t even apply for this job. It isn’t my fault I accidentally sent in an application. I got whisked off to an interview that I didn’t want, with an interviewer who, if I can be blunt, Gavin, scared the life out of me.

“That green mist appeared in my kitchen again and sucked Dave in, and I followed him to help him out. I didn’t know we’d end up in the middle of a war zone, or have to do all this dangerous stuff.” Carrie folded her arms. “I didn’t ask to be a space detective.”

Gavin emitted a series of rapid clicks. “Firstly, you are *not* a space detective, and secondly, if you did not want the position why did you accept it? As I recall, you coerced me into hiring you. Thirdly, you clearly did not read the manual in your toolbox, or you would have known exactly where you were going and what duties you had to perform.”

“I...we...” Carrie sputtered to a stop. “So, can you get us out of here or not?”

“I will try my best.” Gavin reached up with two pairs of legs, and pulled himself up and through the hatch, which slammed shut. The mucus he left behind on the floor steamed. Carrie rubbed the back of her neck. Dave blinked, and the colour began to return to his face. “What the hell was that?”

“My boss, I think, or something like that. I never really found out.”

“You never...” Dave stood. He walked three steps to the opposite end of the cell and back again, before turning to face Carrie. “How can you not know your job title, or what you’re supposed to be doing, or who your boss is? Do you ever listen to anything you’re told?”

“Calm down, all right? You sound like my ex. I just miss things sometimes. And when that mist first sucked me in, I thought I was dreaming. It was all so stupid—why would I think it was real? Of course I wasn’t paying attention. Anyway, it looks like Gavin might be able to get us off the hook.”

“Yes, I could understand that much. Thank goodness at least one of these aliens speaks English. Well, I hope you’re right. God, I wish I’d never accepted your party invitation. All I want to do is go home and forget about this; pretend none of it ever happened.”

“Me too.” Carrie thought of Toodles and Rogue, her new flat, new job. It had all been going pretty well. She wanted nothing more than to continue with her life back on Earth.

She walked to and fro as the time passed, while Dave leaned in a corner. He didn’t seem to want to talk, and Carrie was still annoyed at him for stealing the translator, so she left him alone with his thoughts. When her legs became tired she sat down.

At last, the sound of insect legs scrabbling on the ceiling signalled Gavin's return. Their fate had been decided one way or another. Carrie felt the translator in her pocket. She was going to be the one hearing the aliens this time, and Dave could listen to the terrible racket they made.

As they returned to the shredder to find out what was going to happen to them, Gavin explained that, despite their resemblance to Earth stationery, the placktoids were intelligent organisms, though not natives of the planet below.

When they were back with the placktoid commander, Carrie was pleasantly surprised by the translator's effects. It seemed to eliminate the original sounds of communication—or perhaps prevented her brain from interpreting the auditory signals—and replaced them with English spoken in her mind. In the case of the shredder, the translator modified its speech into a BBC newscaster accent. Carrie couldn't resist a smirk as in the corner of her eye she saw Dave grimacing and cringing.

Soon after it was clear they were not going to die, Carrie lost track of what the commander was saying during its long speech, though she was pretty sure it offered no apology for the way they'd been treated. She thought their near-execution warranted at least a mention of regret, but the shredder sounded, instead, rather disappointed.

Reduced to their chemical constituents, it told her, she and Dave might have been useful. Protected by diplomatic immunity they would retain their organic form and be of no practical use to anyone. The Transgalactic Council was welcome to send officers to resolve the dispute, but it doubted they would make any difference, and it could not see how these *humans*—the translator conveyed a disgusted tone—could help.

Gavin was drumming his legs like fingers on a tabletop.

"Gavin." Carrie spoke from the corner of her mouth as the shredder continued without pause. The bug ignored her. "Gavin."

"Shh."

"But—"

"It is very rude to interrupt," whispered Gavin.

"But," said Carrie in an undertone, "we're going home now, right? Back to Earth?"

Gavin didn't answer, and Carrie noticed the room was silent. The shredder had finally stopped speaking and she hadn't heard its last few sentences.

"What happens now?" asked Dave weakly.

A guard zoomed up and hovered nearby, before telling them to follow it.

"We go that way," said Carrie.

"We aren't going to be executed?"

"No."

"Thank goodness," said Dave. "So we're going home at last."

Gavin walked alongside the two humans. "Not at all."

"What?" said Carrie and Dave.

"If I may remind you, you were sent here to resolve this conflict, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett."

Carrie winced.

"Despite an unfortunate start, you are to return to your duties. The placktoids want nothing to do

with you at the moment, due your unprofessional behaviour. Instead, their strong suggestion is that you return to the planet surface to speak with the opposing side.”

“No, no, no,” Carrie exclaimed, waving her hands in front of her. “I don’t want to. I give up. I resign. I—”

“I am afraid that is not possible. If you resign now it would make me look very bad in front of my superiors. Very bad. They would question my judgement in recruiting someone unwilling or unfit to perform their proper role in resolving these conflicts. As I explained at your interview, my position as an employee of the Transgalactic Council is precarious.”

“I don’t care about your position. I want to go home,” cried Carrie. The bug didn’t reply. “Gavin, we want to go home. We have to. Dave shouldn’t even be here. Send us back to Earth.”

Gavin’s head wagged. “I did consider returning your companion, but he may be of some use to you in your first assignment, so I will overlook your indiscretion for now.”

Carrie and Dave continued protesting as they followed the guard. The numbers of placktoids in the corridor increased, inhibiting their passage, until they arrived at the entrance area of the spaceship where the matte black boxes were stacked. As they neared the square hole that led outside, the paperclip began to hum.

Carrie felt herself being lifted into the air. “I’m not going to do it. Put me down you horrible paperclip. Gavin, send me home. Send us home, please.”

“All you need to do,” called Gavin, as Carrie and Dave were carried, squirming, to the centre of the guard, “is to question the ootoon about the placktoid disappearances. When the placktoids discover where their missing members are, they will be more disposed to enter into negotiations and resolve the conflict. You have your translator. With a little patience and concentration you should be able to communicate with the ootoon.”

Writhing against the force field that held her, Carrie drummed with her fists and feet. Gavin’s parting words were faint. “Good luck.”

Chapter Ten – Death by Custard

It wasn't easy to remain back to back while floating within the centre of a giant mechanical alien, but Carrie and Dave managed it. From the look on Dave's face, it was clear to Carrie that he blamed her for their predicament, and while that was, she admitted to herself, partly true, she thought he was being harsh. It wasn't as though she intended to involve him. She wanted to go home just as much as he did. And he did steal the translator from her house, so it wasn't as if he was Mr. Perfect.

The planet surface zoomed up towards them at a sickening pace. In a sea of yellow the grey island sat, with its forest of red leaves. The island drew closer and closer until, about four hundred feet above the planet's surface, Carrie realised the paperclip's positioning was wrong. It was returning them to roughly the same area as before but if they continued along their current trajectory, they wouldn't be landing on the island.

"Left," she shouted upwards, though in fact she had no idea what part of the guard contained its hearing facility. "Go left, or..."

Dave followed her gaze downward. All color drained from his face. "No, no, no. Left, left!" The pale yellow, gently heaving ocean drew closer and closer.

"Carrie...Carrie," shouted Dave. "Do something. Make it change course. Carrie, pleeeeeease..." Without a sound, the force field holding them was released, and they tumbled down. "I can't swim."

They hit the liquid, but instead of sinking like stones beneath the surface, their feet penetrated only slightly. The impact sent shock waves up their legs. The thick, gloopy ocean bore their weight. Carrie could hear a droning monotone.

"Phew," said Dave, as he regained his balance, "that was...ahhh!" The firm surface beneath his feet gave way, and he began to sink. Carrie was sinking, too. Flailing and thrashing, Dave sank faster.

Carrie stopped moving, which slowed her descent. The liquid was thick but it became runny in response to rapid movements. "Don't struggle," she called. "It's like quicksand. The more you struggle—"

"Carrie, help me," cried Dave, as his thighs and then his torso began to disappear into the yellow gloop. "Help!" But he was too far away for Carrie to reach.

"Stay still," she shouted. "Stop struggling."

Fully panicked, Dave desperately fought the liquid that was swallowing him, even as his arms and shoulders became covered in the glossy goo.

"For god's sake, Dave, keep still. You're making it worse."

"Carrie, Carrie," called Dave, twisting violently as his neck began to disappear. He tilted back his head to keep his mouth and nose free.

"Dave," shouted Carrie.

His eyes rolling, he gasped. He took several short breaths and spoke, his words slow and precise. "I think I'm touching the bottom. On tiptoe."

Carrie exhaled. “Okay. Now *don’t move*. Do you understand? Not a single muscle.”

Dave spat out the liquid that had oozed into his mouth. “Kay.”

“If I spread my weight over the surface, I bet I can wriggle across. Once you’re in this kind of liquid there’s no point fighting it, you just sink.”

Dave spat again. “I think I’ve discovered that.”

“The shore’s only about ten metres away. Move slowly, and try to work your way upward.” Carrie was already doing this herself, and it was working. Her top half lay across the surface, and she wasn’t sinking. She gently wriggled her legs, easing them free of the gloop.

Dave wasn’t so successful, but he knew where safety lay, and his painstakingly slow movements drew him gradually closer and closer to the shore. Emerging from the yellow ocean, the two flopped down on the dry, dusty sand. Their energy returned, and they stood and ran their hands down their clothes to remove the remains of the yellow goo. Carrie took the translator out of her pocket and placed it on the ground. The ocean’s murmuring ceased.

“You know, I think that paperclip did it on purpose,” said Dave. “Dropping us in the sea I mean. Vindictive little piece of stationery.”

“Not so little,” said Carrie.

Dave was flicking the yellow liquid into the ocean. “My boots,” he exclaimed. The once neatly brushed suede was flat and dark and very, very spoiled.

Carrie held out her arms to dry her sleeves in the breeze. The gloop had been easy to remove, and had left their clothes only slightly wet. Wondering what kind of substance it was, she sniffed her hands. “You know what, this stuff smells the same as the inside of our cell back on the placktoid spaceship.”

Dave took a sniff. “Does it?” he asked. “I can’t say I really noticed.”

Carrie dipped her finger in the ocean, and held it to her nose. “It smells like...” She popped her finger in her mouth. “Mmmm ...” Her eyes widened. “It’s custard.”

“Eurghhh,” exclaimed Dave, “we were just swimming in that.”

Scooping a handful of the liquid, she sucked it up and licked her hand clean. “It’s quite nice. It tastes exactly like the vanilla custard my mum makes.”

“That’s disgusting.” Dave stepped back. “How could you eat it? Anyway, shouldn’t you be contacting those people your bug boss was telling you about? Was it the ootoon he called them?”

“Don’t you want to try some? It’s lovely and creamy and not too sweet. Brilliant. A whole ocean of custard. Now all we need is some apple crumble.”

“There’s no way am I eating that.”

“Oh well, I’m hungry.” Carrie scooped up some more liquid in two hands and began slurping.

“Wait a minute,” said Dave. “Don’t drink it, you idiot. Just because it tastes like custard, it doesn’t mean it is. It isn’t likely, is it? We’re on an alien planet. That stuff could be poisonous.”

Carrie’s satisfied expression fell. “You’re right. I didn’t think of that. Whoops.” She opened her hands and the remains of the liquid dripped out. She spat what was left in her mouth back into the ocean. As she turned back to Dave, his eyes focused on something behind her and widened in fear. She only had time to utter, “What’s—” before the deluge hit. A wave of custard swamped her, knocking her off her feet. Blinded and smothered in yellow goo, she felt herself being dragged backwards into the ocean.

Her feet touched the floor, and she staggered up, scraping her eyes clear of liquid. She opened them just in time to see a tall tongue of gloop rise up, ready to grab her again. But Carrie's long hours of Bagua Zhang training kicked in, and she reflexively sidestepped, thrusting out a flat, hard palm. As had happened when she and Dave landed upon the liquid, the fast contact created a dense viscosity. Resistance sent a jarring tremor down her arm, but the blow was effective, and the tongue split into two and fell into the ocean, where it was rapidly absorbed.

"Short, sharp, jabs," muttered Carrie as another tongue rose and raced towards her. She punched it squarely in the middle, wincing at the shock. This tongue fell apart and tumbled down, quickly dissipating.

As a third tongue arose, she thought, *Wait, what am I doing?* She was at the shoreline. Maybe all she had to do was move out of reach? A sharp kick destroyed the next attacking wave, and she raced inland before glancing over her shoulder. The ocean didn't seem to be pursuing her. When she was well out of reach she stopped. At the shore edge the yellow liquid flopped towards her, seeming to reach out, and tongues rose and fell, but they didn't, or couldn't, leave the ocean.

Carrie relaxed. She was covered in gloop once more, but she was safe for now. She gazed in wonder at the ocean that looked and tasted like custard but had the instincts of predator. It took her a few moments to realise there was something missing from the scene. Dave. There was no sign of Dave. She drew in a breath. Scanning the gently heaving waves, she spotted a flailing hand.

"Dave," she shouted, running back to the shore. But the hand was no longer to be seen. Her heart in her mouth, Carrie gawked at the spot where it had disappeared. A bubble of air burst on the surface, then there was nothing. Not a splash, not a ripple. He was gone. "Dave." Carrie whimpered. "Dave."

Chapter Eleven – The Ootoon

Carrie slumped to the sand. The alien sea flopped onto the shore and drew back, flopped and drew back. She put her head in her hands. She'd only seen Dave for the first time yesterday. Not twenty four hours had passed since meeting him. He'd winked at her. He'd complimented her bag. He'd brought her cake.

She drew a sleeve across her eyes. If only she had demanded Gavin send him back to Earth, even if he refused to send her. There was no reason for Dave to be involved. None at all. This was supposed to be her job. She wondered if Dave had a partner. He had never spoken of anyone, but he must at the very least have family and friends who would never know what happened to him, and she couldn't tell them, assuming she managed to get home. They would have her locked up.

A sob burst from her, and another and another. Tears spilled from her eyes and ran down her face, cutting channels in the traces of yellow gloop. It wasn't Dave's fault he had come here, it was hers. She should have been more careful. She should have put away the things Gavin had given her, then he wouldn't have seen them. He wouldn't have been tempted to look at them and he might have left the kitchen before the cupboard door opened.

Thinking about the devices she'd left on her table reminded Carrie of the translator. She wondered if she could use it to speak to Gavin, or if it would at least send signals that showed her distressed state. Going home was the only thing on her mind now. If she begged, maybe he would let her. He couldn't refuse now that her companion had died, surely? The thought of spending another second on this planet looking at the ocean that had swallowed her friend, that had become his grave, was unbearable.

When they'd first left the ocean, she'd taken the translator out of her pocket and put it down on the sand. She soon found where she had left it, covered thinly in alien custard. She exhaled. It was a safe distance from the ocean's edge.

Carrie reached down to pick up the translator. As her fingers made contact, a cacophony of outraged squeals erupted in her mind. She snatched her hand away, and stared at the device. Reaching out again, she lightly touched it with her fingertips. Once more, there was a chorus of voices. Upon removing her fingers, the voices stopped.

Kneeling next to the translator, she placed a finger on it and concentrated on what the voices were saying. They were speaking English, but they were so loud and outraged, and there were so many, they were almost incomprehensible. Carrie frowned. Some voices were shrilling *Catch the invader* and *Down with all aliens*, others were shouting *Victory* and *We got one of them*. Carrie could also make out some quieter voices saying *Our poor citizens* and *Gone forever* and *Eaten by an alien*.

Eaten by an alien? Carrie jerked her finger away. She looked at the custard sea and wiped her mouth. The yellow liquid looked like an ocean. It covered at least half the planet, according to what she had seen from her rides on the placktoid guard. It was the colour and taste of custard, and even had its weird viscosity. But she was the only 'alien' around, and she had definitely eaten some of it. It had never occurred to her...Carrie's stomach squirmed.

Laying a finger on the translator again, the voices instantly started up in her mind. The custard was

full of beings communicating telepathically. She wondered if they could also hear her thoughts.

Hello? she said in her mind. *Can you hear me?* The voices continued without reaction. *I'm a stranger here. I'm sorry for...Hello?* But as much as she tried, she got no response. The custard creatures didn't seem to hear her at all. She would have to try speaking.

"Hello?" She repeated herself several times at increasing volume, then bellowed.

Some of the closer, louder voices ceased, though a monotonous drone continued in the background. It seemed a few parts of the yellow liquid had heard her. There was shushing, and calls of *Be quiet* and *Shut up, it's speaking*. A single voice piped *Murderer!* before it was silenced.

"Can I speak to someone?" asked Carrie. "I wanted to say, I'm very sorry for, er, accidentally eating one, or several, of you."

Cries of *Killer, Criminal, He was my best friend* and *How could you?* echoed in Carrie's mind. Her eyes began to fill with tears. "I'm really sorry. I had no idea. Where I come from, we eat something that looks exactly like you, and I just thought you were the same thing. It was...you were..." The words 'delicious' died on her lips.

That's no excuse was the majority response, closely followed by *How would you like it if we came to your planet and ate some of you?* and *We don't believe a word of it.*

"Honestly, back on Earth, I would never do such a thing. I'm actually a vegetarian, you know, and I have pets. I love animals."

The outrage this statement provoked was deafening. Carrie removed her finger from the translator in fear her brain would burst. Erratic ripples flowed over the ocean surface. Custard tongues rose up and ran towards her, only to topple uselessly down when they reached the shore edge. Carrie stepped away a few paces, cursing herself.

She folded her arms and bit her lip. There was nothing else for her to do but try again. Gavin wouldn't find out there was something wrong unless he discovered it through the translator, and there seemed to be no way off this planet without his help. She had to touch the device even if she couldn't get through to the custard ocean. She stepped closer to the translator and placed a toe on it.

"Sorry about that," she shouted several times until the hubbub quietened enough to indicate at least some of the custard was listening. "I didn't mean to say *you're* animals. I just meant, I wouldn't have eaten you if I'd realised you were alive. I don't eat living things, I mean things that once lived, unless you include plants and stuff." Carrie paused. "What I mean to say is, I'm really, really sorry I ate some of you, and if I'd known you were living, and intelligent, and had feelings, I would never have done it. I don't know what I can do to prove it to you, but it's true."

Anger welled up in Carrie. "And you attacked my friend. Why did you do that? He wasn't the one that hurt you; it was me."

A host of ocean voices responded to Carrie's words, and she could not clearly make out what any of them were saying. The tones were angry, measured, conciliatory, outraged, reasoning, and sympathetic all at once, with none louder than the rest. She listened for several minutes, but the voices went on and on and seemed to be in no hurry to come to any kind of consensus or response she could understand. Carrie's mind buzzed with the noise. She lost concentration and gave up.

Leaving the shore to walk and think for a while, images of Dave's flailing hand and the bubble of air, the last air he had breathed, popping on the ocean surface, played over and over in her mind. She

pictured his face. He'd tried to make her feel welcome, when no one else in the call center had been friendly. He'd come to her house, thinking she was having a housewarming party. He'd even owned up about stealing the translator. And she had got him killed by eating some of an alien sea.

Carrie reached the edge of the leaf forest where she and Dave had run when the custard ocean was being bombed. She stopped and turned, looking back at the vast yellow expanse. The placktoids had been bombing the ocean, an ocean that could talk and move at will. Of course. It was...it was...what had Gavin called it? The ootoon. The yellow gloop was the other side in the conflict with the placktoids.

Returning to the shoreline, Carrie found the voices had calmed down. There were still so many it was difficult to understand what they were saying, but she could make out some utterances.

What is it, anyway? some were asking, and Why is it here? and What should we do with it? In response to the final question there was a chorus of Ruin, ruin, ruin.

Carrie swallowed. "Hello?" she called, and as she spoke many voices quietened down. "I can answer some of your questions if you like. My name's Carrie. Carrie Hatchett, and I'm a human, from Earth."

Human, what's that? Earth? Never heard of it. There's no such place. It's making it up. Are they all murderous savages where you come from, then? How strange to go around all separated like that. How do you...you know?

Carrie's forehead knotted into a frown. She had to speak to the ootoon, but how was she supposed to speak to hundreds, or thousands or millions of them at once? It was impossible, yet there was nothing to do but to try. She set her lips.

"Yes, there really is a planet called Earth," she said. "I don't know where it is, or how I came here from there, but it's my home. The sea there is blue and it isn't alive like you are, but it's full of living things. And the land, well, lots of that is green, but there are also mountains and deserts and icy places where the ground is always frozen. And..." Her voice caught. "And it's very, very beautiful." *And a long, long way away*, she thought.

Blue sea? What's a sea? Weird. Sounds like a dump. Don't be rude. Where could that be, then? Is it far? So what? Who cares?

"Anyway," Carrie said, "I'm here to resolve this problem you've got with the placktoids."

Problem, what problem? Oh, she means the things, you know. Oh those other aliens. What are they? Placktoids they call themselves. Urghh, horrible. Can't stand them. Soon put a stop to their nonsense.

"So, if we could get on to solving that, I could get out of your way." *And home.*

Well, it all started long, long ago, when most of us were just drops, isn't that right? I'd say it goes further back than that. Start at the beginning, work your way forward, then stop. No, just tell her the important bits. The voices continued, with snippets of information here, an anecdote there, and lots of chatter in between. After a while Carrie's attention wandered, and the events of the last few hours began to catch up. Her eyelids began drooping, and her head nodded.

When we captured the other one, said a voice. The other placktoid? No, the other one like the one here.

Carrie's head jerked up. The other one like the one here? She was the only alien here. The other one like her was Dave, but the ootoon had said *captured*. Not killed, drowned, destroyed or any other word used to describe taking a life.

“Excuse me,” she shouted. “Excuse me. Be quiet, and listen, please, listen to me, it’s very important.” After a few more attempts, there was a lull in the chatter. “My companion, the other human, is he...” Carrie screwed her eyes shut. “Is he still alive?”

The response was outraged. *Of course it’s still alive. What do you take us for, savages?*

Chapter Twelve – Bubble Passage

A great, rending, gasping sob burst from Carrie. Alive. Dave was alive.

What's it doing? What's it saying? The words are strange. Those are noises, not words. Urghh, make it stop.

Carrie stifled her weeping. If Dave was alive, where was he? The custard ocean had swallowed him, and there was no way he could breathe in it.

“Excuse me, excuse me.” Carrie tried to interrupt, but the ootoons were too interested in discussing the phenomenon of her crying. She stood. “That’s enough,” she yelled. “Shut up, won’t you? For once, just bloody shut up.” The voices dropped to murmur level. Carrie detected a few exclamations of *How rude!* but ignored them. “My friend, where is he? What have you done with him?”

Does she mean the other one? I think she means the other one. Where is he? What did we do with him? Does anyone know where the other one of the murderous aliens is?

Carrie shut her eyes and clenched her fists. “Please, would one of you, or some of you, bring him back?”

Hey, you're not having him. You can't have him, he's ours. If we give him back, you'll start eating us again. He's our hostage, like the others. We're not stupid, you know.

“Okay, okay. If you won’t bring him here, at least take me to him.” Carrie regretted the words as they left her mouth. What was she saying? How did she know the ootoons weren’t lying? If she allowed them to take her, they could drown her easily. Land was her only place of safety.

No, that isn't a good idea. Come closer. Come over here and we'll take you. Two—we'll have two of them. Don't bother. What good is that going to do us? Come closer, we can't reach you there. Tendrils of custard sea oozed up the sand towards Carrie. She stepped back, then hesitated. What choice did she have but to trust the creatures? It was the only chance she had of reaching Dave, and she was desperate to see him and know that he was okay.

Knees trembling, Carrie took a step, then another. Custard snakes slithered over her shoes and up her calves.

Closer, closer. We can't reach you, said the voices.

Carrie took another step, and gasped as she was suddenly knee deep in warm custard.

Deeper, deeper.

Thigh deep, then in up to her waist Carrie went, her heart thudding. She imagined how terrified Dave must have been when the custard overwhelmed him. She looked back at the shore, which seemed so dry and safe.

Under, under, under, chorused the voices.

Taking a deep breath and closing her eyes, Carrie plunged into the ocean, recoiling from the slimy feeling. She gripped the translator. As the ootoon ocean closed over her head, she panicked and tried to swim to the surface to breathe, but she no longer knew which way was up, and if she opened her

eyes in the opaque liquid she wouldn't be able to see. Besides, swimming in it would only make her sink. She was enveloped in warm gloop, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Just when Carrie's lungs began to ache and she was giving up hope that the ootoon would keep its word and take her to Dave, the custard drained from her face and the rest of her body. She wiped her eyes and opened one a slit. A dim light surrounded her. She could make out a smooth yellow wall a metre away. Opening her eyes, Carrie saw she was in a custard bubble, and the liquid was glowing with some kind of phosphorescence. She exhaled before taking a test breath. The air smelled sickly sweet.

But where was Dave?

She let out a small squeal as a semi-liquid protrusion rose from the floor and lifted her off her feet. It became a custard chair like a sloppy bean bag, and she sank into it as acceleration pushed her deeper into the liquid. Reaching out to touch the wall of the bubble, she was sprayed by custard. The bubble was moving rapidly. She could still hear the voices of the ootoon, but they were a hum of incoherent sound, like a massive crowd of chattering people passed at high speed.

How long would it take to reach Dave? she wondered. It seemed ages since the custard had taken him. *He must be hopping mad by now, thought Carrie, or terrified.* A scary thought occurred to her. *Did the custard know humans needed oxygen to survive? Had the air in Dave's bubble run out?*

She wondered how deep beneath the surface she was. Oceans on Earth were miles deep at their deepest points, but the pressure down there was crushing. She didn't feel as though she was very deep. Either she was still close to the surface or the custard was maintaining normal atmospheric pressure around her. Maybe if she angered the ootoon the bubble would collapse and she would be crushed to death.

Her stomach lurched as the bubble decelerated. Pushing a finger into the wall created a lazy wake. She must be nearly there. She steeled herself against what she might see and forced images of Dave's suffocated body from her mind. The wall before her thinned and then dissolved. Her bubble had broken into another, and there was Dave.

He leapt up. "Carrie, I thought you were dead." He hugged her tightly.

"Well, I'm not," squeaked Carrie. "But I may soon..."

"Sorry." He released his grip. "I thought I'd never see you again. Never see another human being." He rubbed a knuckle in his eye. "I thought—"

"I'm the one who should be sorry, Dave." She grabbed his arms. "I wanted to say I'm sorry you're here and involved in all this. I should have told Gavin I wasn't interested. I should have demanded he left me alone. But I thought it was all a dream, you see. Even after I got up the next day and saw all that stuff on my kitchen table, it didn't seem real."

"It's okay, Carrie. It's my fault, too, for being a nosy parker. I should have gone home instead of poking around in your kitchen and looking at your things."

"It doesn't matter. I don't mind. Look, on my way over, I was worrying about the air supply in here. Have you felt dizzy or sleepy or anything?"

Dave shook his head. "Every so often a bubble of air pops open above me and a hole appears in the floor to grab a bubble to take away. The custard seems to understand I need fresh air. Anyway, how did you get here? What's going on?"

Carrie gasped, realising she hadn't heard the ootoons' voices for a while. Where was the translator?

She must have dropped it when Dave hugged her. She looked down and saw it half-submerged in the floor. As she touched it, the voices started up again in her head.

“I discovered something. The ocean we’re in, it’s alive,” she said.

“What? I assumed it was being controlled.”

“No, listen.” She held the translator out to Dave. “It’s full of voices communicating telepathically, but they hear us best if we speak.”

Dave’s eyes bulged as his fingers made contact with the translator. *Catch them. Keep them. Crush them*, shouted some of the voices, but these were only the loudest, not the majority. Quieter voices speculated on who Carrie and Dave were, where they had come from and why they were there. Other voices explained that Carrie had eaten their citizens. *Actually scooped them up and ate them!*

“Urgh...This is impossible to listen to,” said Dave, grimacing. “Is there a way of turning this off?” He traced the surface of the translator with his fingers. “Ah, there’s something here.” He pressed an invisible bump, and the voices stopped. “So it was because you ate some of it the ocean attacked?” Carrie hung her head. Dave’s brow wrinkled. “Wait, is this the other alien the placktoids are fighting with?”

“Must be. Gavin called them ootoons, I think. It would explain the explosions in the ocean.”

“So why are the placktoids attacking the ootoons?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Your terrifying boss said some of the placktoids were missing.”

“Did he?”

Dave tilted his head and glared at Carrie. “Yes, weren’t you listening?”

“I must have missed that part.”

Her friend grasped his hair with both hands for a moment, then let go. He leaned towards her. “Carrie, this could mean life or death to us. I, for one, want to go home. You need to pay attention.”

“Yeah, that’s a bit of a weak spot with me. I’m more of a visual person, you see. When I read something I remember it, but when people talk to me...”

“Well, do you think you could fix it? Because I intend to get off this planet.” Dave’s lips drew to a thin line.

“All right, there’s no need to go on about it.”

He held up the translator. “Let’s talk to the ootoons and see if we can find out what’s been going on.”

“Okay.”

He held out the device and Carrie grasped it as he turned it on.

ATTACK ATTACK ATTACK, screamed the voices.

Chapter Thirteen – War Zone

An explosion nearby threw Carrie and Dave to the floor. The bubble walls wobbled violently.

“What the hell’s that?” shouted Dave.

“It must be a bombardment from the placktoids.” Carrie tried to stand as large ripples crossed the floor.

“Seems like—” said Dave as he rose to his feet. Another explosion jerked the bubble and he fell down again. “—the time for negotiation may have passed.”

Carrie’s eyes widened. “What if we take a direct hit? What if the bombs break the wall?” She wondered again how deep they were. She touched the wall as she spoke. It had become firmer, almost solid, and rubbery, so that her fingers barely broke the surface. It was as if the ootoons were trying to protect them. Another bomb detonated, and they were thrown to one side. They bounced back from the elastic surface.

Dave staggered upright. “Do the placktoids know we’re here? Are they trying to kill us?”

“I don’t see how they could. Unless they can trace this thing like Gavin can.” She held up the translator. Screams and shouts from it were echoing through her head. She winced. “Poor ootoons.”

Bracing himself against the bubble walls, Dave said, “Carrie, you have to do something.”

“Me? What can I do?”

“What can you...? You’re the Liaison Officer, or whatever. It’s your job to sort this out. That’s why you’re here.”

“But I don’t have the first clue what’s going on.”

“Then you need to find out.”

“But...I...” Carrie was about to protest that she’d tried to find out the important information and solve the dispute, but in fact she couldn’t think of anything she’d done other than try to go home. Dave was right. She should do something. It was her job. She had agreed to it. All for the sake of a stupid handbag.

An ear-bursting concussion resounded from outside, and there was an ominous bulge in the bubble wall.

“CARRIE.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll do something.”

Holding the translator in both hands, she brought it close to her lips. She wasn’t sure it would make any difference, but maybe it would help her to be heard above the explosions and shouts and cries of the ootoons.

“Listen, please listen to me,” she shouted. “You’ve made a mistake. I’ve been sent here to sort out your dispute, by the...” She looked at Dave. He raised his eyebrows and spread his hands. “By the Transgalactic...Council? I’m not wearing my uniform, sorry. But I’m here to help you. Take us back to land. Take us back to the shore. Please.”

A double explosion rocked the bubble, and Carrie fell down. It was impossible to remain standing on the undulating floor. At first it didn't seem her words had been heard. From the ootoons she could hear nothing but shouts of pain and anger, but then she heard *Transgalactic Council*. Another voice repeated the words, and another, until the words echoed in her head. Protrusions rose from the floor that lifted them from their feet.

"We're moving," said Dave. "I can feel it."

Slowly, then faster, the bubble walls began to flow past, and the voices from the translator merged into a speeding gibberish. Carrie thumbed the translator off. The voices were giving her a headache and she couldn't comprehend a single word.

"Looks like they heard you," said Dave, "and believed you."

"Yes, maybe, or maybe they decided to take us somewhere else."

"Out of the bombardment zone?"

"Yes, to protect us."

"Or kill us."

Carrie shook her head. "They could have done that as soon as they got us below the surface. If anything, they've gone to some trouble to keep us alive, maybe just as hostages of course. But when I suggested they'd killed you they were outraged. Accused me of thinking they were savages."

"Some of them certainly sounded like they wanted us dead."

Carrie nodded. "Only some, though."

"Do you really think they'll let us go?"

"I don't know."

"What are you going to do if they take us back to land?"

"I don't know that, either."

Dave rolled his eyes.

Carrie wondered how she was going to solve the dispute between these alien species. It was difficult to come up with a solution when she didn't know what the details of the problem were. The placktoids must be bombing because, according to Gavin, some of them had gone missing and they blamed the ootoons. How could the ootoons take them, though? The placktoids had spaceships, weapons and other technology—dammit, they *were* technology.

"It's got to be the placktoids' fault," said Carrie.

"Why?"

"How could the ootoons hurt them? How could it capture them?"

"Well, they captured us and could have severely hurt us if they'd wanted to."

"We're not machinery."

"Are the placktoids machinery?" asked Dave. "You don't know. You're making assumptions. They might have some living parts. Or there might be baby paperclips that the ootoons were hurting. Yes, the placktoids were raising their babies and the ootoons came along and swept them away, or something like that."

Carrie lifted an eyebrow. "Okayyyyy. So, how could ootoons have taken them? The placktoids are in a spaceship. How could the ootoons reach all the way up there?"

Dave rubbed his chin. "You've got a point...Unless the baby paperclips were playing on the beach?"

Carrie gazed at Dave for a silent moment.

“Or maybe not?” he said.

Carrie folded her arms. “It’s the placktoids’ fault, I’m sure of it. They were the ones who were going to execute us, remember? And we hadn’t done a single thing to hurt them. But the ootoons didn’t harm me or you at all, even though I actually ate some of them. If some of the placktoids have gone missing, I bet the ootoons have nothing to do with it. Or maybe the placktoids are lying because they want an excuse to attack.”

“I’m not convinced.”

“*You* don’t have to be convinced. *I’m* the Transgalactic Intercultural...space detective, so it’s my call. I bet the placktoids can’t prove the ootoons have done anything to hurt them.”

“I hope you’re right. I just want this all to be over.”

“Me, too. I’ll do this one job, then, when I get home, I’m going to dig a hole in a field somewhere and bury all that equipment Gavin gave me. And the next thing I’m going to do is get some nails, and hammer shut that door under my sink.” Carrie raised her arms for balance. “Whoa, we’re slowing down.”

The deceleration was rapid. As the bubble wall opened in front of them, the protrusions they were sitting on rose swiftly up and ejected them through the gap. They landed face downward on the pale grey, gritty shore, not far from where the ootoons had taken them.

“I hate this job so much,” said Carrie, sitting up and rubbing her nose.

“It has its disadvantages,” said Dave, blinking in the daylight and surveying the sticky, yellowish material that had once been his clothes.

An explosion. A giant custard plume erupted. Wet, slimy ootoons rained down on them.

“Out of the frying pan, into the fire,” shouted Dave. The ootoons had brought them back to the beach as requested, but not out of the bombardment zone. Another bomb hit close by, and ootoons were splattered over the beach. The large jellied balls that landed close to the ocean oozed quickly down into it, but the ones farther from the shoreline began to darken, dry and shrink.

“Look,” said Carrie, pointing at the drying lumps, “I don’t think they can survive cut off from the rest of the ocean.” They ran to the globs to try to help them return to the sea. Dave lifted one but his fingers slipped through. He pushed it, but his hands sank uselessly in. Separated from the rest of the liquid, the ootoons didn’t seem to have the ability to change their viscosity.

“You have to hit them hard,” said Carrie. “Do that and the liquid resists. Like when we landed on it. See, like this.” She smacked a glob hard, and the material shuddered and slid a short distance along the sand. “Kicking probably works better.” She aimed a sideways swipe with her foot, and the glob slipped closer to the ocean’s edge.

“Got it,” said Dave, and he began punching and kicking a blob for all he was worth. In a few minutes it touched the custard sea, melted, and flowed into it.

As the bombing continued, Dave and Carrie worked steadily to return the displaced ootoons to their fellows. They worked for longer than half an hour until the bombs finally stopped. The two humans flopped down in exhaustion. They’d done their best, but some of the globs farthest from shore had dried completely and showed no signs of life.

Chapter Fourteen – Carrie’s Replacement

“We did our best,” said Carrie.

Dave turned his head. He sniffed and blinked, and wiped a finger under his eye. “This needs to stop, Carrie.”

“I know.”

“Then do something.”

“I’m trying.” Carrie stood. In the distance was the red leaf forest. The custard sea flopped and withdrew, flopped and withdrew, no trace of the recent bombardment visible on its glossy surface. Everything had returned to normal. The only signs of damage were the dried remains of ootoons on the beach. Yet Carrie couldn’t forget the shouts and cries of the victims. She needed to talk to Gavin and get him to help her force the placktoids to stop the bombing. She would demand they show evidence the ootoon had taken their missing members. She took out the translator. Maybe she could figure out how to use it to communicate with Gavin.

“Are you going to talk to the ootoons?” asked Dave. “You need to find out their side of the story, remember?”

“Oh, come on, Dave, you’ve heard the mass of chatter that stands for ootoon communication. I tried listening to their side of the history of the conflict before I found out they hadn’t drowned you. It was gobbledogook. Incomprehensible. And we haven’t got all the time in the world.”

“I think you can do it. You’ve made some headway already.”

But Carrie shook her head.

“What’s that?” asked Dave.

Carrie followed the direction of his gaze. He was looking towards the boulder. A patch of green mist was forming in front of it. The faint spot of colour grew wider and deeper, and began to glow and spin. Dave stood.

Carrie gripped his arm. “That looks like...”

A leg appeared through the mist. It was long, shapely, and womanly, and it was clothed in fluorescent orange. A firm, curvaceous buttock followed the leg, joined by another buttock and another leg. An hourglass torso began to appear, and shoulders. A woman appeared, clad in a perfectly fitting orange jumpsuit. A mane of tawny hair hung down, so that it was impossible to see her face. As the mist faded, the statuesque female stood upright. She shook back her hair, revealing even features and a finely chiselled bone structure.

As she scanned the surroundings, the woman’s eyes alighted on Carrie and Dave, open-mouthed and wide-eyed, but moved quickly on. Over her shoulder was an attractive designer handbag, which she opened. She pulled out a translator, glanced once more at Carrie and Dave and turned her back before speaking into the device.

“Wow,” said Dave.

“I know,” exclaimed Carrie. “How rude.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“Huh?” Carrie looked from Dave to the woman, who was deep in conversation, and back again. “But you’re...?”

“I may be gay, Carrie, but I’m not blind.”

“I suppose she is a bit, I don’t know, drop dead gorgeous.” Carrie frowned. “But what’s she doing here?”

“She’s got all the stuff you have: a handbag, a jumpsuit like the one that was on your table, a translator. She’s doing the same job as you of course.”

“But...” said Carrie, “but *I’m* doing this job. What’s *she* doing here? And why won’t she say hello?” The woman was scanning the sky. She began walking away. “Where’s she going?”

“I don’t know. There’s nothing that way but forest. Maybe she’s going to try and find a placktoid to talk to?” Dave grabbed her arm. “Carrie, look.” In front of the blasted boulder, the green mist had reappeared. It was thickening and swirling into a spiral. “Do you think that’s an exit? A way for us to go home?” He tugged her arm. “Come on, let’s go.” He ran towards the hole, checked over his shoulder, then stopped and turned. Carrie hadn’t left the spot. “Come on. What’s wrong?”

She found her legs reluctant to move. “We don’t know where it goes. It could lead anywhere.”

“I don’t see why. It isn’t like these things appear randomly. Gavin must have created it so we can leave. It makes sense. That woman’s been sent to replace you. The job’s over, Carrie. We can go home.”

Still her legs felt like lead. Her pride and annoyance seemed to be gluing her to the sand. She folded her arms and set her lips. “You go if you want to. I’m staying.”

Her friend hesitated at the edge of the mist. “But why? Don’t you want to get back? Aren’t you tired of all this? Your pets must be missing you by now.”

Carrie’s mouth twisted. He was right. She was worried about Toodles and Rogue, but they would just have to wait a little longer. She went to Dave’s side. The green mist lifted and pulled at her hair, but she resisted.

“All my life, Dave,” she said, “all my life I’ve never been able to hold down a job. Even a crappy temporary job. I don’t know why, but things always go wrong for me. And I think I’ve messed up the call centre job, too. But this job...maybe I can do this. I don’t want to give up yet. Maybe I can stop this war between the ootoons and the placktoids.”

Dave ran his hands through his sticky hair and looked longingly at the mist. He looked at Carrie and rubbed the back of his neck. The edges of the mist were fading and the hole was beginning to contract.

“But you go,” said Carrie. “You don’t need to stay. I can do it on my own. I think I can, anyway.”

Dave’s eyes lifted skyward. The hole was smaller now, barely wide enough for a person to pass through it. He spoke to the ground. “I didn’t want to say this, Carrie, but that woman looks like she knows what she’s doing. She’s an experienced professional, and this is a serious situation. We saw the ootoons dying today. They need someone to put an end to the conflict. Maybe you should leave her to it.”

Her voice trembling, Carrie replied, “You should go now if you’re going, before it’s too late.”

There was a silence. Dave looked wistfully at the mist. The spiral grew smaller and smaller and finally disappeared. He hung his head and sighed. “No, it’s okay. I’ll stay.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you.” Carrie threw her arms around him. “I know what you were saying is

right. I know that woman's a professional and I'm not. But I can't give up and walk away again. I just can't. We have to help the ootoons, don't we? Who knows what she's going to do? She hasn't even tried to talk to them yet."

"Yes, I suppose. But I still think all this stuff is way beyond you and me." He squinted into the sky. "If we are staying, maybe we need to hitch a ride on that?" He pointed at something swooping down so fast its outline was a blur. Carrie could make out the shape, however. It was rectangular, with curved edges and a hollow centre. It was a guard from the placktoid mothership.

Below it, the beautiful woman waited.

Chapter Fifteen – A Difference of Opinion

“Hold on,” shouted Carrie to her orange-jumpsuited replacement. “Wait for us. We’re coming, too.”

The blur of the mechanical alien sharpened as it came nearer. It was slowing and angling its flight towards the woman, who hadn’t reacted to Carrie’s shout.

“I said, wait.” Carrie was running now, with Dave close behind.

Glancing over her shoulder and back up at the guard, the woman looked as if she was hoping it would arrive before Carrie did. The air began to vibrate with a low, barely perceptible hum as the alien drew to a halt. It hovered just above the ground a short distance from the woman, who was now walking towards it.

“Stop, don’t leave without us,” yelled Carrie.

Not stopping, nor even pausing, the woman lifted her foot to step into the placktoid’s centre when Carrie’s dive almost, but not quite, knocked her off her feet. Carrie bounced and fell.

“Wow, you’re solid,” she said as she sprawled on the ground.

Staggering upright, the woman frowned. She stepped away from the paperclip and folded her arms. “What on Earth are you doing?” she asked, curling her lip.

“We’re coming, too,” said Carrie. “I’m a space liaison thingy as well. I’m going to speak to Gavin, or the placktoids.”

“Er, no, I don’t think you are.” She turned towards the waiting placktoid.

Carrie leapt up and stood in front of the woman, her arms straight by her sides. “What are you doing here, anyway? I’m the person responsible for settling this conflict.”

“Not any more, you aren’t. Now, excuse me please, I have a job to do.” The woman side-stepped Carrie, who reinserted herself into her path.

“No, you haven’t. It’s my job,” she said.

Dave lingered close by.

“It *was* your job,” said the woman. “You failed, and now I have to come in and clean up your mess.”

“That’s not true,” exclaimed Carrie. “I haven’t failed. I was just...I was just... gathering information from the custard, I mean, the...” she waved towards the ocean, “the ootoons.”

“Hmpf, you clearly have no idea what you’re talking about, or what you’re doing. And, by the way, it’s ootoon, singular. Please step aside, the placktoids are waiting.”

“We were calling them to get us...anyway. I have important questions for them.”

“Oh really. Where’s your equipment? And why aren’t you wearing your uniform?”

“I—I—” Carrie’s shoulders slumped. The woman smirked. Carrie’s mouth shut like a trap and stamped her foot. “Dammit, that’s none of your business.”

Her expression softening, the woman smiled and leaned down. “Look, it’s all right. Not everyone is cut out for this job. You toddle off home now and get a good night’s sleep. In the morning you can pretend none of this happened, and you can continue your boring little life in whatever boring little corner of the world you come from. Okay? Do you want me to ask Gavin to open a gateway for you?” She reached into her bag.

Carrie pushed up her sleeves and clenched her fists. “You aren’t getting on that paperclip without us.”

Tipping back her head, the woman laughed. “And I suppose you’re going to stop me? Like you did just then? Or are you going to get your boyfriend here to do your fighting?”

Dave tutted and rolled his eyes.

“I was trying to avoid hurting you then. But now I’m warning you, I’m trained in Bagua Zhang. And Dave isn’t my boyfriend.”

Momentary indecision flickered in the woman’s eyes, then her expression firmed. “I don’t care what you’re trained in. You’re still a little pipsquea—”

The air rushed from the woman’s lungs as Carrie jabbed her in the stomach with rigid fingers. She staggered, her mouth open and gasping.

“Carrie,” exclaimed Dave, “I don’t think there’s any need for that kind of behaviour.”

“It’s okay, I’ve just winded her. Come on.” She went to board the paperclip.

But Dave walked over to the woman and put a hand on the shoulder. She was bent double, her hands on her knees, struggling for breath. “Are you all right?”

“Dave,” shouted Carrie.

“I’m just checking you haven’t hurt her.”

“She’s fine. If I’d wanted to hurt her, I would have. Let’s go before she recovers.”

Dave hesitated. “If you’re sure...she looks a bit pale.”

Flinging back her hair, the woman bared her teeth at Carrie as she took in great gulps of air.

“Come on, Dave, quick.”

“I really think we’d better—”

A fluorescent orange blur flew at Carrie, who side-stepped the woman’s force and caught her off-balance with a shoulder to her middle. The woman lifted into the air and glided over Carrie’s head, landing on her back with a whump. She lay at Carrie’s feet, winded again.

“Whoa,” said Dave.

“Now, will you—owww!” The woman had sunk her teeth into Carrie’s ankle through her trouser leg. “Arghhh...let go.” She shook her leg, but the woman clung on. Carrie reached down, grabbed her wrist and twisted her arm. With a cry, the woman released her bite and leapt to her feet. Carrie stepped back. The two women began to circle.

“Back off,” said Carrie. “I’m not playing anymore.”

“You caught me off guard. You won’t get away with it a second time.”

“We only wanted to hitch a ride with you on the paperclip.”

“It’s a placktoid, you idiot. Stop calling it a paperclip. Better yet, go home, where you belong.”

Dave stepped between the women, both hands raised. “You know, I’m sure we can talk about this, if we all calm down and behave reasonably.”

“I’m not the one being unreasonable,” said Carrie. “I only wanted a lift.”

“Give up and go away,” said the woman through gritted teeth.

Carrie darted forward, and Dave jumped out of the way. She threw out her foot, trying to hook the woman’s leg from under her, but she scooted back. They circled again. As Dave backed farther away Carrie dashed in once more with a kick, but the woman grabbed her foot and dragged her forward,

hopping. She wrenched Carrie's leg so she was forced to hop closer, and swung a fist, but Carrie leaned back. The fist missed her jaw by a hair's breadth.

Dave put his hands to his face. "There's no need for all of this. You're both totally overreacting."

Carrie was still hopping. With a grunt, she leapt and turned 360 degrees in midair, breaking the woman's grip. As she landed, she leapt again, flinging her leg upwards and kicking the woman in the head. After landing heavily on her bottom, the woman sat swaying and blinking.

"Dave, come on," called Carrie as she turned and ran for the placktoid.

He was just behind her as she jumped into the centre. The forcefield gripped them and they floated, bouncing gently to and fro. Their entrance seemed to trigger a reaction in the mechanical alien. Its humming intensified, and it began to rise. A few feet away the woman lurched up, wobbling. She shouted something, but the sound didn't penetrate the forcefield. Her long stride brought her over quickly, but not quickly enough. Leaping, she reached for the edge of the placktoid as it ascended. Her fingers grasped air, and she dropped to the ground.

Carrie and Dave watched her figure grow smaller as she shook an angry fist at them. Carrie smiled and waved. Dave frowned at her. Carrie tried to look serious, but her smile broke into a grin. "You're both totally overreacting," she said. She put a hand over her mouth, and with a great snort, she began to laugh. She bent double and gripped her sides.

Dave's lips twitched, his frown melting as a smile forced its way onto his face. His smile broke into laughter, and as the alien zoomed upwards, Carrie and Dave clung to each other in fits of giggles, wiping their eyes and struggling to draw breath.

Above them, the black shape of the placktoid spaceship grew larger, a beam of brilliant light shining from the open hatch in its base. Carrie and Dave were still laughing when the alien disgorged them into the loading bay of the spaceship. They collapsed to the floor, gasping and groaning.

Gavin was awaiting them, his hundred eyes fixed on their rolling forms. Carrie caught sight of him, and her giggles weakened until they finally faltered and died.

Chapter Sixteen - Belinda

Drumming the ground with his legs, Gavin emitted a long series of musical clicks.

Carrie and Dave glanced at each other. Despite not understanding a syllable of what Gavin was saying, they both felt compelled to lower their heads like naughty schoolchildren. Carrie wasn't sure if Gavin was communicating with someone—or something—she couldn't see, talking to himself, or just seething.

She pulled her face into a serious and, she hoped, professional expression. “I wanted to report that I've investigated the—”

“Where is Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Markham, Transgalactic Intercultural—”

“I don't know who you mean.”

Gavin clicked again. “The question was rhetorical. I know exactly where she is. She is aboard the second transport the placktoid commander had to send out, due to the fact that the first transport was misappropriated by you.”

Carrie swallowed. “Yes, I wanted to talk to you about that. What's she doing here? This was supposed to be my job. You were going to send me back to Earth without giving me a chance to do it.”

“Nonsense. You have had numerous opportunities to ascertain the points of contention on the opposing sides. Your performance so far has consisted of arriving for duty out of uniform, lacking nearly all essential equipment, and accompanied by an unauthorised companion. After your arrival, you failed to contact the ootoon. When picked up by the placktoids you did not explain the official nature of your presence, resulting in your confinement under sentence of execution. Upon your return to the planet surface, you antagonised the ootoon and were taken into confinement once more.” Gavin's extendable inner jaws protruded an extra couple of inches. “You have made no progress in resolving this dispute. Hostilities have recommenced. Naturally I had no option but to return you to Earth. This is not a game. Lives are at stake. This conflict must be resolved, and you have singularly failed to resolve it.”

Carrie opened her mouth and closed it twice, before saying, “I have made progress. I've been talking to the ootoons, and they're friendly, not aggressive. They protected us from the bombardment even though they had no idea who we were. And how could the ootoons harm the placktoids anyway? They can't reach up here. The placktoids have been bombing it for no reason.”

Gavin was clicking again. “No reason? The ootoon, which is considered a single organism, by the way, has abducted placktoid settlers. That has been established, or I would not have stated it as a fact when you returned to the planet surface. The ootoon attacks any placktoids that stray near its shore.”

“Really? Why?”

Gavin leaned closer, so that his inner jaws were inches from Carrie's face. She drew back her head.

“That,” he said, “is what everyone would like to know.”

“Hold on,” said Dave, “we were bombed down there. Aren't the placktoids in danger of bombing their own people if they're still alive...or functioning, or whatever?”

Gavin swung round to face Dave, who stumbled back.

“The placktoids have little value for individuals of their species who are not available for recycling. In placktoid culture, a placktoid that has left its colony is considered useless and therefore expendable.”

“So why bother attacking?” asked Carrie.

Gavin swung back to her. “For revenge, and to deter the ootoon from capturing any more of them. All of which you would know if you had consulted the briefing device in your toolbox.”

“Which is what *I* did, of course,” came a woman’s voice. Carrie’s replacement had arrived and was stepping down from a hovering placktoid. “Hello, Gavin.”

“Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Markham,” said Gavin, “thank you for agreeing to step in.”

“I’m always happy to help. I see you’ve been disciplining the little flake. Not a moment too soon. I’m here to report that while I was waiting for the second transport to arrive,” the woman glanced sideways at Carrie, “I took the opportunity to speak further with the ootoon. It’s a belligerent entity that holds an unprovoked hatred for the placktoids. In my opinion there’s little hope of any settlement in this dispute. The ootoon should be subject to sanctions and forced to return the placktoid hostages, assuming they’re still alive.”

“What? No,” exclaimed Carrie, “you’ve got it wrong. The ootoon is nothing like that. You just didn’t listen to it long enough. And what do you mean you spoke further with it? You were going to come up here without speaking to it at all.” She turned to Gavin. “The ootoon’s very difficult to understand, with so many competing voices. It’s always arguing with itself because it’s many, many beings in one.”

“Approximately four and a half billion, if we are talking planetwide,” said Gavin, “and yet, at the same time, a single massive entity. A very interesting and nearly unique life form.”

“And particularly antagonistic,” said the woman.

“Look,” said Carrie, “I don’t know who you are, but I’d be grateful if you’d stop showing your oar in.”

The woman smirked. “The name’s Belinda. *So* pleased to meet you, whoever you are. No, really,” she held up a hand as Carrie opened her mouth, “don’t bother telling me your name. You won’t be around long enough for it to be worth my while learning it. Gavin, I believe the case here is solved. I studied the Council’s inspection report, and the placktoids’ claim that they have been subjected to unprovoked attacks ever since attempting to settle on the ootoon planet—”

“There’s your answer,” exclaimed Carrie, “the placktoids are trying to take over the ootoon’s world. It’s only natural that it fights back.”

“Didn’t you read *any* of the information you were given?” asked Belinda.

Gavin was clicking again. “The placktoids have been granted permission to settle on the land areas of the planet. The ootoon has no use for them and there is no other sentient life. But, after agreeing to the settlement plans, the ootoon began kidnapping placktoids.”

“Unprovoked?”

“As far as we can ascertain.”

Carrie looked at Dave. “That doesn’t sound right, does it?” He had wandered to the hatchway and was looking out of it. He shook his head. Carrie turned to Gavin and Belinda. “When we were there,

after the paperclip dropped us in the ootoon—deliberately, I’m pretty sure—it let us out untouched. We didn’t even know it was alive. It was only when I accidentally ate some of it—”

“You ATE some of it?” said Gavin.

Carrie sighed. “It was a mistake, okay?”

Belinda shook her head and tutted. “Gavin, isn’t there some way to force this woman and her friend to return to Earth? She’s terrible at her job and she’s complicating everything with her ineptitude.”

“It was only when it was provoked,” continued Carrie, heavily, “that it attacked. And even then it didn’t harm us, it only confined us. It tried to protect us from the bombing, and it let us go when I explained who I was and why I was there. It set us free despite what I’d done.”

“That the ootoon are holding several hundred placktoids hostage is well established,” said Belinda. “The ootoon provided no coherent explanation when I questioned it—”

“That’s because it can’t communicate clearly.”

Gavin whirred. “Transgalactic translators are highly effective—”

“That isn’t the point,” exclaimed Carrie. “Every single one of the ootoon parts speaks at once. I don’t know exactly how it works, but it seems that when there’s a consensus between enough of them, the ootoon acts. But in terms of talking with it one-to-one, forget it.”

“The Transgalactic Council is aware of the unusual communication method of the ootoon,” said Gavin.

“Well, I certainly managed to communicate with it,” said Belinda.

“No, you didn’t,” said Carrie.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You didn’t have enough time—”

“How dare you,” said Belinda. “Gavin, is this kind of behaviour acceptable? She’s actually accusing me of lying!”

“Yes, I am sorry to say I think you are correct, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Markham. Carrie, your behaviour and attitude are entirely inappropriate for someone in your position. I am formally informing you that your employment is terminated. This will cause me severe embarrassment in front of my superiors, but I am afraid it is unavoidable. If you do not return to Earth I will have to force you.”

Belinda tilted her chin and looked down her nose at Carrie, who clenched her fists.

“I’m not going anywhere—”

An alarm ripped through the air. The three humans covered their ears, and Gavin flipped onto his back. His ten pairs of legs jerked and wriggled. From all corners of the entrance area, placktoids began speeding towards the door.

“What’s going on?” yelled Carrie, though she couldn’t hear herself above the din.

Dave beckoned her over to the hatch, and pointed down. At first, Carrie couldn’t make out what he was pointing at against the yellow background of the planet, but then she saw it, zooming up towards them at an astonishing speed: A massive blob of ootoon.

Chapter Seventeen – The Ootoon Fights Back

Belinda joined them. All three looked down as, silently and swiftly, the yellow blob of ootoon grew larger. The placktoids continued to hasten out of the door. Carrie grabbed Dave's arm and motioned to the departing machines.

The alarm stopped, but the placktoids continued streaming out.

"Hmpf, so the ootoon's harmless?" said Belinda. "What do you think *that's* going to do when it gets here? Cuddle us?"

Carrie bit her lip. "Maybe, just to be on the safe side, we should get out of here."

"Yes, let's go," said Dave.

But Gavin was still on his back, wriggling.

"Hold on. We can't leave Gavin," Carrie said. As she spoke, the last placktoid reached the door. It disappeared through, and the door slid shut. The only remaining signs of the mechanical aliens were the stacks of black boxes they had left behind. The three humans and Gavin were alone.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Dave, looking at the incapacitated bug.

"Don't you know anything, you two?" said Belinda. "His aural sensory organs were overloaded by the alarm. In his species they're very sensitive. He's still recovering."

"Maybe we can push him?" suggested Carrie. "But can we even get out?" She ran to the door. It wouldn't open no matter how much she pushed or dragged the smooth surface. The surrounding wall was also smooth, with no buttons or other means of unlocking the door. There was nothing to be done but to return to the hatch and watch the ootoon approach.

The yellow blob was larger. Carrie estimated they had only minutes before it reached them. She wondered what it would do when it arrived. She also wondered if her earlier defence of the ootoon might have been misguided.

"Wait a minute," said Dave, "can't Gavin start up the mist, like he did when we were on the planet? Isn't that how he came to this ship? We can escape that way. Go back to Earth, or wherever. Just somewhere that isn't here."

"Yes," exclaimed Carrie. "Great idea." She went to Gavin, whose legs were still wagging weakly. His multi-eyed head lolled from side to side. "Gavin, please, can you open a gateway? We have to get out of here. There's going to be a fight."

Gavin clicked and chattered. He said something that sounded like, "Too loud, too loud."

"Damn," said Belinda.

"Can't you do, it then, with your equipment?" Dave asked Belinda.

"Of course not. Movement between planets is restricted in the same way that movement between countries is restricted on Earth. You can't just travel from world to world. Only authorised officials can create gateways."

"Wow," said Carrie, "look at that." She was back at the hatchway, craning over it. A bolt of light had left the placktoid ship. The bolt tore through the centre of the ootoon mass. A hole gaped for a moment, then the liquid oozed inwards and sealed it. The ootoon was solid again. As the three humans

watched, another placktoid bolt struck the same place, and once more the ootoon sealed the hole. Another bolt and another struck, and each time the ootoon repaired the damage, though blobs of custard were breaking off and floating away into space.

Carrie wrung her hands. "Poor ootoon."

"Poor ootoon?" said Belinda. "You have noticed we're being attacked, right?"

"It's attacking the placktoids, not us, and it must have a very good reason—" She gasped. "Oh no."

The bombardment from the ship had succeeded in splitting the large mass of ootoon in two.

"Yes," cried Belinda. "We got it."

"Not quite," said Dave. The two halves had reached out to each other and were oozing slowly together.

"Hah," said Carrie, and threw Belinda a triumphant look.

Another blast severed the ootoon in half again. The bombardment intensified, and the halves became quarters.

The placktoids were succeeding in breaking the ootoon apart, but they did not slow its pace. The ootoon quarters continued to fly towards the placktoids' ship at the same speed, and continued to draw closer together. The placktoids' weapons attacked each part separately, driving holes through them, which oozed relentlessly closed.

"Noooo," said Carrie, her hand over her mouth.

"Honestly," said Belinda, "anyone would think you wanted the ootoon to succeed."

"It isn't aggressive. You don't know it like I do."

"Not aggressive? What do you call that lump of death and destruction flying towards us? I bet you haven't even read the history of the conflict, let alone the species profile on the ootoon."

"Look," said Dave. The ootoon was in multiple pieces now, and it was slowing down. But still it came on.

"I've spent time with it," said Carrie. "You couldn't have listened to it for more than a few minutes. You just read the placktoids' side of the story and assumed that was all there was to it."

"For goodness sake, it's a barely intelligent species. I have no idea why the Transgalactic Council list it as a civilisation. And it's captured and probably killed hundreds of placktoids who were legitimately settling on unused land."

"Says who?"

"The placktoids, of course. The ootoon is hardly going to admit to it."

"And you believe them?"

"I read the official report. It's there in black and white."

"But it was written from the placktoids' viewpoint."

"And how would you know that?"

"Because the ootoon doesn't communicate like you and me."

"Wh-what's happening?" Gavin flipped onto his front and straightened his twenty legs. He stood unsteadily. "I remember some kind of—"

"The ootoon is attacking the ship," said Belinda. "You have to open a gateway to allow us to escape."

"Oh I see. That is what the alarm was about, was it?" Gavin lurched over to the others at the

hatchway.

“How on Earth is it doing that?” asked Carrie. “Flying up here, I mean.”

“I have no idea,” replied Gavin. “But I agree we should leave the scene of the conflict. Now, let me see.” He retracted his inner jaws and his head wobbled from vertical to horizontal.

“Woah,” said Dave. He stepped back from the hatch. “It’s made it.” A custard-yellow mound of ootoon bulged up and into the room.

“No,” shouted Belinda. “Hurry up, Gavin, hurry up. Before it surrounds the ship.”

But the bug was still groggily waving his feelers in the air. His inner jaws moved in and out.

“What’s the hurry?” asked Carrie.

“You can’t open a gateway within the ootoon,” said Belinda. “It throws out some kind of counteracting field. Nothing can get out from inside it. If it surrounds us we’ll have no hope.”

“Now then, where was I?” said Gavin. “Oh, I remember, a gateway, that was it.”

A circle of green mist began to form. It brightened and became thicker. A spiral began to swirl into being. Belinda lifted her bag higher on her shoulder and stepped up to be first through. But then the mist thinned and the spinning slowed. The three humans watched in dismay as the spiral faded and sputtered out.

Belinda swore. “Great. Just great. Now we’ll never get out of here.”

Above them, the placktoid ship’s brilliant lights blinked out and were replaced by a dull red glow. Beneath her feet, a vibration that Carrie had not noticed before, which she assumed must be the ship’s engines, stopped.

Chapter Eighteen - Trapped

“Oh dear,” said Gavin, his head returning to vertical.

Belinda folded her arms before sitting down with a thump.

“Don’t worry, everyone,” said Carrie. “The ootoon won’t hold us. It’ll set us free, like before.” She turned on her translator.

Voices blasted into her mind. *Victory, victory. The ship is ours. We won, we beat them. Fight the placktoids.*

“Hello?” she said. “I’m the Transgalactic Council Officer you were holding before. Do you remember? There are three humans here and a...a Transgalactic Council Manager.”

Trapped! We’ve got them trapped now. hooray for us. Thought they were so clever.

“Hello,” called Carrie. “Listen to me. There are more than just placktoids aboard. Hello?” she shouted, wincing at the multitude of triumphant ootoon voices echoing around her mind.

Belinda watched her with a sardonic expression. Carrie walked to the bulge of ootoon in the hatchway, hoping proximity to the stuff might help her to be heard. “Please,” she bellowed, “please, you must listen to me.” But all she heard in return were victory cries. “Oh, it’s impossible,” she muttered, and thumbed the translator off.

“You see?” said Belinda. “Utterly pointless. The creature’s hardly sentient. You’d get more sense from a marshmallow.”

“One moment,” said Gavin. “I will attempt a conversation.” He twisted his head to its horizontal position and was silent for several minutes. The three humans watched the large bug as his feelers twitched. “I have not been successful in communicating with the ootoon,” he finally said, “I have informed it that it will be breaching Transgalactic Code 538F if any harm comes to us through its action or inaction, but it gives no coherent response. Nevertheless, I will continue the attempt.”

“How come you don’t have to speak to it out loud like I do?” asked Carrie.

“Humans are only partially telepathic,” said Gavin.

“Oh.” Carrie leaned against a stack of black boxes. “well, maybe if we wait it’ll calm down enough to listen. Is there anything else we can do while we’re here?”

“We do not have an endless amount of time,” said Gavin. “The ootoon can clog and prevent from working whatever it chooses. It can become as liquid as water and solidify at will. It has no doubt accessed every duct and port and jammed the engines, weapons, everything. Without running engines the ship cannot maintain orbit. Neither can it remain warm, though the ootoon coating provides a measure of insulation. Of course, as the spaceship falls, friction with the atmosphere will generate heat but at sufficient temperatures as to be incompatible with life. To put it simply, we will freeze to death, roast to death or die upon impact with the planet surface. Now, please excuse me while I seek to gain the ootoon’s attention.”

Dave eyed the yellow bulge in the floor. “It doesn’t sound as nice as you seem to think it is, Carrie.

I'm glad it didn't think there was anything in here worth jamming."

"Yet," said Belinda.

"Well, you're all glass-half-empty types, aren't you?" said Carrie. "I'm telling you the ootoon is good at heart."

"Did you hear what Gavin said?" asked Belinda.

"It's been provoked by something. I'm sure of it. And we're still okay, aren't we? I bet there aren't any recorded instances of the ootoon actually harming anything."

"It's difficult to imagine what else has happened to the missing placktoids," said Belinda.

"Look, I admit I'm new at this job, and I might not have made much of a success of it so far, but aren't we supposed to maintain some sort of objectivity? You know, look at the evidence before we jump to conclusions?"

Belinda stood. "Are you trying to tell me how to do my job? Who the hell do you think you are?"

Carrie also levered herself upright. "Well, let's face it, you didn't even try to talk to the ootoon before you called the placktoids—"

"And what would be the point of that, exactly? As I correctly assumed, it's impossible to—"

"For goodness sake, you two," said Dave. "Just stop it, won't you? We might all be about to die, and I'd rather not go to my death trying to break up another fight."

Carrie and Belinda glared at each other, but after a time Carrie relaxed and leaned once more on the stack of boxes. She turned and looked at them curiously. "I wonder what's in these?"

"Probably raw materials to make new placktoids," said Belinda, "ready to ship home. The placktoids are mining the planet for ores."

"We didn't see any mines," said Dave.

"There are more islands than the one you were on."

"Oh," said Carrie. She rested an elbow on a box. "So, what is it you do exactly? Apart from this, I mean."

"On Earth? I'm a banker."

"That figures."

"Carrie," said Dave.

"All right, all right," she said. "So, how long have you been working for the Transgalactic Council?"

The woman shrugged. "A couple of years. It's been fairly straightforward up until now. I go to a conflict zone, establish the history, facilitate negotiations between the sides. They usually come to a resolution in time, providing they're reasonably advanced—unlike the ootoon. Job done."

"And why do you do it? I mean, it's interesting and all that, but what's in it for you? Seems like a risky profession."

"Most assignments are more clear-cut than this, and I like to travel, meet new species. There's an index-linked pension at the end of it and you can retire on the planet of your choice after ten Earth years' service."

Carrie's eyebrows rose. "Really? Those are quite some perks."

"Yes, they are. My background's finance, and believe me, Earth economies aren't stable. And what with all the environmental destruction..."

Belinda continued to speak but Carrie wasn't listening. Her eyes glazed over as she considered life

as a space detective, or liaison officer, or whatever the proper job title was. Travelling between the stars, visiting new planets, meeting aliens of every kind and shape. Who knew what wonders the universe might hold? And finally settling down on the perfect world, never having to work again. She grinned. “Right,” she said, cutting through Belinda’s monologue, “I know I got off to a bad start, but this sounds like my dream job. You know,” she turned to Dave, “I used to think I was a failure because I was always getting fired. Now I see it wasn’t because there was something wrong with me, I just wasn’t cut out for jobs I was doing. I wasn’t the right person for them. But this, I can make a go of it, I know I can. Or at least I’m going to give it a damn good try.” She stumped off towards the exit.

“Where are you going?” called Dave.

“I’m going to talk to the placktoids. The ootoon isn’t evil. I know it. I’m going to get to the bottom of this conflict if it kills me.”

“I can’t wait to see this,” said Belinda.

“The ootoon continues to fail to respond to my communications,” said Gavin. His head returned to vertical. “Where is Carrie going?”

“I think she plans on opening that door so she can talk to the placktoid commander,” said Dave.

“Given that the ootoon is not responding, I believe that is an appropriate course of action. Indeed, it is paramount.” The insect crawled to join Carrie at the door, trailed by Belinda and Dave.

Carrie was examining the door.

Belinda snickered. “All the systems are off, remember? The ootoon has jammed them all.”

Carrie rubbed her chin. “The ship’s general systems may be off. That doesn’t mean the local ones are. That emergency lighting, for instance. It must be locally powered or on a backup grid. I bet there’s some way we can open this. Gavin, do you know how these doors work?”

“As with most placktoid technology, the mechanism is comparatively simple. They’re magnetic.”

“Magnetism to open or close them?”

“The doors are nearly always open. A magnetic field is activated to hold them closed.”

“An emergency system,” said Carrie. “Thanks, Gavin. How come you know that?”

Ten pairs of legs shuffled to the right. “In my previous position I was a safety inspector for the Transgalactic Council Fleet. The placktoids contributed several ships.”

“Why did you leave?”

“I did not leave as such, I was forced to resign. I would rather not say why.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry, you aren’t going to get fired again. We’re going to get this job done. I won’t let you down, I promise. So, emergency power is holding the door closed?”

“Yes, it’s a safety mechanism.”

“You.” Carrie turned to Belinda. “You must have something in that bag that neutralises magnetic fields.”

Belinda’s expression was pinched. “No, I haven’t.”

“Carrie is correct. I believe you have,” said Gavin. “The magnetic field neutraliser. It’s about this long—” he held up two claws six inches apart—“and it—”

“Oh, *that* magnetic field neutraliser.” Belinda narrowed her eyes. She rummaged in her bag, retrieved the instrument and slapped it into Carrie’s outstretched palm.

“How do I—”

“Press the switch at the end,” snapped Belinda.

Carrie pressed the switch. With a quiet whoosh, the door slid open. Carrie strode through and turned left.

“Right,” said Dave. “The shredder’s to the right, Carrie.”

She about-faced and walked past the others. Dave caught her up.

“What are you going to say to the shredder?” he asked in an undertone.

“I don’t know yet.”

“You’re making this up as you go along, aren’t you?”

“Kind of.”

Chapter Nineteen – Back to the Shredder

Carrie and Dave walked silently for a while, Gavin and Belinda following a short distance behind.

Carrie said, “It’s odd, don’t you think? Why didn’t the placktoids take us with them when they left the entrance bay? I mean, they knew we were there. Gavin’s a manager in the Transgalactic Council, and Belinda and I have some kind of status, too. Why did they leave us alone like that? Shouldn’t they have made sure we got out before they closed the door?”

Dave nodded. “Something else is funny, too. Ever since we left that place, we haven’t seen a single placktoid.”

They were retracing the route the paperclip had taken on their way to their first audience with the shredder. The corridors were deserted, the doors they passed were closed, and all was quiet. The deep red emergency light gave the ship an eerie, almost subterranean appearance. Their steps and Gavin’s scrabbling tread echoed from the metal floors.

Carrie turned to her companions behind. “Gavin, why does a placktoid spaceship need lighting?”

Her insectoid manager stopped a moment to rub his hindmost legs together, making a thrumming sound. Dave peered over his shoulder at the bug, and increased his pace.

“Did I say something wrong?” asked Carrie as they resumed walking.

“No, not at all,” said Gavin. “I was expressing approval. I believe the human equivalent would be clapping. I was pleased because I think that may be the first intelligent question I have heard you ask.”

Belinda smirked.

“Thanks,” said Carrie. “I think.”

“You have clearly noted a discrepancy between the placktoids’ construction and their chosen environment. The placktoids are not biological, but mechanical. They are manufactured. In fact, they manufacture themselves. As such, they can select the sensors with which to equip themselves. There are a range of methods they could use to perceive the physical environment other than vision, or vision that depends upon certain wavelengths of light. Many of them do employ several other sensory strategies. The question why they light their spaceships has been asked before by anthropologists. As far as is understood, the best answer is that it is an entirely cultural phenomenon.”

“The placktoids have culture?”

“Of course they have culture.”

“But you just said they’re mechanical. They’re robots.”

Gavin chattered. “You must try to keep an open mind. The English word “robot” hardly expresses the widely ranging functions, intelligence and abilities of the placktoids. The species that originally devised and built them became extinct millenia ago. No one is sure why or how exactly; but since that time, the placktoids have developed a rich and diverse culture of their own.”

“And that includes light worship or something?”

“I do not believe it is worship exactly, though I am not an expert on placktoids. Their planet exists

within a binary star system and is constantly bathed in sunlight. Therefore light is normal to them. As many species do, the placktoids construct spaceships that recreate some of the conditions of their home planet. It is what they're used to; it is what makes them comfortable."

"Comfortable?" Carrie imagined a huge stapler reclining on a chaise longue. "That's interesting."

"I agree. Spaceship design is a passion of mine." Gavin fell silent. Carrie wondered if he was remembering the incident that had got him fired from his position as a spaceship inspector.

"This is it," said Dave as they entered a large chamber. Carrie recognised the place. It was lofty and wide and characteristically bare of any instruments or decoration. Dave had brought them to the right room, but there was no sign of the shredder or any other placktoids.

"The commander must have gone somewhere to deal with the attack," said Carrie.

"Most odd," said Gavin.

"It must have gone that way." She pointed to the shadowy end of the room, where a massive doorway gaped. "It wouldn't fit the way we came. That's strange. The big ones don't usually move around much, do they?"

"No," agreed Gavin.

"Did it go to the ship's command centre?" asked Dave.

"It *is* the ship's command centre," said Gavin. "Placktoids are not humans. They do not press buttons or consult screens. All communications between them and their instruments are electronic. They only emit sounds when talking with biological species that perceive sound waves." He walked sideways to the end of the room, disappearing into the dark red shadows.

"Is he going somewhere?" Dave asked Belinda.

"He's thinking," she replied.

Gavin returned, walking sideways again. "This situation is both inexplicable and unfortunate. We have no option but to search the ship and find the placktoids. We must facilitate communications between them and the ootoon and seek a resolution to this crisis. It is the only means to our survival."

"Good luck with that," said Belinda. "The ootoon refuses to communicate and now it has no reason to. As far as it's concerned, it's won, for the time being, anyway."

"Nevertheless, we must try," said Gavin. "This way."

The three humans trailed after Gavin as he set off across the room once more, heading for the cavernous exit. Carrie shivered and rubbed her arms. The temperature was dropping. She wondered where the placktoids could be hiding, if that was what they were doing. When she and Dave had been aboard the ship before, the place had seemed to be filled with them. How could they all just disappear?

Belinda fell into step next to Carrie. "So, I've told you a bit about my background. How about you?"

"I just started a new job, actually, as a call centre supervisor."

"Really? How interesting."

Carrie thought there was a touch of sarcasm in Belinda's tone. She stiffened.

"And what did you do before that?"

Carrie listed her various minor, menial and dead end jobs as she looked up at the statuesque beauty's profile. Her voice became quieter and quieter as she went on. As she finished, Belinda turned to her with a condescending smile.

"Forgive me for saying this, but you know what you said before about being determined to succeed

in this job, that didn't really make a lot of sense. If we get out of this alive, you should resign."

"What? Why?"

"Can't you see for yourself? It's difficult and dangerous, and, to be frank, you don't seem to know what you're doing. I'm not sure how you managed to get hired. You need years of experience of talking with people in positions of power to do this job. Negotiating skills, sound judgement, diplomacy." She shook her head. "I hardly think walking dogs or dressing up to deliver birthday telegrams is what the Transgalactic Council is looking for."

Carrie flushed and her nostrils flared. She fumed for a few silent moments as Belinda smiled smugly, then the realisation hit her. "Oh, I get it. You're feeling bad because I beat you in that fight and found a way out of the entrance bay. Thought you'd take me down a notch or two."

"That's nothing to do with it," Belinda snapped. "You were lucky, that's all."

"Hah." Carrie smiled.

"Oh, stop it, you two," said Dave.

"Hey, she started it," said Carrie.

"And you took the bait," said Dave.

Gavin stopped in front of a door. "We must enter each room in a systemic manner. We will start here and work our way through the spaceship as quickly as we can. When we find the placktoids we must convince them to communicate with the ootoon. We do not have much time before the ship drops out of orbit."

Chapter Twenty – Surprise Discovery

Carrie opened each door with the magnetic field neutraliser. There were rooms full of metals, plastics, unrecognisable materials and what might have been tools, and rooms stocked with the matte black boxes they had seen in the entrance bay, but no placktoids.

One room they entered contained a pair of large doors set into the floor. Carrie tried using the neutraliser on them but they remained closed. Each door had a handle, and Carrie pulled on one. The door lifted a fraction. She peeked through the gap, but it was too dark to see inside.

“What’s in there, do you think, Gavin?”

The creature’s feelers twitched. “I do not recall this feature in placktoid ship design. As with the holding cell in which you and your companion were confined, it must have been added after manufacture.”

“Could the placktoids be down there?”

“Not all of them,” said Dave, “half of them wouldn’t fit through that hole. Unless there’s another entrance somewhere.”

“It is unlikely there are any placktoids in an unlit area,” said Gavin. “It is odd that magnetism is not being used to holding the doors closed. The fact implies they are not normally left open in the same way as the others on the ship. Perhaps it is a safety feature.”

“I can’t lift them. They’re too heavy,” said Carrie.

“There must have been an opening mechanism that is now disabled. And placktoids are generally much stronger than humans,” said Gavin.

“What do we do, then?” asked Dave.

“Let us search the rest of this section,” said Gavin. “Perhaps placktoids are close by.”

The group returned to the corridor of closed doors.

“Belinda, what’s the story behind all this?” asked Dave as they continued their search. “How come you’re doing this job? You said before you’re a banker. How did you find out about life on other planets?”

“You mean you don’t know about what goes on in the galaxy?” said Belinda. She nodded. “It all makes sense now. You’re strays.”

“Do you have to be so rude?” said Carrie.

“Ugh, not in that sense, though...” She looked down her nose at Carrie, who glared at her. “I mean you strayed from Earth. Look, there’s a small number of humans who are aware of extraterrestrial life, and a large number who haven’t a clue. You belong to the latter, don’t you?”

Carrie pinched her lips together.

“Well, I certainly had no idea about any of this until I got sucked under Carrie’s sink,” said Dave.

“It isn’t as big a secret as you might imagine,” said Belinda. “The Transgalactic Council made contact with world leaders decades ago, but until we develop intragalactic travel, Earth is barred from

joining the Unity.”

Dave was open-mouthed. “Why haven’t they told us?”

“I’m not sure why the leaders keep quiet about it. Maybe they’re worried it will make them unpopular if people know the galaxy is teeming with life but they can’t go there or have anything to do with it. And the opposing political parties can’t come up with the goods either, so they also don’t say anything.”

“But surely they should pour all their resources into developing space travel?” said Dave.

Belinda shrugged. “Budgets have to be accounted for. But I think the scientists are getting close, finally.”

Carrie’s curiosity overcame her reluctance to speak to Belinda. “So how did you get this job?”

“The Council likes to recruit humans as Liaison Officers because we have no history of conflicts or alliances with other species. Without any baggage, we’re trusted to be neutral. I say ‘we’ but in fact I’m half dandrobian.” She smiled smugly.

“You’re...?”

“Can’t you tell?” Belinda drew herself up to her full height. Tossing her tawny mane over her shoulder, she turned her head from side to side. She dropped her pose. “Hmpf, of course you can’t. You’ve never met a dandrobian have you?”

“If I might interrupt?” said Gavin. They had come to the end of the section. “I suggest we check what is behind the non-magnetised doors we found earlier before we move on. What is the saying in English? We should leave no stone unturned. There is a small possibility there may be a placktoid in there who can inform us where the rest have gone.”

They returned to the room, and Belinda took hold of one of the door handles.

“Hold on,” said Dave, “maybe there’s a reason those doors are closed.”

“I cannot imagine why,” said Gavin. “The placktoids have nothing to fear aboard their own ship.”

Belinda grunted, and the door lifted an inch. “Damn, this is heavy.”

Dave lent a hand, and the door began to slowly open. In the area beneath, all was dark. The meagre deep red emergency lighting didn’t penetrate. When the door was halfway open, Gavin said, “There is something in there. I can hear movement.”

Dave and Belinda heaved the door up until it was past vertical, then stepped back to let it fall open. Dave shook his head as the door clanged to the floor.

“I can hear something, too,” said Carrie. There was a metallic rustling and swishing. It reminded her of something but she couldn’t think what. Dave went to the room entrance, where he lingered. The other three looked into the shadowy interior.

“I know,” exclaimed Belinda. She rummaged in her bag.

“Have you got some kind of detection instrument?” asked Carrie.

“Sort of.” Belinda pulled a long, cylindrical object from the bag, and flipped a switch. A beam of light shone out. “It’s called a torch.” She angled the light into the hole. “Well, I never.”

Carrie and Gavin peered in.

“Most odd,” said Gavin. In the circle of light from the torch, hundreds of small paperclips shifted and glinted. They were five or six times the size of their inanimate Earth cousins.

“Dave,” called Carrie, straightening up, “you were right. There *are* baby paperclips.” She looked

again into the hole in floor. “Woah.” The paperclips were rising and floating towards them along the beam of light. “Errmmm...” She took a step back. The lead paperclip had reached the edge of the hole, and continued to rise. As it drew level with her eyes, it changed direction and zoomed into her face, hitting her between the eyes. “Ow,” she cried, “they’re attacking.” More paperclips were gliding out of the hole. Another one hit her, and another.

Carrie was forced to close her eyes and cover her face. She gave out little squeaks as the placktoid onslaught continued against her hands and the rest of her body.

Chapter Twenty-One – Paperclip Battle

Belinda was yowling, and Carrie could hear the pings of placktoids bouncing off Gavin's exoskeleton.

"Most odd. Most odd," he said.

Carrie spun around, disorienting herself. She didn't dare move too far in case she fell into the pit, nor peek between her fingers, but she remembered Dave had been standing by the exit. "Dave, where are you?"

"Over here."

Her arms spread in front of her, Carrie stepped hesitantly towards her friend's voice, cringing at the paperclip strikes, which felt like bee stings. "Open the door."

"I can't. I haven't got the neutraliser."

"Ow." A placktoid had struck just below her nose. The strength of their impact seemed to be increasing. But Dave wasn't making a sound. "Aren't they attacking you?"

"No, they're attacking Belinda and Gavin, mostly. Get over here. Maybe they'll leave you alone."

The frequency of hits did seem to diminish as Carrie neared Dave. He grabbed her arm and pulled her towards him. The jabs from the mechanical aliens stopped. She opened her eyes. She was at the closed door. Back at the open hatchway, Gavin was looking as bemused as an insect can while the paperclips pinged off his shell. Belinda was swinging the torch round in a futile attempt to ward off the attack.

Carrie swallowed, hard, and called, "Belinda, come over to the door. It looks like they're staying in that area. You'll be safe here. Gavin, we have to get out."

Belinda began to shuffle towards Carrie and Dave, voicing regular expressions of pain as the paperclips hit her around her face and head and along her outstretched arms. Gavin didn't move, but instead gazed into the hatch from which the aliens were swarming.

"Hey, I think they're growing," shouted Dave.

"That is impossible," said Gavin.

Carrie peered at the swirling silver mass around the hole in the floor and the separate mass that encircled Belinda as she edged closer. It was difficult to tell, but she suspected Dave was right.

Belinda had crossed more than half the distance to the exit, but as she drew nearer the aliens followed. She wasn't leaving them behind.

"Ow," said Carrie as a paperclip flew into her neck. "Oh no, they're coming over here with her. Go back, Belinda, go back."

"No, I'm getting away from these things."

"You aren't getting away. They're following you."

Gavin, despite standing right next to the open hatch, was no longer being hit. He watched the clouds of placktoids zooming around Belinda.

"Ow," shouted Carrie as another alien hit her. "Stop. Go away." But it was too late. Belinda and her

attackers had come too close.

“Ouch,” cried Dave. He dashed to the opposite side of the room, which was empty for the moment. Carrie ran to join him.

“Am I nearly there? Where are you?” called Belinda. “Where’s the door? Ow. Ouch.”

“It’s you they’re after,” called Carrie. “They aren’t attacking anyone else. Just you.”

“Oh no! Ouch. What am I going to do? Help. Help me.”

“Gavin, what can we do?” called Dave.

“Most perplexing,” he said.

Belinda was performing a mad dance as she waved the torch around her head. She set off in a different direction across the room, but wherever she went the aliens followed. Carrie and Dave kept carefully out of her way.

Belinda’s erratic, desperate movements generated in Carrie a tiny twinge of sympathy. “Maybe we can open the door, push her into the corridor, and close the door quickly behind us.”

“Look at her,” said Dave. “She’s swarming with them. They’ll follow her and the rest of us out.”

Carrie rubbed her face, where most of the placktoids had hit. The idea of being pursued around the spaceship by the small, vicious creatures didn’t appeal. She watched Belinda as she gyrated. Why were they attacking only her? What was different about her? What had she said about herself? A crease formed between Carrie’s eyes. *That was it*, she thought, *she said she was half-dandrobian*.

“Oh, please—ow—someone help me,” called Belinda.

“Gavin, what’s a dandrobian?” asked Carrie.

“The predominant sentient species of the planet Dandrobia.”

Carrie sighed. “Is there something about them that planktoids hate?”

“Not that I’m aware of. I do not believe the two species come into regular contact, in fact.”

“Can’t someone do something?” cried Belinda. “Any of you? Ouch. Ow.”

It had to be something else. Were they attacking her because she was tall? No, Dave was tall, too. Because she was shouting? No, Carrie had also shouted. What did she have that no one else in the room had? Carrie watched the aliens sweeping through the light from the torch. They reminded her of something. She strained to remember. The image came to her. The paperclips were behaving like moths around a flame. Though they circled, they always returned to the light. She remembered the tiny placktoids rising up along the torch’s beam from the hole in the floor. She shouted, “The torch. Turn off the torch.”

“What? Why?”

“They’re attracted to the light. Turn it off.”

Belinda fumbled for the switch, her eyes still closed. As the beam disappeared, the aliens’ energy dissipated. Their flying slowed until they drifted down like metallic snowflakes to the floor, where they lay moving feebly.

Putting the torch in her bag, Belinda smoothed her hair. Her face and hands were a mass of pink lines and shallow scratches. Two placktoids were caught in her tawny locks. She disentangled them and threw them down.

“Well,” she said, “thank goodness that’s over. Horrid things.”

Carrie looked at Dave, an eyebrow raised. “You’re welcome.”

“I’m sorry?” said Belinda.

“I said, you’re welcome. My saving you from the paperclips was no problem.”

“Oh, that.” Belinda waved a hand. “I was just thinking the same thing. About how the paper—I mean, placktoids—must be following the light from the torch.”

Carrie’s mouth fell open. She turned to Dave, who shrugged.

“Very, very strange,” said Gavin. His head was bent close to the small mechanical aliens on the floor.

Carrie could not decide who, between Belinda and Gavin, she wanted to hit most. “Gavin, I swear, you say that one more time—”

“Baby placktoids,” said Gavin.

“Yes, we did notice,” said Carrie.

“Not possible.”

“Erm...” Carrie gestured to the small placktoids shifting slowly around them.

“Placktoids are mechanical. They build new members of their species. They have no juvenile stage.”

“Maybe they’re just small ones,” said Dave.

“I have never seen a placktoid even approaching this diminutive size,” said Gavin, “nor can I think what possible use such a small creature might have in their society. Furthermore, I believe you were correct. Look there.”

Carrie studied the aliens Gavin indicated. They seemed identical except for one thing. “They’re different sizes.”

“They grew while they were attacking us,” said Gavin. “Placktoids do not grow. And see here.” Two neatly severed paperclip halves were on the floor. A thin blue liquid dribbled from their ends.

“Unfortunately a paperclip flew into my inner mandibles during the attack and cut itself in two.”

“What’s that blue stuff? Antifreeze or something?” asked Carrie.

“I believe it to be a form of blood. An unfortunate loss of life, but an accident.”

“They can bleed?” asked Dave.

“Again, no, placktoids do not bleed. But this one and presumably all its companions do. It appears the placktoids are developing biological parts and have instigated an intensive breeding programme. This is a most serious matter. Habitable planets are few and far between in the galaxy. The population growth of every species must be sustainable. The placktoids were granted permission to settle on the ootoon planet because the land area is unused, but their numbers cannot grow indefinitely. I cannot imagine why they would want to develop these excessive breeding methods.”

“But they still need materials to grow,” said Belinda. “They must pay for those, or acquire them somehow.”

“No, indeed,” said Gavin. “These were growing with the aid of one primary resource.”

“Light,” said Carrie.

Gavin lifted his back legs and rubbed them together. “Perhaps carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, too, in a manner similar to many plant species. We must search further, and try to find out not only where the placktoids are, but what they are doing. A further concern of mine is that these juvenile placktoids are aggressive.”

The spaceship seemed to drop from beneath Carrie’s feet. Her stomach lurched. “What was that?”

“The spaceship’s course has become unstable. I believe we may soon begin our descent to the planet,” said Gavin.

“Here’s hoping for a soft landing,” said Dave.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Where Have All the Placktoids Gone?

Deprived of the strong beam of light from the torch, the baby aliens had little energy to resist as Carrie, Dave and Belinda quickly scooped them into the hole in the floor. Belinda and Dave hefted the door over and it slammed shut with a satisfying clang. Carrie thought of the paperclips rustling in the dark, and shivered.

The four stepped up the pace of their search, hastily glancing through each door Carrie opened before running to the next one. The ship was large and soon the humans were sweating and panting, though Gavin seemed to cover the ground with ease.

But wherever they looked, there was not a sign of the placktoids.

“Maybe they left in a matter transporter,” said Carrie, as they rounded a corner and found themselves in the corridor leading to the entrance bay.

“That might be a possibility, if such a thing existed,” said Gavin. “However, as far as I am aware, this instrument has not yet been invented, therefore—”

Carrie held up her hand, palm outward. “I get it. There are no matter transporters.”

“No,” replied Gavin. “No. If the placktoids had invented a method for transporting matter, they could name any price for it. Sadly, I believe the truth to be far more alarming. You are all fatigued. Please rest for a moment.”

They had returned to the entrance bay. Inside the large area stacked with black boxes, the mound of ootoon still protruded through the hatchway.

“We have searched most of the ship,” said Gavin, as they entered. “Its layout has been altered from the original design but there is, as far as I am aware, no section we have not explored that is large enough to contain the ship’s crew. I think we can safely conclude they are not on board. Yet, as we found, the shuttle ships are in their docks, and we saw none depart while the ship was being attacked. The placktoids did not fly down to the planet surface.”

“So where have they gone?” asked Dave.

“There is only one method by which the placktoids could leave, and if my deduction is correct, when it is considered along with evidence of the development of biological reproduction and growth, it is most damning.” Gavin lowered his abdomen to the ground.

“What is your deduction, then?” asked Carrie.

The insect’s inner jaws retracted and protruded twice before he said, “I believe the placktoids created a gateway.”

“Oh,” said Carrie, “you mean the spiral of green mist? Seems sensible to me, in the circumstances. I mean, that’s how we tried to leave, right? Before the ootoon surrounded the ship. It isn’t that bad, is it?”

“Of course it’s bad,” said Belinda. “Why do you think Earth isn’t overrun with aliens? It isn’t just anyone who can create gateways. The Transgalactic Council must grant permission, which it very rarely does.”

“If there were free passage to any planet via gateways,” said Gavin, “it would be extremely disruptive. Millions might suddenly flock to other worlds, or criminals might turn up, steal or murder, and disappear again. There are endless appalling scenarios that could occur. Gateway technology is highly confidential and its usage limited to essential needs only.”

“And now the placktoids have it,” said Carrie.

“Apparently so. They are acting illegally and subversively. If word of this gets back to the Transgalactic Council, they will be disbarred from all treaty agreements and subject to the strictest sanctions. Placktoid colonies on other worlds will be immediately arrested and confined indefinitely. The placktoids know this of course. Employing gateway technology is tantamount to declaring war on the entire galaxy.”

The spaceship lurched, and Carrie grabbed the wall for support. “But if word doesn’t get back to the Transgalactic Council, what then?”

“Then the placktoids are free to travel wherever they want and to increase their numbers at an astronomical rate, raising an army of their kind. We must leave this ship and alert the Transgalactic Council.”

“Then we have to persuade the ootoon to let us go,” said Dave.

“We’ll never do it,” said Belinda. “There’s no communicating with that thing. It’s barely intelligent.”

Carrie tutted. She went to the bulge of ootoon, took out her translator and switched it on. A babble of voices filled her mind. *Ruin the placktoids. Catch them, crush them. More hostages. They’ll never hurt us now. Wheeee, we’re flying. I miss home. The placktoids attacked us. Revenge! Let’s see how they like it.* Carrie turned off the translator. Maybe Belinda was partially right. The ootoon surrounding the ship seemed impossible to communicate with, though it wasn’t unintelligent. There were just too many personalities within it who were focused on harming the placktoids. A few might be listening, but not enough to influence the majority.

Gavin, Dave and Belinda had joined her.

“I told you,” said Belinda. “It’s a complete waste of time. We’re doomed.”

Carrie strode to the far end of the bay and found a pile of boxes to slump down behind. She could not stand being around Belinda a moment longer. *Smug, doom-mongering, arrogant, b—*

“How are you doing?”

Dave had come up behind her.

“That woman,” she exclaimed.

He grimaced and sat down beside her. “I have to admit she’s been getting to me, too.”

“What are we going to do? We’ve got to get out of here. I have to get back to Toodles and Rogue. I’m new in the area. I don’t know anyone there, and no one knows me or that I’ve got pets. If I don’t get back who knows what’ll happen to them.”

Dave rested his elbows on his knees. “Yeah, there are a few people who might miss me.” He smiled. “I had no idea your housewarming party would turn out quite like this.”

Carrie hung her head. “I’m sorry I got you into all this.”

“Don’t apologise. It’s been kinda fun, in a strange way.”

“You’re too nice, you know? Anyway, in case we don’t manage to find a way out of this, I wanted to say, it’s been good to know you. We only met yesterday, though it feels like a lifetime ago, but you’ve

been a great friend.”

“I’m glad I met you as well, Carrie.”

“And I forgive you for stealing from me.”

“I keep telling you, I have a condition.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Carrie stood. “Maybe we should move away from these boxes. The way the ship keeps lurching, we stand a good chance of one of them falling on us.”

Dave also got to his feet. “I wonder what’s in them?”

“I wondered that, too. Probably more baby paperclips, ready for shipping to another planet.”

“But if they can use gateways, the placktoids don’t need to ship anything.”

Carrie frowned. “That’s right. What can these be for, then? They must be containers for something.”

“Let’s have a look.” He peered at the nearest box. “Maybe we can get one open.”

“Are you sure we should try? What if a load of...I don’t know...alien pens come flying out and start poking us in the eyes?”

“But they need light for energy. It’s pretty dark in here.”

Carrie nodded and ran her fingers along the edges of the box Dave was examining. It was as high as her chest and about the same width. Aside from two handles on its lid, the box seemed smooth and featureless. There didn’t seem to be a way to open it. But then Carrie had an idea. If the placktoids used magnetism to hold doors closed, might they not do the same with their containers? She pulled out the magnetic field neutraliser and ran it along the nearest edge. As the instrument passed over it, there was a small click. Dave’s eyebrows lifted.

Looking closely at the matte black edge, Carrie could make out a fine crack. She pushed her fingernails into it, forcing it wider. As the side came free Dave leapt back. It banged to floor exactly where he had been standing, yellow liquid gushing out and over his shoes and trousers.

“Not again,” he groaned.

It was ootoon. The box had been full to the brim with ootoon.

Chapter Twenty-Three – Ootoon Everywhere

Gavin scrambled over on his spiderlike legs. The box they had opened was empty except for a thin layer of ootoon the bottom. The rest of the contents were spread out over the floor in a large puddle.

“Whoops,” said Carrie.

“Is that an expression of regret?” asked Gavin. “There is no need to apologise. You have made an interesting discovery. We must examine the other boxes. I do not know why the idea did not occur to me.”

They opened four boxes, each in different areas of the entrance bay. All were filled with ootoon. The liquid didn't dry up under the dim red emergency lighting as it had in the strong sunlight on the planet surface.

“Perhaps this will help us convince the ootoon to release its hold on the ship,” said Gavin.

“I don't see how,” said Belinda. “It's hardly going to make the ootoon less belligerent to the placktoids if it knows they've been removing it from the planet and keeping it here.”

“It must already know it, or parts of it do. That's why it's attacking,” said Carrie. “When enough of the ootoon knows or decides something, it acts. We're surrounded by the ootoon that knows exactly what the placktoids have been doing, and there was enough of it to break away from the planet and attack the ship.”

Carrie smacked her forehead. “Of course. I was wrong. The ootoon *is* responsible for the missing placktoids. It captured them while they were siphoning it up. Then the placktoids started bombing it in retaliation and to try to beat it into submission. When the Transgalactic Council inspected the settlement process, the placktoids knew the ootoon would be a poor witness for what had been happening to it. Talking to the ootoon is like talking to individuals of an angry mob. Each has a different story to tell of what happened where, when and to whom. All most of them know is that something bad happened to some of them and they're angry about it.”

“Yes, yes. I see we may have been interpreting this conflict incorrectly,” said Gavin. “The Transgalactic Council report was perhaps inaccurate.”

“Because the ootoon can't communicate well,” said Carrie. “And no one ever really took the time to listen to it, all of it.”

“There have certainly been difficulties, yes, which is one reason why I dispatched you to the ootoon planet, to gather more information.”

“Hmpf.” Belinda was looking at her with a scornful smirk.

Carrie's elated smile faded. She had acted irresponsibly and failed the victimised ootoon. If only she had investigated the contents of the handbag and seen the briefing device. If only she had taken the job seriously, or just refused to do it when she realised what it was about. Who did she think she was? She was just a mediocre nobody who couldn't even work in a call centre.

Dave touched her shoulder and smiled.

A massive bang shot through the air. The floor shook, and they stumbled.

“What the hell was that?” said Belinda. “Did we hit something?”

“I don’t think so,” said Dave. “It came from over there.” He gestured to a blank wall at the far end of the entrance bay. The metal wall was misshapen, though earlier it had been perfectly straight like the rest of the ship. Another huge crash sounded and the wall buckled towards them. “Whatever’s coming through, I don’t think it’s friendly.”

“I am in agreement with you,” said Gavin. “I think it would be expedient to leave.”

“But what if it’s come to attack the ootoon?” said Carrie. “We have to protect it.”

“I do not believe it is attacking the ootoon,” Gavin replied. “Whatever it is, it has had ample opportunity to do that. I do believe it intends to attack—”

A third ear-splitting bang rent the air. Carrie staggered.

“—us.”

At a fourth boom the wall gave way. A large, rectangular, metal object rolled into view, its wide, toothed maw glinting red. The placktoid commander.

“What the...How did we miss that?” shouted Dave, as the four ran towards the door. Gavin had been right. The shredder zoomed directly at them.

Carrie looked over her shoulder as she ran. For a large item of usually stationary office equipment, the commander was surprisingly fast. It was gaining on them, and it was heading straight for her. “Watch out,” she shouted. She veered off to one side. Dave, Gavin and Belinda swerved to the other and not a moment too soon as the placktoid zoomed through the place they had just been. It began to turn, but though it was fast it maneuvered badly. It could only turn in a wide circle. As it did so, it cut a path through the stacked boxes, overturning and crushing them. Ootoon oozed over the floor.

They were forced to run in the opposite direction now that the commander was between them and the door. Gavin made it to the other end of the entrance bay first, and the others soon joined him. They stood at the wall the placktoid had driven through, as the machine completed its circle. Behind them, the secret room was dark.

“I suggest we withdraw through here,” said Gavin. “There may be an exit.” He scabbled over the remains of the wall and into the shadowy room. But there was no door. It was as if the commander had been sealed in a tomb at the departure of its crew.

A high-pitched whine told them the placktoid was bearing down on them again.

“Run,” Carrie shouted, but they needed no warning. As the alien’s caterpillar tracks carried it over the torn wall and into its former hiding place, they scattered left and right and ran down the room again, outmaneuvering the clumsy machine.

They met at the door, which was closed. Without the influence of the magnetic field neutraliser, it had slid shut behind them after they entered the entrance bay. Carrie felt for the neutraliser in her pocket, but she couldn’t find it. Dave and Belinda watched anxiously as she checked her pockets again and again. The neutraliser must have fallen out while she was running. Her eyes searched the floor.

“Where’s the neutraliser?” asked Belinda.

At the other end of the room, the shredder had completed its turn and was bearing down on them once more.

“I don’t know,” said Carrie. She scanned the mess of shattered boxes and ootoon, run through with the tracks of the shredder and footprints. Finding the neutraliser in this chaos would be hopeless.

“What? You mean you lost it?” exclaimed Belinda.

“I think it fell out of my pocket.”

“Run,” shouted Dave, as the commander drew uncomfortably close.

Dave and Carrie darted down one side of the entrance bay and Gavin and Belinda ran down the other, sheltering behind stacked boxes of ootoon. The placktoid immediately turned to follow. It swerved towards Carrie and Dave, but the maneuver cost it speed and it couldn't reach them. In its journey it took out more boxes of ootoon, splashing the yellow liquid over itself.

The cycle repeated, this time with the shredder pursuing Belinda and Gavin. Once more their ability to turn more quickly than the alien was the means of their escape. But they could not run forever. Dave was already puffing hard, and even Carrie was starting to feel the pace. The placktoid commander seemed to have an inexhaustible power supply.

Chapter Twenty-Four – Shredder Pursuit

Carrie was beginning to lose count of the number of times she had run from one end to the other of the entrance bay, pursued by a murderous alien.

Dave called, “We’ve...got to...get out...of here.” As they slammed into the wall that held the only exit, which remained closed.

“Maybe we can trick it into smashing through this wall, too,” said Carrie, panting.

“I cannot imagine how,” said Gavin. “The placktoid commander is not lacking in intelligence.”

“We need the damn neutraliser,” said Belinda, glaring at Carrie.

Dave gasped and pointed. “There it is.” The instrument had been kicked or had rolled near the corner of the room, where it lay next to a smashed box. Dave ran to get it.

“No,” cried Carrie. “There isn’t time.” The mechanical alien was nearly upon them. They needed to run again. Dave scooped up the neutraliser and turned to run back to the others. His face drained of colour. The shredder had spotted him. It had cut him off.

“Carrie,” he called, and threw the neutraliser.

She caught it as he dashed into the corner of the room and curled himself into the wall, awaiting his fate.

“No,” screamed Carrie, and closed her eyes. There was a resounding crash. Blinking back tears, she opened her eyes again. Unable to straighten its course, the commander had hit the walls at an angle, forming the longest line of a triangle, with Dave at the opposite corner.

Carrie’s heart leapt into her throat. Maybe the placktoid would reverse to align itself better, and give him a chance to escape? But it didn’t. It drove forward, its caterpillar tracks grinding the floor. The walls on either side of the corner began to buckle and break. The alien drew closer to Dave.

“Give me the neutraliser,” snapped Belinda. “We have to get out of here.”

“I’m not leaving him,” said Carrie.

“We can’t do anything for him, and if we don’t get out now, it’s us next.”

Carrie thrust the neutraliser into Belinda’s hands and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Dave,” she yelled, “jump onto it. Jump on top.” But even as she spoke she knew it was impossible. The placktoid was at least two metres tall. An Olympic champion couldn’t do it from a standing start, and there were also the rows of metal teeth to avoid.

“I’ll never make it,” came Dave’s shout. “Go, Carrie, leave me. You don’t need to see this.”

“I’m not damn well leaving you, you idiot.”

Belinda and Gavin were through the door. As it closed behind them, Carrie had an idea. She fished in her pockets, but as she expected, her translator had fallen out as well as the neutraliser. She thumped the door with her fist. “Belinda, give me your translator,” she called. The door remained closed.

“Belinda, damn you, come back here right now and give me your translator.”

“I’ve got it.” It was Dave, yelling over the grinding of the shredder’s caterpillar tracks against the

floor.

“What?”

“I’ve got her translator.”

“You stole it?”

“I have a condition.”

“Never mind that now. Throw it to me.”

The translator came sailing over the placktoid. As it hit the floor Carrie snatched it up and turned it on. “Hey, commander,” she bellowed. “Stop immediately. I am Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett, and I demand you stop.”

In its BBC newscaster voice the alien replied, “The Transgalactic Council is far from here, little human, and soon there will be nothing left of this ship. You and your companions will be dead. There will be no one left to report me. Run away. When I’ve finished with this one, I’ll chase you and kill you. That will be fun.”

Carrie couldn’t think of a reply. The commander was right. Unless they could convince the ootoon to release its hold on the ship, they would all be dead soon. But being shredded to death was not a pleasant way to go, and she was determined that wasn’t going to happen to her or her friend.

She launched herself at the mechanical alien and banged on its metal sides with her fists. The machine ground on. There was now only a narrow space between it and the corner of the room. Carrie couldn’t see Dave but she imagined him cowering, awaiting his terrible fate as the grinding metal teeth drew nearer.

“Stop,” she screamed and kicked the placktoid, gasping as the impact jolted her leg. “Stop, please. Please.” She hit it again. There could be no room left by now for Dave. The teeth must be nearly upon him.

Dave’s yell was long and loud, and cut off abruptly. Carrie covered her face. Then she noticed the silence. Not only had Dave stopped yelling, the placktoid was also making no noise. She opened her fingers a crack and peeped through. The machine was motionless, and it hadn’t quite reached the corner of the room.

“D-Dave?”

“Carrie?”

“You’re alive!”

“It’s stopped, but I’m trapped. I can’t get out. I’m thinking it’s going to start up again any second now.”

Carrie scanned around. She had to get Dave out and quickly. But all there was in the entrance bay was the boxes of ootoon. The smashed and remaining intact ones had been scattered randomly around by the shredder’s progress. When the answer hit her she wondered why she hadn’t thought of it before. She ran to the nearest box and pushed it as hard as she could. It was very heavy. Her efforts slid it a few inches across the floor. The stickiness of the spilled ootoon made the going even harder.

After turning so that her lower back was pressed against the box and her feet were braced against the floor, Carrie pushed again, straining with all her might. The box slid farther towards the shredder.

“Hold on, Dave,” she panted. “I’m coming.”

“Hurry up.”

Sweating and red-faced, she pushed and pushed, until finally the box was close enough. She climbed onto it, then onto the top of the placktoid. Running to the front, she saw Dave's face peering up anxiously. He was standing in a triangle of walls and mechanical alien just large enough to hold him. She grabbed his hands and leaned back. Scrabbling up the machine's teeth, he climbed onto the top. She took him to the box and together they climbed down.

The alien still showed no sign of movement.

"What did you do? How did you stop it?" asked Dave. "I could hear it talking, but without the translator I couldn't understand."

"I didn't do anything. It wouldn't listen to me. It said we were all going to die, it was going to have fun killing us, and no one would ever find out."

"Then why did it stop? Has it broken down?"

Carrie scratched her head. "Shall I try and find out? Maybe it is talking, just not to us. Didn't Gavin say they only use sound when communicating with species who can hear?"

"I suppose it's worth trying. It might be useful to know."

Turning on the translator, Carrie's mind resounded with the shredder's roar. She grimaced and handed the device to Dave, who winced as he took it. He listened a few moments before turning it off.

"All I can make out is something about the ootoon. Damn the ootoon jamming it. Once it was free it would destroy it all, etcetera."

"The ootoon? But, how could...?"

Carrie looked around. The floor was wet with ootoon from the boxes the shredder had smashed. They were both sticky from it, and the commander's caterpillar wheels were coated with it. "It's the ootoon, It must have been oozing into the shredder all the time when it was running over the puddles from the smashed boxes. The ootoon has jammed its tracks and engine."

There was a creak. The alien's tracks moved forward a notch, then with a roar, the placktoid started up. Carrie and Dave jumped back. The machine lurched forward and drove into the remaining space in the corner of the room, where Dave had been only minutes before. The floor shook as it crashed into the wall before the engine fell silent again.

Dave went pale. "Let's leave."

"Yes, it's still struggling against the ootoon."

"I hope the it can hold the beast. Don't want that thing roaming the ship looking for us."

After a few minutes' banging on the door, it opened. Gavin was there holding the neutraliser with Belinda beside him, looking annoyed.

"I keep telling you there's no point...oh," said Belinda when she saw them.

"I concluded from the absence of noise from the placktoid and the strikes upon the door that one or both of you were still alive," said Gavin. "I am delighted to find I was correct."

"We're pleased to see you, too," said Carrie, noticing that Belinda didn't seem to share Gavin's happiness.

"I apologise for leaving you, but in the circumstances it seemed prudent as I was unable to offer assistance, and you insisted on remaining to help in what I believed to be a hopeless situation."

"That's okay," said Carrie.

Outside the entrance bay part of the corridor had been destroyed by the placktoid commander's

efforts to kill Dave. The wall had collapsed and the alien was embedded in it, locked in its silent struggle with the ootoon that was jamming its engines. Carrie explained to Gavin what seemed to have happened. Gavin blinked, a hundred translucent lids flicking over a hundred eyes. “The ootoon has clearly developed an automatic antagonistic response to the placktoids. It did not attack us when it had the opportunity.”

“That’s right,” said Carrie. “When we first landed in it, it let us go. I mean, it was in its natural state, so we sank and everything, but it was only when I provoked it that it captured Dave.”

“What I yet fail to properly understand,” said Gavin, “is why the placktoids are extracting the ootoon. I can only imagine that among its many remarkable compounds and their properties there exists something that facilitates the placktoids’ ability to incorporate biological systems, reproduce organically and metabolise using light.”

“I hope you manage to find out one day,” said Dave, “because that would mean we survive this.”
The ship shuddered.

Chapter Twenty-Five – Ootoon Solution

A grinding lurch from the commander drove the four down the corridor, away from the struggling machine. They huddled in a bend, joined in silent thought about how they were going to persuade the ootoon to release the ship.

All except Belinda. She laughed grimly. “Huh, you’re all busily rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic. It’s hopeless. We left orbit—”

Dave’s punch hit her right cheekbone and sent her to the floor. She sprawled, holding her cheek. “What the hell?”

“Dave,” exclaimed Carrie. Gavin chittered.

Dave rubbed his right hand. “Damn, that hurt more than I thought it would.” He shook out his hand and stretched his fingers. “First time I’ve ever hit someone, and I hope the last. But as for you,” he pointed at Belinda, “you’ve been nothing but trouble since you arrived. What have you done to help, huh? You didn’t listen to the ootoon—I mean, neither did Carrie, but at least she’s a nice person. At least she tries. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone so rude, arrogant and negative. So if you won’t help, shut up and keep out of the way, and the rest of us just might save your life.” He turned to Carrie.

“What’s wrong with *you*?”

Her eyes were filled with tears and her chin trembled. “Do you really think I’m a nice person?”

“Hey, you just tried to save me from a terrible death at the hands of a rampant item of office equipment. After these two ran away and left me to my fate—sorry, Gavin, but it’s true. Do you think I’m gonna hate you after that?”

“I know, but it’s my fault you’re—”

“Oh stop beating yourself up. We don’t have time for this. We’ve got to figure out a way to make the ootoon listen to us.”

“But it’s too late,” said Belinda.

Dave threw her an angry glance, and she clamped her lips shut.

“I keep trying to think of a way,” said Carrie, “but I can’t come up with anything. I’ve listened to the ootoon so many times now, and it’s just a mass of conflicting voices. There isn’t one representative to listen to or talk to. It’s impossible to communicate with it.”

“But you did,” said Dave.

“What? When?”

“When it had me trapped, you persuaded it to bring you to me, and later you persuaded it to let us go.”

“But, I...yes, I did, didn’t I?” Carrie frowned. How had she done that? Why had the ootoon listened to her? “I don’t know how, though. I just talked to it, shouted at it until I got its attention. Then it did what I was asking. I don’t know why.”

“Perhaps you should try again?” said Gavin. “I doubt there will be any harm in the attempt, or that it will make matters any worse than our current situation.”

“I think he means we’ve got nothing to lose,” said Dave.

Carrie set her jaw and strode, translator in hand, into the entrance bay.

It was a complete mess. At the far end was the gaping hole edged with torn metal, in the right nearest corner the shredder was embedded, surrounded by crushed and collapsing walls, and the floor was strewn with broken boxes and slippery with yellow, liquid ootoon. The remaining intact boxes were scattered everywhere.

Turning the translator on, the first thing Carrie heard was the outraged roar of the shredder, still struggling to free itself from the ootoon that had infiltrated it. As she walked hurriedly away from it, the voices of the spilled ootoon became more distinct. *Where are we? What are we doing here? Where's the rest of us? Oh, thank goodness. How nice to merge with you again. Where are my friends?* Carrie guessed that, cut off from the rest of its ocean, the ootoon in the boxes had been lonely. Other voices echoed the sentiment that pervaded the ootoon entity. *Where are the placktoids? Let's get them. We hate placktoids.*

The ootoon that had been spilled was reconnecting with the rest of itself. Pools of liquid were moving sluggishly towards other pools. As soon as two made contact they flowed into each other, and the larger pool would continue searching for more ootoon.

Carrie neared the bulge of ootoon in the floor, which was joined to the mass surrounding the ship. She noticed the strong emotions of the voices and their obsession with their task. *We've got them now. They'll never escape. Down we go. Back home, we're going home! Not long now. Curse the placktoids forever. There must be hundreds on this ship. They'll never take us away again.*

A pool of spilled ootoon oozed nearer the bulge in the hatchway. It was striving to make contact. Carrie squatted and put two fingers in the edge of the puddle. She dragged her fingers across to the bulge, creating a pathway for the isolated ootoon pool to merge. Screwing her eyes shut, she listened as hard as she could.

Who's this? Hooray, we found you. Welcome back. Where have you been? That feels so good. The placktoids took us. It's some of the ones we lost. So good to have you back. We rescued them. We'll take them home. Down with the placktoids. Yes, down with the placktoids. We won't let them take you again.

Carrie turned off the translator. It was impossible to think with the constant cacophony of voices in her head. She circled the bulge, studying it. The captured ootoon pool had slipped in easily and disappeared. No doubt it was mixing with the rest of itself, adding its voices to all the others in the ootoon surrounding the ship.

Carrie stopped, her last thought echoing: *Adding its voices to all the others in the ootoon surrounding the ship.* She looked around the entrance bay at the still-intact boxes of ootoon. They were cut off from each other and wouldn't be able to communicate with ootoon in other boxes, pools, or the bulge in the floor. She wasn't sure how many ootoon voices or thoughts or personalities—she'd never quite figured that out—the boxes held, but talking to only the ootoon in each box had to be easier than trying to communicate with a whole mass of the stuff.

“Get in here, you lot,” Carrie called. “I think I might have a plan.”

A scent filled the air. It was delicious. Sweet, but slightly acrid, like, like...caramelised custard. The outer edges of the ootoon were burning. Carrie realised she was sweating. The temperature in the bay was rising. There was no time to lose.

Chapter Twenty-Six – The Final Push

“Gavin,” said Carrie, “do you speak ootoon?”

“It is one of my languages, yes.”

“Great. That means we have at least one translator and you. Dave, look for my translator. It must have fallen out of my pocket with the neutraliser when we were running. We’ve got to talk to the ootoon in each box and make it understand there are virtually no placktoids on board, but that if it crashes into the planet it’ll be killing four innocent civilians.”

“Do you really think it cares?” said Belinda.

“Yes, I do, actually. Or enough of it does, anyway, that it’ll try and do something to save us if it can. Providing we can get the message into it.”

Wrinkling her nose, Belinda said, “And how do you propose to do that?”

“We’re going to talk to each box of ootoon. Because the contents are separated by their containers from the rest of the ootoon, they’ll be much easier to communicate with. When the contained ootoon understands the message, we’ll push it to the hatchway, open the box and tip it into the bulge so that it mixes in with the ootoon surrounding the ship. We just need to add enough ootoon that understands our predicament to tip the scales. It won’t let us die if it can help it. I’m sure of it.”

“Well, I’m certainly not going to help on this foolhardy task,” said Belinda. “I don’t want to spend my last moments speaking with—”

“May I suggest you begin pushing boxes towards the hatchway, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Markham?” said Gavin.

Belinda pursed her lips. “I suppose if you’re going to make it an order I will talk to the ootoon, then.”

“No,” replied Gavin. “I sense your attitude in this matter is somewhat half-hearted. I believe Carrie’s unauthorised companion, Dave, will be far more effective at making the ootoon understand. Please either assist him in locating the second translator or move the boxes so that they are ready for adding to the larger ootoon mass.”

Glaring, Belinda marched to the nearest intact box and began pushing, her feet slipping on the wet floor.

“Found it,” exclaimed Dave, who had been scanning around for Carrie’s translator. He picked up the dripping instrument.

Carrie, Dave and Gavin wasted no time in talking to the ootoon inside each box, but the process seemed to take forever. First they had to attract its attention, then they had to explain why it was separated from the greater mass and where it was—most of the captured ootoon had no idea what had happened to it—and finally they had to ask it to spread the word among the ootoon outside. It had to understand the placktoids had left and there were innocent people who were going to die if the ship crashed.

The smell of caramalised custard grew stronger. Carrie’s heart sank at the thought of the ootoon burning on the edges of the blob as it sped towards the planet, and also at the fact that none of this

would matter to her very, very soon.

As they added more and more of the captured ootoon to the bulge, she didn't bother checking the general sentiment of the larger ootoon enclosing the ship. If her plan wasn't working there was nothing she could do about it. They were out of options and time, and if she had failed and they were about to perish, she would rather keep busy in this last futile attempt than sit and wait patiently for death to take her.

Belinda wouldn't have been able to move all the converted boxes to the hatchway by herself even if she was trying her hardest, which she wasn't. The other three joined in, pushing the heavy containers across the sticky floor at the same time as talking to their contents. Carrie realised that, despite her confidence and background, Belinda wasn't actually very bright. If she really thought the attempt was futile, why was she still following Gavin's orders?

When released, the captured ootoon flowed quickly and easily into the larger mass. *Even joyfully*, Carrie thought. It warmed her heart to see it set free.

The spaceship jerked and Carrie staggered. She wiped sweat from her eyes. As well as the exertion of pushing the boxes to the ootoon bulge warming her, the air temperature was becoming unbearably hot.

We must have hardly any time left. In fact, they had probably run out of time ages ago. How could the ootoon possibly lift the massive accelerating spaceship out of its plummeting descent? She expected at any moment there would be a deafening crash and everything would go black. She wondered whether there was an afterlife and what it was like. She hoped she would see Dave there, and maybe one day, though not too soon, Toodles and Rogue.

Dave caught her eye with a sad look. He seemed to have come to the same realisation as herself. They must be speeding through the atmosphere so quickly now that, even if her plan succeeded and they managed to convey to the outer ootoon that they were inside, their fate was sealed.

There was a grinding, wrenching sound. Carrie stopped pushing her box, her brow wrinkling. It wasn't the kind of sound she expected from an impact with a planet at hundreds of kilometres per hour. The noise had come from the corner of the room, where the placktoid commander was embedded in the wall. The shredder.

With a deafening screech, it broke free and reversed a quarter of the length of the bay. *Not again.* The machine ground forward, then stopped, then jerked forward again, and stopped. The ootoon inside it was still trying its best to jam the thing but it was regaining control, moving farther forward each time. Dave, Gavin, and Belinda were watching it, too.

"Time for another game of chase," called Dave.

Swinging a circle, the alien edged closer and closer to face them. Carrie and the others began to move to the side of the entrance bay. Avoiding the manic machine was easy enough, but Carrie was tired, so tired. Her arms and legs ached from pushing the heavy boxes, and her head ached from talking with the multi-voiced ootoon. She wasn't sure she had the strength or the willpower to run from the commander again. Maybe Belinda was right. What was the point?

The placktoid faced them, its metal-toothed face crushed and twisted from impacts with walls and boxes of ootoon it had smashed. It looked like a massive car grille that had been through a crusher. The engine revved, louder and louder. It had freed itself from the clogging ootoon, and its sound was

now clear and sharp. The caterpillar treads remained still as the engine gathered speed. When Carrie thought the engines couldn't growl louder, and she covered her ears, the shredder shot forward like a greyhound from the starting gate.

Then came the deafening crash.

Chapter Twenty-Seven – Mellow Yellow

Yellow. Everything was glowing yellow, and the air was filled with a sweet scent. Carrie bobbed gently on the surface of a cool liquid. She blinked, trying to focus on the ceiling, which was an undefinable distance away. She tried to remember where she was and what had happened. This place didn't look at all like her bedroom, not any bedroom. But it was pleasant, and soft, and smelled nice. Maybe she should just drift back off to... Toodles and Rogue. She hadn't seen them for a long time. They would need food and water, and Rogue would need a walk. She forced herself awake.

Carrie sat up, sinking her face into the ceiling, which was a soft, blancmange-like substance. Before she had time to pull her head out, the ceiling lifted away and bubbles of air popped open across it. The events of the previous hours filtered into her mind: the placktoids, the ootoon, the desperate rush to save themselves. The last thing she remembered was the shredder breaking free and preparing to attack them again, and then nothing. The placktoid ship must have hit the planet, and she was in the ootoon. It had saved them. It must have flooded the entrance bay and cushioned them against the impact.

Flopping down, Carrie let out a sigh of relief. She'd been right. The ootoon had protected them. Or maybe that had been its intention all along? Maybe it had never meant to kill the placktoids? It didn't seem to her that the ootoon was a murderous species, even in revenge for wrongs committed against it.

But where were the others? Sitting up again, Carrie felt in her pockets and checked all around her for the translator, but it was gone. She couldn't ask the ootoon if the others had survived, or where they were. Or how to get out of the place.

As she stood, the bubble reacted by expanding around her. She wobbled on the jellylike floor. Before, the ootoon had transported her, but now she couldn't tell it where she wanted to go. But maybe she could use its reactive properties to move around? She took a step forward, and the bubble opened in front of her. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the wall draw inward to close up the space behind. Success. She could move around at least. She desperately wanted to find the others, particularly Dave and Gavin, to check that they were okay. She even wanted to find Belinda, though that would probably be a brief visit. The ootoon had saved her, but that was no guarantee it had saved everyone. The impact of the falling spaceship on the ocean would have been massive, and even the exceptional properties of the ootoon must have struggled to respond to it.

Carrie strode on, wondering where she was. Was she still in the entrance bay aboard the placktoid ship, or was she outside it in the ootoon ocean? Her muscles tensed. If she was in the ocean she could wander forever, alone, until she died. She didn't even know in which direction land lay. The planet was mostly ocean with only a few islands. She might be walking deeper and deeper below the surface, farther and farther from shore.

Her stomach churned. How she was going to find the others by wandering blindly through the ootoon? And when had she last eaten or drunk? Apart from a few mouthfuls of ootoon—she cringed at the memory—she'd had nothing in the hours since she had dived through the green mist beneath her kitchen sink on the heels of Dave.

A musical chittering came from behind and Carrie's heart leapt. As she turned, her bubble expanded and melded with another, containing a familiar creature. She had never been so happy to see her gigantic bug boss. "Gavin, thank goodness you're okay."

"Carrie. I see you are also unharmed. That is good."

"Do you know where the others are? Where's Dave? Is he all right?"

"I have only this moment succeeding in conveying to the ootoon my request to transport me to you. I do not yet know how the others fared, but in the light of our survival, I have every confidence the ootoon did its utmost to protect them. It appears your strategy was successful."

"Maybe, or maybe the ootoon never intended to harm the placktoids, only capture their ship and its crew."

Gavin's many eyes blinked. "You may be correct. I had not considered that. It is always wise to avoid concluding causation from correlating facts." The insect rubbed his hind legs together.

"Regardless, I feel this is an appropriate time to inform you that, despite earlier mishaps, I find your performance in your first assignment to have been exemplary."

"Really?" Carrie almost—but not quite—wanted to hug his shiny bronze insectoid head. But she was forgetting her friend. "I've lost my translator, Gavin. Please talk to the ootoon and tell it to take us to Dave."

The surrounding ootoon must have been particularly tuned into the situation, because it didn't take more than a few moments of persistence from Gavin before the familiar protrusions rose from the floor, lifting them from their feet. Seated upon ootoon supports, Carrie and Gavin began to move, and the bubble walls flowed past.

When they burst into Dave's bubble, Carrie threw her arms round him. Compared to the well-groomed, stylish young man who had come to her flat what seemed an age ago, Dave was almost unrecognisable. His hair was a sticky mess that stuck out at all angles, and his clothes were damp and smeared in yellow, but without him by her side, she would never have made it through the events of the previous hours.

"You won't believe what I've found," Dave said. "It's this way, I think." He turned and pointed. "Or over there." He pointed in a different direction. "Damn, I've forgotten. It's so hard to navigate in this stuff. I was wandering around try to find you, but I found something else instead."

"Perhaps I can assist," said Gavin. "What is it you wish us to see?"

Carrie could not believe Dave's answer.

They burst into the huge chamber a few minutes later, and there they were: placktoids. Hundreds of them, motionless, frozen by the ootoon that had infiltrated their systems. Carrie clutched Dave's arm and pointed. Grimacing, he nodded. The largest placktoid stood at the far end of the chamber. A massive rectangular object lying on its longest side. Just visible beneath a heavy coating of ootoon. The commander.

Carrie wondered how much ootoon it had taken to permanently jam its powerful engine. Though it was completely still, the sight of it brought Carrie's heart into her throat, and her muscles ached at the memory of the pursuit in the placktoid spaceship's entrance bay. "So this is where the ootoon is keeping the placktoid hostages."

"There is no doubt that the ootoon is responsible for the missing placktoids," said Gavin.

“Are they alive?” asked Carrie. A cacophony of screeching as the placktoids spotted them gave her her answer. She clasped her hands to her ears. “Let’s get out of here.”

Their bubble withdrew from the placktoid holding chamber, taking them with it, and the painful noise of the placktoids’ squealing and booming faded.

“It’s kept them down here all this time,” said Carrie. “With their seized parts, they couldn’t move, and the ootoon could block any communication they sent to the command ship. But even though the placktoids were siphoning up ootoon and taking it away, it didn’t harm the prisoners it took. It never meant anyone any harm. It just wanted to be left alone.”

Dave yawned and rubbed his eyes, and Carrie realised that she, too, was heavy with tiredness.

“So, that’s that, isn’t it?” she asked Gavin. “As they say on TV, case solved. We can return to Earth now, right?”

“But you must attend a debriefing at the Transgalactic Council. They will be most interested to hear what the placktoids have been doing. It is alarming and disturbing, and we must address their actions at once.”

Carrie and Dave shared a glance of mutual agreement.

“Gavin,” said Carrie. “It’s been fun, kind of, but, you know, I need to see my pets. They’ll be wondering where I am. We just want to go home.”

Dave nodded.

“I see,” said Gavin. He worked his inner jaws in and out.

Carrie waited in the pregnant pause. She had never wanted to see her quirky cat or handsome dog so much. But the only way she would get to see them was if Gavin started up the green mist that opened a passage through the stars.

“In the circumstances,” he said at last, “I think that it would be acceptable for your assignment to end here. I am able to make a full report based on what you have told me. You both require rest after your exertions. I will ask the ootoon to convey us to land, where I will be able to open a gateway to Earth.

“But before I do that,” he continued, “I believe you are forgetting something, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Hatchett.”

“What’s that?”

“Your colleague, Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Markham.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight – Farewell Ootoon

Belinda looked even worse than Dave from her immersion in the sticky ootoon. Her gorgeous mane of tawny hair was dark and flat and plastered to her head. Her fluorescent orange jumpsuit had caught and torn on the corners of the boxes of ootoon, leaving her in wet, yellow-orange rags.

Refusing to speak to Carrie or Dave, she gave Gavin monosyllabic answers to his inquiries after her health, and all the way back to land she did not say a word.

The ootoon deposited them on a beach near a placktoid settlement. The island that was new to Carrie. There was no red-leaved forest, but there were metallic roadways and buildings reminiscent of the interior of the placktoid ship. Empty black boxes lay abandoned near the shoreline, waiting to be filled with ootoon. There was no sign of any placktoids.

“It seems the placktoids have abandoned this settlement, perhaps upon discovering their ship had been captured,” said Gavin. “This is further evidence that they are illegally using gateways to travel across the galaxy. There is no other way they could have left the planet.”

“Where have they gone?” asked Dave.

“It is impossible to tell with any certainty. If the gateway was legitimate, the Transgalactic Council would have a record of their journey, but illegal gateways are, of course, unreported. Perhaps the placktoids returned to their home planet. A more prudent destination would be a planet unknown to the Council, in the eventuality their illegal operations had come to light.

“The remaining storage containers the placktoids created to transport the ootoon are all empty,” Gavin continued. “Presumably the planetside placktoids took the full containers with them.”

“Poor ootoon,” said Carrie. “What will happen to the parts of it they took?”

Gavin did not speak immediately, then he said, “I doubt the placktoids are interested in preserving living ootoon. They are generally only concerned with the constituents of things; raw materials for constructing more placktoids or items they require.”

None of the four spoke for a while. The planet’s sun was setting, casting violet tones over the undulating yellow ocean. The sky was turning a deep purple and stars were appearing. Carrie looked up at them. The patterns were unfamiliar, though she could see a concentrated band of silver she supposed must be the Milky Way.

“Where’s Earth?” she asked Gavin.

The insect chittered. “I apologise, but my knowledge of astronomy is extremely poor. I am unaware of the location of your home planet, I confess, except to say that it is near the edge of the galaxy. This is one of the reasons it was only comparatively recently discovered.”

“Could the placktoids go there?” Carrie was remembering the shredder, and the placktoids’ hatred of humans.

“Much as I would like to reassure you that it is not possible for the placktoids to visit Earth, I am sorry to report that if they are travelling illegally by transgalactic gateway, they could go anywhere for which they possess the coordinates.”

“But if Earth is off limits until we develop long distance space travel,” said Dave, “how did the

placktoids even know about office stationery?”

“The term ‘off limits’ is not an accurate description of the travel restrictions that apply to Earth,” said Gavin. “You three, for example, are all here. But the reason for the placktoids’ knowledge of Earth artifacts is quite simple. Your media is very popular throughout the galaxy. Documentaries, dramas, quizzes and—what is it you call them? Ah yes—makeover programmes. Extremely edifying.”

Carrie and Dave raised their eyebrows at each other.

Turning his head horizontal, Gavin said, “I will create a gateway to return you home now.”

Throughout this exchange Belinda had been standing at a short distance from the group and staring silently out over the ootoon ocean. At Gavin’s announcement she began rummaging in her bag. After pulling out a hairbrush she began to attempt to brush her thick, matted locks. “So, I’ll send in my report tomorrow.”

“Your report?” asked Gavin. His head returned to vertical.

“For this assignment, of course.”

“Thank you, but that will not be necessary. I will, however, require a report from you,” he said, turning to Carrie. “I have concluded that my decision to replace you with a more experienced officer was premature. As I said, your performance was laudable, despite a rather disorganised start.”

“But—?” said Belinda.

“Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer Markham, while I am grateful to you for stepping in at short notice and attempting to deal with this difficult case, some of your behaviour and attitudes during recent events have led me to question your fitness for this role. I do not require a report from you, but I do require a self-evaluation statement, outlining where you believe you could have behaved differently, and what you would do if you found yourself in similar circumstances in the future.”

Belinda’s mouth fell open, and she stood gaping like a fish out of water.

Carrie looked around once more at the alien planet, its rich colours and the silent, sluggish ootoon. A chill wind was rising. She rubbed her arms. “Gavin, please, can we go home now?”

Chapter Twenty-Nine – Back to Work

Carrie scrambled from beneath her kitchen sink and waited for Dave. Outside her window, it was still dark. She'd been sure it would be morning on Earth by now. They'd been away for ages. Rogue bounced into the kitchen, his tail a waggy blur, and jumped up at Carrie to lick her face. She rubbed his neck and ears and made a big fuss of him. Toodles was nowhere to be seen, reserving her affection as usual, but Carrie knew she was about somewhere, just waiting for her to come in and say hello.

Dave's head appeared under her sink, quickly followed by his arms, shoulders and the rest of his body. The green mist faded as he clambered out. "What's the time?" he asked as he got to his feet.

According to the clock on Carrie's kitchen wall, it was nearly eight o'clock. "That can't be right." She went into her bedroom to get her phone. Returning to the kitchen, she showed it to Dave. It displayed the same time as the clock, and the date showed it was still Friday. From her living room came the sounds of the Leonardo DiCaprio biopic still playing on her TV.

"No time's passed since we left?" said Dave. "The gateway sent us back in time to the moment we left as well as returned us to Earth. That's something your boss didn't mention."

"No, but it's great, isn't it? I'm shattered. All I want to do is go to bed."

Dave was looking at the objects on Carrie's table; at the things she had left behind when she had dived through the gateway after him. "You don't have a translator anymore."

"No, I lost it when we crashed into the ootoon's planet." Standing in her ordinary kitchen in an ordinary town in the U.K., hearing the sounds of traffic in the street below, the words sounded weird. She frowned. "That did all happen, right?"

Dave smiled. "Unless we both took the same hallucinogenic drug, yeah, it all happened. But, what I mean is, you won't have one for your next assignment. You'll have to ask Gavin for a replacement."

Carrie rubbed her forehead. "My next assignment? I don't know. I need to recover from this one, and think about it a bit." The prospect of visiting more planets was exciting, but the idea also made her heart race.

"I know what you mean. It's a lot scarier than it looks on TV or at the pictures, isn't it?"

"A lot."

"Best put all that stuff somewhere safe while you have a think about it, then," Dave said, gesturing to the devices supplied by the Transgalactic Council and the fluorescent orange jumpsuit.

"Yeah, I'll do it tomorrow. I've got to find whatever it is I need to use to send in my report first. Might as well do the job properly. I don't want to disappoint Gavin. He's a good person, or thing, or whatever, even if he does look like he walked out of an alien horror flick."

Dave laughed nervously. "Yeah, he is. And it's a good idea to tie up the loose ends." He picked up a flat, black object and looked at it closely then, with apparent reluctance, he replaced it on the table.

"You did a great job, Carrie."

She beamed. "I couldn't have done it without you. You know, I don't care what the Transgalactic Council calls the job, I was kind of a space detective, wasn't I?"

"Yes, you were." Dave grinned and stretched. "Okay, I'm going to head home now. I'll see myself

out. See you at work on Monday.”

“Yeah, see you then,” she called as he left.

Dave’s words reminded Carrie she had to return to the call centre on Monday. She was relieved that she had a whole weekend to recover from her work as a space detective. A thrill of excitement passed through her. Maybe she would take on another assignment.

She also took a brief mental inventory of the items in her hallway, but there was nothing there she would mind losing to Dave’s light fingers.

Monday rolled round too soon. After a weekend of putting the finishing touches to her new flat, walking Rogue and coaxing Toodles out of various hiding places—receiving several deep scratches in the process—Carrie was at her desk in plenty of time for her nine o’clock start. Maintenance and IT Support had been busy over the weekend, because a new telephone had appeared on her desk, and when she logged on to her computer, the call centre’s network of operator terminals was displayed.

Carrie eyed the folder of complaints procedures on her desk, her heart sinking at the memory of all the customers she had put off with airy promises to fix their problems on her first day at the job. But she recalled what Dave had told her when he brought her some cake. The great long lists of questions and tick boxes were probably intended to frustrate the customers into giving up their complaints, which didn’t seem much better than what Carrie had done.

“Welcome back.” Ms. Bass was standing at Carrie’s desk. Her eyebrows seemed to have moved higher on her forehead.

“Oh...thanks?” Carrie couldn’t decide if Ms. Bass was being sarcastic.

“It’s good to see you here bright and early, Ms. Hatchett. Your positive attitude will not go unnoticed.” She leaned closer. “To be frank, our turnover rate for supervisors is rather high. But you seem to be keen to do a good job.”

Carrie winced. “I am keen to do a good job. Which is why I wanted to talk to you about this complaints procedure manual.”

The warmth drained from Ms. Bass’ expression, and her look became stony. “Is there a problem with it?” Her calcified look didn’t deter Carrie from a thorough explanation of why the manual was a bad idea and how the customers might prefer a more practical response. “Thank you for your comments. I will give them due consideration,” Ms. Bass said, and strode back to her office. She closed the door behind her.

Carrie sighed. *Oh well, small steps.*

An icon was blinking on her screen. An operator was transferring a complaint. Carrie put on her headset and clicked a button. A barrage of angry words spewed into her ears. Sighing, Carrie swivelled her chair away from her desk while she waited for the customer to take a breath. She made eye contact with Dave, who was talking into his mic. He gave her a thumbs up, and she smiled and waved.

At the first brief pause in the customer’s tirade, Carrie said, “I’m sorry to hear that, sir. Please go on, I’m listening.” Carrie paid careful attention to the customer’s explanation. She thumbed through her manual to find the relevant section, but it seemed to lead down a rabbit hole of inaction. She would

have to find another way to deal with the complaint. Opening her desk drawer to find a notepad and pen, Carrie spotted a box of paperclips. She shivered.

But when she got home that night, the very first thing Carrie did was to check inside her Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer's toolbox. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw a message running across the screen of a flat, transparent device. She removed the device from the bag. *Liaison Officer Hatchett*, the message read, *please report for duty at 7.45 am Saturday June 7th according to your Earth time zone. You will attend a briefing session before embarking on your second assignment, which involves a visit to the planet Dandrobia.*

Carrie made herself some tea. She sat at her kitchen table, Rogue at her feet, his tongue lolling. Sipping from her mug, she mentally repeated the final word of the message. *Dandrobia*. She wondered what kind of place it was, and what kind of aliens lived there.

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CARRIE HATCHETT, SPACE ADVENTURER #2

(Scroll ahead for a sneak preview.)

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CARRIE HATCHETT, SPACE ADVENTURER #2

Chapter One

Carrie Hatchett was late. She was trying to find the room where she had been interviewed for her job as a Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer, and the seam of her fluorescent orange jumpsuit was working its way uncomfortably high.

She was walking alongside her colleague and friend, Dave. Dropping back a step or two, she stealthily tugged at the seam and jiggled her leg to ease the tension.

“What are you doing?” Dave had turned and was watching her.

“Nothing.” Carrie cleared her throat. “Now, where is that room?”

“I thought you’d been here before?”

“I have, but I kind of stumbled on the right place by accident. I can remember what it looks like from the outside, but I’m not sure how to get there.”

They were in a set of cream-coloured ceramic tunnels that had large oval recesses embedded in the walls, floor and ceiling. Bordering each recess was a line of symbols, some black, some luminous, some flashing. They approached a recess that crossed their path and were forced to leap over it before taking a left-hand turn. The tunnel walls emitted a soft glow.

“You know,” said Dave, “I shouldn’t have come along.”

“It’ll be fine, honestly. Anyway, I need you. I really do.”

Dave had accompanied Carrie on her previous—first—assignment, and she was sure she could not have succeeded without him. When the Transgalactic Council had contacted her about her next task, she had persuaded her friend to come with her to the briefing, though he was technically an ‘unauthorised companion’. Glancing at Dave’s profile, Carrie sighed. Dave was stunningly good-looking, but also—for her—disappointingly gay.

He shook his head. “You’ve shown you can do the job. I’m sure you can manage.” He looked nervously from side to side. “Maybe there’s some way I can go back? I could feed Toodles and Rogue for you.”

Carrie’s brow wrinkled. Dave knew as well as her that when they returned through the green mist that had conveyed them there from beneath her kitchen sink, no time would have passed. To Toodles, her sweet, affectionate cat, and Rogue, her lovable, handsome dog, it would be as though they had never left. Studying her friend’s face, Carrie saw beads of sweat, though the temperature was only

pleasantly warm. She realised what the problem was. “Stop worrying. Gavin won’t hurt you, you know.”

“I know, but...” Dave’s shoulders slumped and he swallowed. “You’ve got to admit...those eyes, and the j-j-jaws, with the extra set of jaws inside and razor sharp teeth, and the legs...He’s definitely got far too many legs. I mean, why does he need that many?”

Gavin, Carrie’s manager in the Transgalactic Council, was a massive insectoid alien with ten pairs of legs, a bronze carapace and two sets of viciously sharp mandibles. At moments of high tension, his inner jaws had the unnerving habit of protruding several centimetres, and he had a poor understanding of the human need for personal space.

Rolling her eyes, Carrie said, “Gavin’s lovely. You just have to get to know him.”

Dave tugged at his shirt collar and grimaced.

As always, he looked effortlessly stylish. He was wearing denim jeans, brogues, and a button down shirt under a crew neck pullover. Carrie looked down at her orange jumpsuit, the uniform for her role in the Transgalactic Council. The colour was intended to help Council officers stand out in conflict zones and mark them as neutral personnel with diplomatic protection. Carrie’s jumpsuit squashed her breasts to one homogeneous lump and the tight material neatly profiled her pot belly. The central seam had worked its way too high once more. She reached behind to pull it lower.

Glancing at her, Dave said, “That jumpsuit’s too small for you.”

“I know.”

“Didn’t they have a bigger size?”

“Yes, they did.”

“Then why didn’t you—”

“Because I’m on a diet,” Carrie said between her teeth. She sighed and tilted her head. “I thought it would fit me when I lost a bit of weight, okay?”

“Okay,” said Dave, raising his eyebrows.

“Wait, is this it?” The symbols alongside a recess looked familiar. One was a black circle above a triangle with two long rectangles below, like the symbol for the women’s restroom. Carrie slipped her bag off her shoulder and put it down. The bag was her Transgalactic Council Officer ‘toolbox’ and held a translator, magnetic field neutraliser, briefing screen and other useful devices.

Carrie rubbed her palms together, then lightly rested one hand on the surface of the recess. Nothing happened. “Maybe not.” She put her hands on her hips.

“Come on, Carrie,” said Dave. “Don’t you have any idea where this room is? We’ve been here for ages. We’ll be wandering around forever at this rate.”

She looked up and down the corridor. Dave was right. Their situation was difficult. The tunnels were

endless and she did not know where they were nor how they could get back to the place where they had entered. Not that it would do any good to retrace their steps. The green mist that transported lifeforms between worlds always disappeared within a few minutes, and only authorised Transgalactic Council staff could open the gateways. Carrie was not high enough in the Council to have the authority.

She needed to find Gavin soon because he would be wondering where she had got to. Though he was far nicer than his appearance suggested, he was still her boss and he would not be pleased about being kept waiting. “Right. Let’s go this way.” She set off decisively.

“That’s the way we just came.”

She halted mid-stride and about-faced. “Okay, this way then.”

Dave rolled his eyes as he followed her. Traces of a rich, complex, spicy scent appeared in the air. As they walked on, the odour grew stronger. It seemed to be coming from the area they were approaching.

“Can you smell something?” asked Carrie.

Dave sniffed deeply as they turned a tight bend. “Yes, it’s kind of musky, like a—” Before them loomed a huge, twenty-legged, razor-jawed, bronze-shelled alien. “Whoa.” Stumbling back, Dave grabbed the wall to steady himself.

“Gavin! Great to see you again,” said Carrie.

The head of the massive alien insect turned from vertical to horizontal, and the spicy scent grew stronger. Antennae quivered on the wedge-shaped head as its ten pairs of legs were set in motion. The bug approached Carrie, its inner jaws protruding until they were centimetres from her face.

“G-Gavin?” said Carrie, taking a step backwards.

Bobbing up and down, the creature advanced, forcing Carrie to continue her retreat. Its one hundred eyes blinked, transparent membranes flashing over their surfaces, and its antennae weaved to and fro.

“Carrie, are you sure...?” asked Dave as they retreated around the bend in the corridor. He reached out and clutched her arm. “Are you sure Gavin’s okay?”

“Errm, now that you come to mention it...”

The scent became a reek. Carrie covered her mouth and nose as she gagged. The alien increased its pace and so did Carrie and Dave, walking in reverse so quickly they were nearly running. As the creature’s inner jaws flashed out, Dave cracked. He turned and sped off down the tunnel. Carrie was not slow to follow, wondering what was wrong with her boss as she ran. *Why doesn’t he say something? His English is great.*

The seams of Carrie’s jumpsuit tugged painfully as she ran, and she cursed her idiocy in choosing a size that was too small. On the floor ahead was her Transgalactic Officer’s toolbox. She had left it behind after trying to open the recess, and Dave was heading straight for it.

“Dave—” she called, too late. Her friend, in his blind panic, didn’t see the bag. He tripped over it, landing sprawling on the floor. Carrie had no choice but to stop to help him. As she tugged on his arm to pull him to his feet, the alien caught up, its massive form overshadowing them.

Dave’s muscles relaxed under Carrie’s grip. “Oh, okay,” he said. Unfastening Carrie’s fingers from his arm, he turned to her. “It’s all right.” His foot was caught on the handle of her handbag. He disentangled it and fished inside the bag. “Here,” he said, handing her the translator, “I think you need this.”

PASSAGE TO PARADISE

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